



jeremiah

a love
story

joseph
bennett

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*Cover image: William Headley, an escaped slave from North Carolina,
taken between 1862 and 1865.*

Library of Congress.

other books by joseph bennett

rest, the art of doing less

twenty years later

word after word (poems)

Trust with a capital T

tell me your name again?

when in doubt

Anytime while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it just to stand one minute in God's airth (sic) a free woman.

— Elizabeth Mumbet Freeman, an enslaved African American who filed, and won, her freedom lawsuit in Massachusetts in 1781.

Love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters?

— James Baldwin, acclaimed African American gay writer, and civil rights activist.

where jeremiah came from

For years this story would not leave. I'd been working on other projects, yet all the while *Jeremiah* kept whispering to me, tapping me on the shoulder, wanting to be told.

There's a journal entry from April, 2023 that begins *Well, I guess I'm not going to be writing Jeremiah after all.*

I went on to justify why I wasn't going to pursue the story, how there were other books to write, my time supposedly needed elsewhere.

Then, as often happens, inspiration was found in the work of other writers. Three specifically—

Anne Lamott. I've read much of her work, yet I think it's *Bird By Bird* where she suggests writing for thirty minutes, one page a day, "no need to quit your day job". In a year you'll have a novel, she says. I kept that advice in my back pocket.

In her celebrated book *Big Magic*, Elizabeth Gilbert tells of a novel she'd been writing for years, and abandoned. After, the synchronicity of meeting Anne Prachett and, perhaps over a kiss on the lips(!), the plot of the novel magically floated from Elizabeth to Anne. The muse is always looking for a vessel—if it's not you, the muse will search for someone else to pick it up, she supposes. I did *not* want someone else writing this story.

And finally, Claire Keegan, who birthed a compellingly beautiful novel in just a few pages. I don't need to write a four hundred page novel, I can write something shorter and still have it be meaningful, I realized. *Small Things Like These* was the permission slip I'd been waiting for.

Inspiration struck further during my New Year's resolution for 2024: show up to the page, even if it's only a few minutes a day, and tell Jeremiah's story. Stand in front of the blank screen and, in the words of Hemingway, *write one true sentence, write the truest sentence you know.*

Hence, the book you're holding in your hands.

Enjoy, and in joy,

Joseph

Dedicated to the millions who have been, or continue to be, enslaved. Especially to the memory of William Headly, et al. May each of us know true freedom—especially freedom from harm.

jack

I died on the 11th day of January in the year 1893.

Might be a rather unlikely way to begin this story, but there is no way to tell it other than the way it needs to be told. Allow me at least that. I had, for years, been witness to great hardship and hatred, and yet enjoyed a great love unknown to me previously. What we have now is the story, if you will allow it.

As I sat at the desk, her wood worn from years of use by others, as well as myself, the night sky ablaze, I decided that before I was to take my last breath, there were a few moments of my time on Earth that I was yearning to put down on the page. Others' voices will chime in from time to time, as their stories deserve a telling as well.

And so, these words spilled forth in the sharing of the most tender, most challenging moments of my precious, love-filled life.

This, I daresay, is not an important book. You may wish to use it for kindling before long—yet I ask simply that you take in these words for even the briefest of moments. Our love stories are much needed upon this Earth, would you not agree?

Why? That's what most want to know. Seems they spend much of their precious time thinking of me and how I lived—who I welcomed into my bed. I thought of nothing at the time other than *leave me alone. Leave us alone.*

Us. There is now and has been for years, an us. By law he was to have no life of his own, other than what I said it was. Yet, I live by the good Lord's word. To love one another. Nowhere, far as I know, does the Lord profess that we are to enslave another. The \$240 that I paid for him was not for a continuation of his enslavement, but for his freedom. I did not know it at the time. I knew nothing at the time.

There was never any intention of it. Had never a thought of buying someone, participating in the horrid slave trade. Wanted no part in it, and yet there I was, at the river, witnessing the horror of it all. Among dozens of negro men being sold, all in various degrees of exhaustion, fear, filled with shame to be auctioned off like property, he, standing in front of me, a particular broken man, barely able to stand, chained. The auctioneer began the bidding and, for just a moment, he, heavy in chains, lifted his gaze and our eyes met. And, by the will of God, I raised my left hand, my voice squeaked *\$200 dollar!* Christopher Beston raised to \$205 and we battled it out 'til Beston quit. At \$240 it was over. I had just bought a man.

That night, he bathed. I sat just outside the room, avoiding watching him through the door left ajar, the room dark except for a candle near the washstand. I had no right to be

there, of course, to watch his nakedness as he stepped into the warm water I had prepared. No right to hear him hold back tears as he began to sob. I came into the room, a pile of clothes in hand, moved a chair nearby. I was feeling much tenderness for the hell he must've been through. *What is it boy?* I had no idea what else to call him. His God-given name, which I had yet to learn, seemed too intimate to say aloud, yet here I was, sitting not three feet from him, his battered clothes rumpled beside me.

Intimacy was already in the room.

jeremiah

When I ran, I did it for a good reason. They found out that I knew my letters, some numbers, and they called ol' Jolson over from the barn and told him to cut my hands off, on account of me *knowin' more than a nigger ought to know*.

I looked down at my hands, worn over from hard work—don't ask me how many hours I worked, how many fields I plowed, how many barrels of cotton I picked, 'cause there ain't no way to know any numbers that high. God might not've made numbers that high.

So, I looked down and knew right there that I needed 'em, would need 'em for the rest of my life. How am I supposed to clean myself with no hands? Feed myself? How about, once I'm a free man—I knew one day I was gonna be free, could taste it—I was gonna need my hands. Don't everybody? And I just knew better than to stay. But here is the worst part: if I was a runner, no tellin' what would happen to Momma and Debra.

But, I couldn't stay. I just couldn't. I needed my hands.

I'm gonna need 'em for the rest of my life, I kept thinkin'. So I ran. Right then, with nothin' on but a flannel shirt and breeches made from a coarse *Savannah Seed and Grain* bag. I had no shoes. No water. But I had somethin' ol' Jolson didn't have: speed—and a thick determination to get away.

When they set out after me, Master Clark and ol' Jolson on horseback, they didn't have time to grab a saddle, a gun or nothin'. Just hopped on Jessup and rode after me. God knows I loved that horse more than life herself, but I had rage in me, and when Jessup came up beside me, I threw every bit of weight and muscle and rage—and the blood, sweat and tears of my kin, and I knocked 'em over. All three, I pushed 'em over, down the ravine and the last I heard was them screamin' my name like the bejesus. *Nigger Jeremiah! You dead! You gonna be dead 'fore long!*

Now, I didn' have many choices in my life, but that night I did. I knew deep down in my heart that I could not go back there. I would rather be dead. Truly better dead than beat, chained and losin' my hands. So I ran, faster than I had ever run before, faster than the dogs that might've been followin' me... but those days there weren't dogs 'round there. Most had died or were too sick to hunt down a negro like me. Maybe the milk disease had got 'em. Lucky for me, sad for them.

Was I scared? Truth be told, I wasn't scared of runnin'. Not scared of goin' to who knows where. North was always whispered, so I thought about bein' there, of course. Only one thing in the whole of the world scared me, and that was gettin' caught. By the grace of God, I was not goin' get caught.

Until I did.

Not by Clark (I can finally say his name all these years later. He's dead now. Died by the hand of a negro lady, which makes my heart smile BIG.) I was caught alongside Lil' Red, another runner. He found me hidin' in a ditch. Both of us, quiet as a peck, but after a bit I heard quick, nervous breathin'. I looked over, and there was Red, hidin' not but a few inches from me, covered in leaves.

We stayed together for nearly a month, 'til we got ourselves caught and I was taken, chained and beaten right to the auction block. Then, nearly an hour or two later I suppose, it was my turn to be sold, and the man yelled for me to look up, open my mouth, show my teeth, turn around, and me, wearin' nearly nothin' but a soiled bag around my personal parts, people yellin', offerin' money for my personhood.

There, bleedin' and messed in my pants with my own waste, I did somethin' I had never done in the nearly thirty-three years I been alive—I let m'self look up. And found the eyes of a white man. It was less than a second, I swear it. But I did it just the same.

Hang your head in shame, I heard at the Clarks' often; negroes weren't supposed to be lookin' at the sun, the moon, the fields of crops, not lookin' at the dogs before they died. Or at the other negroes out and about, fixin' the bales, tendin' to the sewin', sweepin' the porches and bringin' in the horses. Jessup. Beautiful Jessup. *Look at nothin', especially a white*. Mostly I didn't, 'til I caught the eyes of that white man lookin' at me. His hand in particular goin' up again and again, 'til the biddin' was done. And, just like that, I'd been sold.

Well, hello there. Those were the first words he spoke to me, and I about fell over. No white ever said hello to me before. I said nothin'. Then, I remembered that when a white speaks to you, you're supposed to say somethin' back, least they think you deaf, or ignorant. *Yessir.* That's all I said that mornin', just kept sayin' *yessir.* Sometimes *nosir* in the weeks to come, if I meant to say no to something. *Are you cold? Nosir. Are you wanting to have more food? Nosir.* I was confused! Life ain't a yes or no thing, far as I can tell, yet I never been asked my opinion outside of Momma and Daddy askin' me things. *You love your Momma? I can't imagine you love me near as much as I love you,* and Momma would giggle when she said that. Was I supposed to see Massa Jack as my kin? *Nosir.*

That first day, alongside the buggy, he said *you look like you need a bath, and some food.* It nearly took my breath away. I found myself gulpin' in the next bit of air, didn't wanna take too much air case he be needin' it.

You see, that's how it was 'round whites. You never know what you might be takin' that they think is theirs, so you try and never take anythin'. Mostly, I just sat there, breathin' as little as I could, watchin' the back of his head, noticin' the sunburned creases in his neck, the smell of horse fillin' the space. *Yessir, a bath, food and a few weeks of sleep is what I be needin' alright,* is what I wanted to say, instead I just looked straight ahead, tryin' not to breathe, or blink. And, of course, not smile *never let 'em see ya smile,* my Momma taught me, *lest they think you happy or up to somethin'.* *And once they think that, they beat it outta ya.*

He pulled the buggy into a long drive, both sides covered in hickory trees, some near ninety feet tall, I suppose. The shade was welcome. I tried to be subtle, lookin' from side

to side, careful not to move my head, lest it create suspicion.

You can tell a lot about a place by the condition of her slaves, seein' the fear in their eyes, the thinness of their wrists and collarbones, skinny little waists and legs if they ain't been fed. How they hunch over to hide down, be swallowed by the earth, pretendin' they ain't there. Sometimes, perhaps they don't got the strength to stand upright, that's where the hunch comes from. I was lookin', too, for the size of the crops, to see how much work was gonna be laid out in front of me.

There weren't none.

No negroes.

No crops.

Just me, and Massa Sunburned Neck.

jack

It had been years that I had sat up here, alone, no one to talk to but the horses and dogs. Since Mother and Father had gone to meet their maker, I was beside myself. Earl died shortly after, and his wife Elizabeth was full of grief. They were the only negroes left on the land.

Some days we sat and looked at each other, shucking corn together on the porch. *You need not stay here, Elizabeth. If there's someplace else you want to be, kin to go find, you are free to go.* She said nothing for the longest while, looked about the place, probably thinking the same thing I was: no way I could keep it up, the land, the house, all of it. It was beyond me. Plus, my heart wasn't in it.

I gots nowhere to go, and truth be told, there ain't much spirit left in me to help. My strength is gone; barely able to cook and clean for ya. I wish I could do more 'round here, but as I said, there ain't much spirit left in me.

Cousin Sylvie came by later that day, and the three of us took to talking about what to do next. It was decided that

Elizabeth would be more comfortable living with her, less work to do, fewer reminders of the past. Elizabeth took daisies out to Earl's grave one last time, could see her knelt down, shoulders shaking. By early evening, everybody was gone. Mother, Father, Earl, Elizabeth, Sylvie.

The quiet of the house overtook me.

For months after, I ambled about, picking up something, a plate that needed cleaning, a shovel to be put away, then just as soon forgot what I was doing, and set it down. Neglect is the word that comes to mind—the loss of two parents, my closest companions from the day I was born, lost the same day without a moment to say goodbye, caused me to suddenly stop tending to things. This went on forever.

Sylvie tried to help, but I kept telling her *no bother, I'll get to it tomorrow*. I must've said this a hundred times, 'til she stopped offering to bring Elizabeth back to help keep up with the place. *Let her be, she needs her rest*.

So, I went on, picking stuff up, putting it back down. Until, Jeremiah.

jeremiah

I suppose you want to wear something besides what you got? I nodded my head yes, faster than normal; nothin' about this was normal. I'll just set these here. They belonged to Father... you are welcome to them. Massa laid the pile up on the ledge and sat himself down, watchin' as I bathed. I am glad you are here, and supper will be ready within the hour. May I ask of your name?

Now that I was his property, he must've needed to record facts 'bout me in his ledger. *They call me Jeremiah, I'm about thirty-three years, and this next part came out like steam, and I wished immediately I didn't say it, and I am a runaway from South of here, though I ain't fit to go back. I rather die than go back. Thought it best to tell you the truth, Massa.* There was a heavy breath, heavy 'nough to be felt in the room. Then he said *the weight of the world you seem to be carrying, sir. You can let that be.*

I stopped breathin' at the word Sir. Looked 'round to see who he was talkin' to, though I knew no one else was there, except me and the dog. Did white folks call their dogs Sir? *I hope the clothes are to your liking. Downstairs you will find the parlor,*

you are welcome to rest there for the time being. He went to the door and paused a moment, then turned.

I never shared the land with another, except my parents, said the white. Starts tellin' me how they left one mornin' for Atlanta, a storm come up and they never came back. Why was he tellin' me this? No white ever told me nothin', except what to do.

The candles wore down then, one of 'em fully burnt, the smell of it lingerin' in the room like charred wood. *The gate at the end of the drive has a bell. Visitors know to ring three times, deliveries twice. It is an old tradition that most homes around here use, you might know if it. But, late that Tuesday night in March, a few years back, the bell rang but once. I attributed it to the wind, the weather. Then, it happened again, again. I finally got up, threw on my boots and coat, lit the lantern and went out. Couldn't see a thing cause of the storm, so I walked clear out to the gate. Saw the horse standing there, still with the bit in his mouth, the reins dragging in the mud. Some carriage floorboards were... I could hear the crackin' in his voice. My parents were not about, all the fussing and planning for their trip was...*

I sat quiet, lookin' down at the water, the soap steady in my hand. *I opened the gate, took the horse in for hay and water, released the broken boards in the yard, strapped the saddle. Went out in the storm, called for them over and over 'til my voice got hoarse. Could barely see the road, muddy and filled with water, not able to tell the creek from the shore...*

I started shiverin', the water long cold. I stood then, my body wet, facin' him frontways, which seemed all wrong, showin' him my manhood like that, but thought it better than to show him my back. A white seein' your scars was like a callin' card askin' for more, like they know you were bad, you gonna

run off, so they try to beat it out of you before you run again. As I stepped out, I thought right away that spillin' water on the floor was cause for a beatin'. *Sorry, Massa. Sorry.*

A towel of course. Forgive me, he said as he got up. Opened the wardrobe, removed a thick linen, brung it to me. Could swear his eyes ran over my skin, checkin' his property; see if I was fit for work, or damaged, or somethin' in between the two? I started to dress quickly, reachin' for my soiled clothing. *No, no. Please, Jeremiah, use these,* he pointed at the pile. And, I was thankful for it; did not want to pretend that the rags I was wearin' were any good. I was wantin' for somethin' less full of chicken and pig shit, mud, blood; the runnin', biddin', buyin' trapped in the frayed threads. I was set to welcome the clothes, 'specially a shirt to hide my back, pants to hide my parts. After handin' me the fine clothes, he gave me water, too, a full glass. No white ever brung me water before! I drunk it all down, careful not to make a sound. *I am happy to clean the floor, Massa. The water, I dripped...*

There is no need. You best rest, after the day you had. He reached toward my head, and I flinched, fast. *There, there.* Brung his hand to my hair, pinchin' somethin' with great care, softness even. Held it in front of me. With no doubt, I could identify that bit anywhere in the world, regardless how dark the room. *Cotton.*

When he left, I found my empty stomach was not wantin' to wait more than necessary. The old burlap rags sat heavy on the floor, and I stood naked in the room. Out of an old habit, I looked around, side to side and behind, before I dared touch the new clothes. There were three pairs of drawers—three!—and two trousers. When I pulled them upon

m'self, they were a bit loose fittin' yet touched my skin like heaven—how I suppose a cloud would feel if you could wear a cloud upon yourself. The shirts, a whole pile of 'em, were like richness between my fingers, and I took my time puttin' one on. *No need to hurry, Jeremiah*, I said aloud, then thought better of it. Didn't want to fill the room with my own voice, worried it might be an invasion to the white, a disturbance. Then, I slowed down enough to let my right arm slide down the sleeve, the fabric touchin' on my shoulders and back as I let the left arm fall in, too.

My fingers fumbled with the buttons. A slight tremor in my hands that might've been there a while but I was just noticin' it now. There were socks in the pile, too. Some made of wool, others maybe silk. I dared not use the silk, and it was too hot for wool. I picked up the boots the white had put there, and walked into the hall, barefooted.

I was not planning on having a guest this evening, do not have a place for you to sleep. There is a shack on the property, but it's not fit... I was standin' in the downstairs room, lettin' my eyes adjust. There was no candle, no light from the windows. He asked if I would be alright sleeping on the sofa, and brung more blankets and pillows than I'd seen in one place, put 'em down. *I invite you to make yourself at home.*

When finally left alone, I sunk to the floor and started shiverin' again, sweatin' in suspiciousness—never had I been treated like this by a white. Had not even sat upon a sofa before! I'd rather be sleepin' in the mud, I thought to m'self, beggin' water from the pigs than to be here, in the house of a white, not feelin'... *deservin'* was the word that come to mind right off, and the whole moment left me fit to be tied. Why was

I here? In this house? How is it that I come to be in a bath, with heated water, and now invited—invited!—to have my head upon a pillow and my body upon a sofa?

While I was considerin' what to do next, my nose picked up what I reckoned to be pork cookin' in the kitchen, though I was suspicious of that, too. Can you imagine what it's like to be suspicious of everythin'? *I invite you to come eat, Jeremiah.*

The white was standin' in the doorway, the palm of his right hand open.

jack

I had never been the type of man wanting to own another. They had a word for it that I read about in the *Republic*, but they didn't tell what the word meant, least not right away. I had to read all through the article 'til I figured out that 'abolitionist' was what I was, *a person adamantly against the owning of slaves*, and here I was buying a negro and setting him up as part of my property. *Property*. A horrid word, a thing to be owned. How did this suddenly come to be? How did I go from *this'll never be okay with me and I will find justice for another* to raising my hand at auction?

What you have not known of me before, yet is worthy of telling: once I had learned that men had been gathering in secret to fight for the freedom of the negro, I went, practically ran down the front steps. It was my beloved Sylvie, first cousin on Mother's side, that let the news in. Sitting together in the parlor having mulberry muffins and sweet tea, we had, once again, fallen into the familiar: finding ourselves raging against what was befallen the negro *there is nothing on the great land that could ever convince me that enslavement is part of God's plan, Sylvie. Let us speak up! God willing, many of us are needed to lend a hand to*

stop what is morally sinful. Is this too much to ask?

Jack, she whispered, contradicting my rough shouting. Jack, she said again. I will tell you something that I learned only today, but you must, by the grace of God, be careful with both your mind and body. I leaned in, hard of hearing in my right ear and knowing well, by her clasped hands, her elegiac gestures, that I should not miss a word. There's a meeting planned, a meeting of those concerned about the poor, enslaved persons. It is dangerous to even speak of it, and I know that by telling you, you will want to run off and likely seek to elect yourself leader of the cause, knowing you as I do. But I expect this group, while they are full of good and just desires, must know of the dangers, and you, my dearest cousin, do not. Do you know what it is for a white man or woman to help? Do you know what's being risked?

It was later that night, as the fire died in the hearth, that Sylvie whispered the details *there might be someone at the window, cousin. We know not who lurks*, she said, her eyes pleading with me to listen, to not ask questions, to allow the news to simply sit in the room for a while, buried deep in the crevices of the feather pillow Mother had embroidered before I was born. *Please don't do anything rash. And keep your voice down.*

It was then that she allowed me the news of the abolitionists gathering not far from our door. While she spoke, my body began in tiny fits of tremors, barely noticeable from where she sat on the sofa as the dark overtook the room, and, as I learned more, the tremors grew more noticeable, and the lining of my throat grew hoarse. My hands, clammy with sweat, became chilled and fragile. I feared I might not have the ability to hold a spoon, if needed, and my heart? Dare I say that my heart stopped?

Were there beats missing that I shall never get back?

jeremiah

Over the years, I accepted the world as it was, to be an owned thing. To not put forth my thoughts into the world, not have an opinion 'bout the weather, my clothes, rags such as they were. To never speak in any meaningful way, except in whispers to Momma and Daddy, Debra. We said nothin' important. There was nothin' to say! We did not speak of freedom (we called it *bein' away*, freedom was too big, too dangerous and could be cause for killin'.) Momma would say *you were loud as a cracker in your sleep last night, Jeremiah! Loud as a cracker! You must a' been dreamin' of bein' away! Is that what got in your head, Cracker?*

Those first few days with Mister Jack—he taught me to never call him Master, *change the a to an i, that's all, and the whole meanin' is changed*, he said—were the worst, like walkin' on cracklin' coals. When I was a slave, I knew to not say more than necessary, to not forge with an opinion. Life was white and black, black and white, what to do, what not to do. Was almost always what not to do. But here? It looked as if I could do things, could say and eat and reach across the table and take a biscuit if my mind or stomach called for one. I was *allowed*, and

it scared me awake.

Nights when I was supposed to be sleepin', I lay there, imaginin' different times and movements in the house or on the land, imaginin' myself openin' up my arms to the mornin' sky and lettin' the sun fall upon my skin and *just stand*. No need to watch my back or worry that I was wrong in my not doing. Can you see it? Thinkin' that it was okay to just stand in the sun and not fear a beatin'? That is what keep me awake at night, smilin'—smilin'!—at the thought of standin' there, feelin' the sun, with no need to bend over and pick a heap of cotton, keeping a sideways eye on the overseer. I had learned to let my skin fall loose when the whip came (it was less pain than when the skin was tight. Did you know about that?)

I remember one time when I laid awake, it was a clear night, the door fully open, skeeters were bitin' round my head but I didn' mind, didn' feel the need to close the door. I wanted the air comin' in, laid there pretendin' I was at the supper table with Momma and Debra, Mister Jack, and askin' them to pass me somethin'. *Pass me the butter? Pass me a fork? Pass me a switch to scratch my back?*

To be able, to think myself able, to ask for somethin' that I needed, wanted, and not be afraid of it? That kept me awake! I loved laying there, thinkin' of it, imaginin' it clearly in my mind. Can you see why I couldn't sleep?

There is one word that hurt more than any other, hurt all of us, I suspect. A word screamed at us on the plantation, yelled into the shacks or down in the hole, a hole that smelled

of urine and scat and vomit, smelled of desperation and death.

Savages.

That word was bored into our minds—like they wanted us to believe it. Wanted us to become savages so they could feel all high and mighty, I suppose. Make us feel like vermin. I tried to run from the word, tried to put it behind me but I was already scarred, we were all scarred.

So here's what we did: we made a game of it, calling each other with a sing-songy voice *you be my beautiful sweet savage, yes you be!*

And then a song was crafted, sung high and proud like it was a thing to be relished all day through—

Here you be, my sweet little savage,

sweet with the smell of life.

Never mind what come b'fore,

never mind the strife!

Let me love my little savage,

love as the day is long.

Now as the night is fallin'

I wait for you til the dawn!

By the grace of God, Mister Jack treated me different right from the beginnin'. That first night when he showed me to his house, upstairs to the washroom, fillin' a bath with warm

water and said *I expect you are wanting to clean up and perhaps take a meal?* He said it like it was a question, like he was invitin' me to answer. I had never been asked a question from a white before, except in a harsh and dangerous way. *You want me to cut the right hand first, or the left* was the last question I was asked by a white before that.

I never answered.

jack

There is, of course, a sense of urgency in my heart, and I cannot allow myself to rest. Truth be told, it is not urgency that I feel, it is expectancy. Expectant that we are all to be killed, tortured, strung up for wanting justice for each of humankind.

Finding myself rushing through the day, holding my breath, tossing and turning at night. Is this how it feels to live with black skin, living on the other side of the hate? To always be on the lookout? The Colt pistol laid loyally beside me as I slept, my hand clasping the cold metal, but I am not one to kid myself. When they come, they will come in a posse, and will not stand at the foot of the bed, waiting for me to rouse from sleep, waiting as I grab hold of my senses, waiting politely for me to kill them. And, what if I did? As a sympathizer, I shall not stand a chance at trial, the jury packed with white men, full of rage toward any and all who are on the side of freedom. And, if I were to kill one? What chance would I have for justice?

This is why I find myself drenched in sweat and terror,

my voice hoarse with dryness. Enslavement is indeed the easier choice, the safest choice. I would not be killed for participating in it, but as God is my witness, how am I, how are any of us, to cage another of God's children, to shackle them and force upon them the whip and... I shall not do it, and will not stand beside anyone that thinks it is alright to do such. How to change their minds? Full well I know that the Colt would not bring forth any resolution, any peace. How in God's almighty land did we come to this? To the insanity of laws and culture allowing us—encouraging us!—to shackle another?

There is but one ever-present question, one I have asked myself more than a thousand times these past months, the answer already on my lips. The question of whether to stay here and raise my voice in hopes of changing minds—the Smiths, the Laurels, the Winstons... change the minds of all those who seek continued enslavement—or run from the only place I've ever known?

Tonight, as the cold is now upon us, it seems I will need help keeping up with all this land, unable as I am, to care for her myself. In speaking with Jeremiah—or more accurately to him, as he barely speaks—I asked *would it be alright to have your help around the place? I shall pay a fair wage, money you can do with what you please. Of course, you are not allowed a deposit in the Georgia Bank and Trust, but you might find a safe place to hold it here 'til you need it.*

He stared down at the ground, a stick in his hand moving dirt from one place to another, quiet, his brow wrinkled as if this were the most strange proposition he's heard, and it

might've been. As he sat there in his long silence, I noticed the way his upper lip held a bit of moisture, although the night was not warm, his body was sweating.

I... he barely said, then a long, shallow breath; a breath that seemed to say something about all the hardship and horror he'd been carrying around with him, though, of course, we never talked of it. I expect we would never. It was my own people that had caused him all this hatred, I was the unlikeliest person to shore up his confidences. It was not my place to know his pain. It was his to do with it what he wanted, and it seems that now all he wanted was to draw in the dirt, so I left it at that.

I moved a few feet away then, preparing to walk back to the house, when softly I heard *mighty kind of you, sir*. A tear welled in my eye, a tear of happiness that we had made an inroad, yet I wished his first words would've been about him, about what he wanted and wished. Instead it was about me, and that would have to do for now.

Without thinking too much more about the subject, what I heard fall from my lips was *there's more where that came from. Kindness, I mean*.

It was getting dark now, yet I could still see him when I turned around, wanting one more look, and swear to the grave that my Mother was laying in, I swear there was a hint of a smile on his face, and, if not a smile, perhaps a softness, which was a joy to behold. Because of it, I waited, to see if there was more, and by the grace of God, he looked at me. Through a cracked voice I let out *G'night Jeremiah*. He said nothing.

The following morning, on the Lord's Day no less, having spent most of the night thinking about all that the land

required this time of year, I found Jeremiah straightening out the barn. The day was just warming up, and I could smell the hay underneath my feet with its familiar scent, like cooked corn. *I've been wondering*, I said, *if I might go and get more folks to help out around here. Or would it be better just the two of us? Doesn't seem fair to go down and buy someone...* Perhaps I put too much weight on the word *buy*, said it too strong. Jeremiah turned, looking first at what might've been my forehead—he is tall, towers above me—then lowered his eyes and met mine.

What I noticed, not for the first time, was how red his eyes were, bloodshot, though I dared not say the word. I learned to speak carefully these past weeks, and knew better than to say tender words like blood and shot. Just looked at him and saw his eyes welling with tears, a full drop was spilling down his cheek, leaving a dusty trail.

Might be better, he said, then continued to stare at me, as if he wanted to make his point known surer than not. I was tempted to turn away, to look back at the land or down at my feet, to dispel the discomfort, but chose not to. I kept looking at him, trying to consider all the pain that had caused the intricate map of blood vessels. I swallowed hard, noticing that moment just before you cry, when the well has been opened and you're not sure to hold back or let the water fall down.

Instead, I coughed, punched my chest with a fist, a bit more dramatic than I wanted to, but it gave me a chance to look away, catch my breath. *What do you mean it might be better? What might be better?* I knew that asking him questions might throw him back into silence, but I dared not pretend to know what he was referring to, did not wish to spend the rest of the week guessing what he meant. Best to just ask and hope for an

answer, bridge an understanding between the two of us.

Now it was his turn to clear his throat, to loosen, I suppose, the roughness that had settled there these past few weeks, or longer. I stopped looking at him then; allow him the peace and privacy to gather his thoughts and continue, if he chose. *Might be better to go get some others*, he said softly, *not because we need help but because this here is a better place than where they gonna end up.*

He gestured to the house and a bit toward the land when he said the last part, and what I caught onto was the other word that he spoke, the one that fell so easily from him, that I wanted to look again at his eyes and ask him to repeat it. *This place... there are negroes there on the block that need a safe place, if you don't mind me sayin'.*

There we stood, looking out towards the barn, me trying to focus my mind on the woodgrain of the building, noticing the parts that still had varnish as compared to the parts near bare wood. The hinges on the door facing the west were all but covered in rust, the wind causing them to open and squeak most days when they weren't latched properly. This distraction didn't last, yet gave me what I needed, a place to lay my awkwardness. Trying to not give too much weight to what he said, didn't want to be pestering with questions or what I most wanted to lay out—revisiting the *we* that he'd only just spoken of.

The two of us were beginning to walk around the place together of late, looking in rooms that hadn't been tended to

in some time, cleaning out the occasional dust covered shelf, smacking the dust mites and cobwebs off the sofa. We spent our mornings with broom in hand, creating clouds of dust that soon turned to coughing fits.

And once, falling out onto the front porch for a needed breath of air—once, there was laughter.

jeremiah

There have been times in my life when I had moments of near happiness, sittin' on Miss Sage's lap when I was young, learnin' my letters and numbers, though it was not easy doin'. I am not what you would call 'a good student' and neither was I especially interested to discover new things. I ain't the curious type, or let me say, I wasn't the curious type, 'til I learned one thing about this life that turned it all around, and I ain't been the same man since.

I always thought that we all, every one of us with dark skin and nappy hair, that we all were slaved, that this was just how it was for whatever insane and god-awful reason. Then, I learned differently. I learned that some were free, able to walk out the door and go wherever they wanted, eat and sleep when they were hungry and tired. Do you know what that's like? To know of that freedom and reckon it will never be for you?

Where I come from, every one of us was either holed down, chained, beaten, or told what to do every minute. Many were killed, and many of those that weren't were beaten so

badly they wished they been killed. Not me. I wanted my freedom so much I could taste it, willin' to do anythin' to get away.

And as you know it already, I ran and got found down by the river more than a month out, found when I was covered in leaves and mud trying to hide myself for a bit of sleep. It had been days since I found sleep and was worn thin with exhaustion. But here is the good part: the slave catchers knew not where I had run off from, so they didn't know where to return me to. And because I was 'just a runaway' with no claims on me, I went to the next slave auction without a history, only thing they knew was I was a negro, alone, no claims on me, which is the worst thing to be, cause the next masters, they will be out to nearly kill you, to break your spirit good so you never think of runnin' again.

But that's not how it worked for me. I was bought from the auction block and never punished, never given a whip or the chains. I was given, near as I could tell, my freedom.

It has been a while since I was brought here. I keep track of the days by notches above my bed. A bed! Mister Jack insisted that I had somewhere to lay my head at night, and no floor or mat was good enough, he says. So he went into town and bought me a feather mattress—and a pillow!

I told the mercantile that I needed one for my cousin Sylvie, so as to not raise suspicion. You have been through hell Jeremiah, you need to get proper rest, you hear?

I did hear, but did not understand. Why was he bein'

this way? The feelings, new as they were, struck me deep down in my reaches. This man, this white man, seemed to care about me. I do not, even for a moment, trust it. I have seen too much, hurt too much. Have seen my Daddy tore out of the place we rested at night, not worthy of being called a house, my Daddy was tore out and they beat him, ripped away his pants, the only pants he owned, and cut off his manhood. As it was happenin', he looked right at me, his eyes bore holes in the back of my head.

I was bein' held back, my shoulders achin' from tryin' to free myself, my heart beatin' faster than I could bear, screamin'. You know when a negro is screaming it's cause he's hurtin' real bad, otherwise we don't make a sound. *Do not be seen, do not be heard*, I was told my whole life. You know what that's like? *Watch what's happenin' to your fat daddy. It'll be happenin' to you if you don't b'have yo'self!* Ol' Jolson said through clenched brown teeth, spit flying in the night.

That is how my life was, always fearin', always behavin', always thinkin' the next thing I do, the next thing I don't do, that was gonna be *the thing*. Always on the lookout for the thing. The thing that was gonna get me killed, gonna get my manhood tore off...

As God is my witness, I knew that by runnin' off it was gonna get my Momma and Debra in trouble. You know those times when it felt like you didn't have a choice, no matter what? This is how I lived my life, until now.

Now, here with this white, I had choices, and they scared the bejesus outta me, they sure did.

jack

It was weeks before he looked me in the eye for more than a second. We were in the field, as I shared plans with him about what I thought might be the best use of the land. I hadn't done much with it in the years since Mother and Father had passed.

The last thing we said to one another, I wish I could remember the exact words, having spent the last four years and seven months trying to construct that conversation, believing if I could put it together, I might find an end to my grief. Near as I can tell, Father said something about *a storm coming soon, and best put the other horses away, and close the latches*. His wave an afterthought, as if it was too much trouble to raise his arm higher than his shoulder, looking not at me but where to put his foot on the buggy to step up.

That's how I picture him, over and over again, looking at the buggy's step, not at me. Mother said, and I remember this near perfectly, *the pie in the oven is nearly done. You'll be able to smell it when it's finished, take it out then*. She adjusting her hat,

fearing, I suppose, that the wind may blow it off. Mother was always one to keep things close, didn't like when anything she carried fell to the ground; her shawl slipping off a shoulder would cause an *oh, dear* followed by a near silent *humph*, or an exhale, exaggerated.

Once, Mother was carrying eggs from the barn, had the basket in both hands, and one of the dogs, I forget which one, got startled and ran 'cross the yard, right between Mother's legs, knocking her down face front, the basket broke her fall as she crashed, breaking all but one egg. *There were fourteen!* she cried from bed later, and Father wiped the viscosness from her hair, too upset to wash herself, tears streaming, still wearing the blue flannel nightgown covered in eggshells and albumen. Two days she spent in bed, could be heard crying sometimes in the dark. Father slept downstairs *I just need to let her be, she's had a bit of a fuss and'll be fine in a bit*. Mother was strong otherwise, *healthy 'n happy* she'd say, until she dropped something. So, the last thing she did, 'least the last I saw of her, was her grabbin' ahold of her hat, keeping it close.

There's work to be done, I told Jeremiah, carrying crates from here to there, and back again. My thoughts whirled, it was hard to make tails out of what I had been thinking those past weeks: I considered the possibility of going to auction come Sunday and bringing home another, but my heart cried no. I wanted the solace of just us two, ached for it. Lifting a crate, I sat it down at once. *There must be tea. Are you ready to stop?*

The companionship of him was a welcome salve; I did not was to fuss with it.

jeremiah

This is a gift, she said, you'll see. It'll be a gift when you're older and can read and write. Not knowin' is no way to go through this world, Jeremiah. I knew nothin' at the time, didn't know it was against the laws of the white for me to know my letters. Miss Sage, she must not've known neither, 'cause she kept puttin' me on her lap, day after day, this is how you write your name. And I'm here to tell you that, laws or no laws, those letters on the paper were about the most beautiful thing I ever saw.

That's the written word, my darlin'. We say words out loud like I am talkin' to you now, but we can also sing the words and write 'em down, like in books and letters. You wanna be able to read books, don't ya child? And if I knew then what I knew now, I might've said, not if I'm gonna lose my hands over it, then no thank you, ma'am.

Then I ended up here on this land, with Mister Jack, with hardly a stitch of work to do, just layin' 'round, thinkin' of the past, takin' my sweet time to look at my hands and praise the sweet Lord that they are still a part of my body. You ever done that? Look at part of yourself and thank God it's still

there?

I knew a negro once, Good-lookin' Gregory they called him. Everybody loved the way he looked, a smile like the sun. 'Til he was caught smellin' a pie on the porch of the Big House. They cut his nose off! Took it right from his face. He was no longer able to smell anything, no longer good-lookin' of course.

They threw the pie to the dogs.

Not fit to eat after that nigger got next to it, I heard from the kitchen, though it wasn't hard to hear. It was shouted by one of the Clark girls. They were always doin' that. Sayin' how bad somethin' had turned after a nigger got close. If the milk curdled, they blamed us, throwed it on the floor, made us clean it up.

Rememberin' this, I reached up and touched my nose—with my hands. Went right out to find Mister Jack. He was feedin' the horses, cleanin' out the barns. I stood there watchin' but a minute. *You know I could do that. Happy to.* He stood, restin' his arms on the rake, smiled at me. *You've done enough, Jeremiah. Time you rest a bit, yes?*

I am needin' to find a way... a way to say thank you, good and proper, Mister Jack. I feel like I ain't done that yet. He said nothin', just stood there, a big quiet between us. *Sit a spell,* he motioned to the stool. *The thing is, it is I, and all the white folks, that should be thanking you. You and your kin have broken your backs to make this State, much of the South, what it is.* He walked to the barn door, his back to me. *And we killed you for it. Killed your spirits, killed your kin. The least I could do is let you be here, resting up, eating your fill. What I do for you is nothing. What you have done for us is everything.*

He turned back, his cheeks red, his breathin' heavier.

I'd never seen a white cry before, didn't know they was capable of it.

I reached in my pocket for a handkerchief—a gift from him last Friday, belonged to his Daddy, but it wasn't there. Instead, I pulled my shirt sleeve down past my hand, reached up and wiped his tears, could smell the sweat comin' off him, the fullness of his sadness. I mumbled a quick *thank you* and, feelin' things I never felt before, stirrin' every which way inside of me, I ran out the barn. Found tears of my own, wiped 'em off with the same sleeve. Nearly fell, tripping on my feet.

I had nowhere to go, full of everythin' that was said, the words plus the closeness, and didn't know how to make any of that go away. You ever have that before? Such a fullness inside you and didn't know what to do with it? Where could I go that didn't make me feel like crumblin' back into myself?

The only place I knew was this land, didn't dare step foot off it. All around town were whites that would kidnap me, sell me down river or across town, take to beatin' me just for the fun of it, see what it look like to have a noose 'round my neck, eyes pleadin'. No, I knew not to go off this land and expose myself. That meant stayin' here, but where? He was in the barn, the house belonged to him, only place left was the shack.

I went in, paced back and forth, punched a wall 'til my knuckles bled, bit down on 'em to keep myself quiet. How could I feel all this rage inside and still have what felt like love for a white? *What?* Is that what I was feelin'? Is that the part of me that can't be figured out? Love for a white? A man? A white man?

I fell back on the bed, piled the pillow behind me, and

whispered, near quiet, *there is too much wrong with me!* Colored skin, runaway slave, and now this? My knuckles found their way to my mouth again, bit until blood spilled its way to my chin. Sat up before I dirtied the pillow. Heard myself say *I love you anyways, Jeremiah*. Said it not in a whisper; wiped my chin with my sleeve.

His tears, my tears and now my blood all mixed together in the fabric.

I have found somethin', somethin' I dare say is my very own. Jack—he has offered that I let go of the Mister part when we are together—he found me one day in the barn, among the deep shadows, barely lit enough to see what's what.

After my eyes had adjusted some, I began to notice things, beautiful things. Crates, barely held together, valises odorous with the smell of time and earth, and off in the far corner, under the window splayed with years of neglect and filth, I could see a workbench with metal springs and nails, screening from doors, spools of string long forgotten. There were tin cans filled with wooden wheels and in one, nests from swallows and finches, robins and blue jays, I suppose. I saw tools, waiting to be loved back to use.

As I stood admirin' all of this, a piece of metal caught my eye. I looked over, and for the first time, took hold of what did not belong to me. I had been careful these past weeks to touch nothin' other than what needed touchin', the pail to bring water to the house, the bedclothes to cover myself at night, the fork to bring food to my lips. Other than what was

necessary, I touched nothin’.

Until today, when what caught my eye was a thing of remarkableness, and as I reached for it, a knowin’ ran through my body in a way that can’t be explained.

There you are, Jeremiah. I had come to like hearin’ my name spoken from him; it was always with ease and kindness, never a hint of hostility. Had, for years, only heard whites say my name with bitterness, as if they were spittin’ out the word. *Lots of debris in here, I’m afraid. You finding anything to your liking?*

He was closer now, so that I could see him in the shaft of light, see the sleep that he had yet to wipe from his eyes. *I don’t believe this is all debris. There are some beautiful things in here, just need some cleanin’ up is all, if you’ll allow it.*

You can have whatever you like, use whatever you like, he said. It was only then that I realized I was still holdin’ the hammer, a beautiful thing made for making things; I wasn’t thinkin’ of startin’ any trouble, of course. Did he know that?

A few nights later I had a dream. I dreamed of a big white room, flooded with light and people drinkin’ from fine, stemmed glasses. I knew in an instant that they were in an exhibition of sorts, and through the din of conversation, I could feel the tension in the room. The whispers became louder, and I could make out a word spoken over and over *negro negro negro negro*. I awoke with a start, my body and bed clothes damp with sweat. It was dark, the sky outside the color of a field mouse.

I was the negro, I said aloud, and lay back, smilin’ at the thought of it. *I was the artist!* I tried to find the dream again, to see a glimpse of the art in the room. How I longed to see it...

I left the bed, lit a candle and had the intention to go

visit the paintings in the house, to take in their oily smell, to touch—touch!—the faint lines that'd been left by the brush, to let my eyes rest in the colors, one color laid up next to the other.

As I walked toward the house, I saw one painting in my mind more fully than the others—a painting of a table with bread and stemmed glasses, a cooked fish upon a platter, still with its head, flatware and fancy napkins beside it. A candelabra with six white candles ablaze in light, a window at the far end of the painting, showing blackness outside. I had studied her, I suppose.

It was during this walk, that I felt a hand just touch my left shoulder, soft with ease and not a bit of harshness to it. I looked back behind myself but, even before I turned, I knew no one was there; it was just a feelin' that fell upon me, and caused me to turn on purpose, and walk to the barn. As I pulled, the door squeaked open with her familiar sounds of age, and the odor of work hit me, stronger than before, perhaps because of the darkness. I smelled the earth, the heavy air, the scat of animals. I swear I could smell the moisture on the hay, the minerals on the nails.

All of it hit my nose, and I sat down at once, takin' it all in, and then, as a surprise even to myself, I lay back in the cool earth, the candle beside me, and took in all that I could see, which wasn't much. I knew the beams overhead were there, and my mind filled the gaps of what I couldn't make out, but sketched from memory, the darkness like a friend.

I was sleepier than I knew, for what seemed like a moment later I woke and saw the sky before me had changed, hints of orange and red were makin' an appearance. I scrambled

to my feet, at once scared of where I was, why I was there. The candle had been used up, a flicker of smoke leaving her wick, the flame gone. For an instant, I wanted to run back to the shack, crawl in bed, not be found out so early. Then I breathed, a long, good breath, a breath of relief. I wasn't doing anythin' wrong here, I wasn't going to be suspected of anythin'—the need to run and hide left my body like a weight no longer needin' to be carried.

For the first time since I arrived here, I breathed.

Almost without thinkin', I walked toward the workbench, dustin' off the night's dirt from my back and arms, my behind, and legs. I wished for a candle just then, for even by the window it was still too dark to make sense of what lay before me. I rested my palms down flat on the aged wood, and found it to be sturdy and ready for use, almost as if she was callin' me. *Waitin'*. As I felt the pressure of her under my hands, I whispered *thank you* and then realizin' that I need not whisper, I allowed my full voice to say aloud, *thank you, dear God* for I knew how close it was, how close I was, to bein' kept away from this privilege, the privilege of standin' here, usin' my hands, of havin' hands.

I looked down at 'em, and slowly, as if in prayer, brought 'em to my lips, kissed each, then moved to the fingers and thumbs, buryin' my face in their palms, and soon found them to be wet with my tears, tears of gratitude, tears of grief. For my father, ungreived, until now. The gratitude, somehow a bridge to the grief I had not dared feel after witnessin' his torture and murder, brought back my own terror when I was runnin', not havin' eaten for what seemed like forever, drinkin' only water I found from a pig's trough, not knowing when I

again would have more. Thirst is a mighty scary thing.

Once, the night I buried myself under leaves and earth to find sleep, I dreamed a dog was gnawin' at me, feedin' on my hands, hands bound together in a heavy rope, and I was silent, my mouth gagged, someone pullin' at my hands, and realized that the yellin', the pullin', and the rope were not of my dreams; I had been found, and I was bein' tied up, gagged, made a slave again.

All those ungrieved memories assaulted me with a start, until they fell out here in the barn, and I allowed it, allowed the grief to fall from my eyes, my heart, my being. How much had I been carryin'?

The weight of the world, Jack had said that first night. The weight of the world.

jack

It was weeks before I extended my hand. We had been standing together, looking again at the field, the dryness of the soil, talked of planting, sharecropping. Jeremiah had not known of the notion, and I myself barely knew what it was, explained it best I could. He seemed pleased at the idea of it.

Before we turned to go inside for our afternoon meal, I reached my hand, held it there. *Let's shake on the sharecropping.* He looked down and I was struck with the possible truth of this: he might not have ever shaken the hand of a white person. After a bit, he took my hand, and I am embarrassed to say that I had much of a reaction. The coarseness of his skin alarmed me. I pulled back my hand and with the other, took his wrist and turned it over, examining his palm. It was the skin of a much harder man, one who had known charred labor for years. The blisters were covered over, slightly healing, but present nonetheless. It took everything in my power not to bend down and kiss the hurt.

I have something for you. It'll help. Come with me. He

followed me to the house, where I had Carlyle's cure-all in the hall closet. I thought to apply it myself, then knew it to be too intimate. Handed him the bottle. *If you need something else, be sure to ask, Jeremiah. If it is not in the house, I'll search it out for you.*

I will tell you here that I was overwhelmed with attraction. Oh, how I longed to kiss this fine, shirtless man, standing in the hall, the smell of sun and soil upon him! I felt a rush of blood come up to my face. *I must be off!* Embarrassed, I scurried halfway down the front road before I remembered I had promised him supper. Stopped, considered if I should go back and feed us, or continue forth to some unneeded, unknown destination.

I came back into the house, found him to be standing just where I'd left him. Reached for the cure-all, poured some in my hands and reached for his. Did not venture to catch his eye. Said with a voice that seemed far away, scared even: *Supper will be ready before long*, and lathered his hands with the ointment. I felt a heat in my loins pressing against my pants. I'm sure I blushed again, visibly. *You must be goin'... you were leavin' somewhere...?* he asked. *No, I... I changed my mind. I am here.*

My voice trailed off before allowing the words *I am here... with you* to escape. Cleared my throat and offered instead: *We shall eat soon. Will you dress for supper?* Gave him the ointment and headed for the kitchen.

Took all my strength to not look back.

That same evening, I found myself at my desk, a pile of paper, my quill and inkwell. Squinted in the light 'til my eyes

adjusted. Began to write, out of a newfound inspiration, my last will and testament.

Firstly, I left the entirety of everything to cousin Sylvie. The house and acreage, any animals still living when I passed on. And then, it fell upon me that Jeremiah was worthy of a reparation of sorts, deserving of monies, and of course his manumission. The paragraph for such read as follows—

And for the negro Jeremiah, who lives here at the time this will was laid, shall be given monies for his personhood, a reparation for his years as an enslaved person. In the upstairs safe are, at the time of this writing, a sizable amount of gold bullions. They are his, and my signature below testifies to it. I do hereby manumit and discharge Jeremiah from any and all bondage, and this writing is to be a perpetual bar from any of my representatives holding him enslaved.

There was more to be found in the will, yet the ascribed details were written clearly, with no need to consider them here. Let it be known that I was interested now, more than any other time, in the safekeeping and care of this fellow human, a man who'd spoken only but a few words to me. And, here he was to receive my gold. Did this strike me as odd? Did I ponder this as I climbed the stairs, readying for bed? And, did I peek out the window, searching for his shadow in the yard, beside the shack? Did all of this follow me to bed that evening?

Yes, oh, yes. And the peace that came from it lulled me to sleep; a sleep like I hadn't enjoyed before, ever.

jeremiah

I found myself in front of the books, could not keep from 'em a minute longer. He told me it was alright to go in, stay awhile, read what I want. *Hell, you can kick your boots off and rest up on the divan if you want, Jeremiah.* I looked at him, and he must've sensed my confusion right off. *The sofa. Lay on the sofa and read a book, Jeremiah. Fall asleep if you want. I will wake you for supper.*

The books made the room feel heavy, but not in a depressing way. More of an old way. Perhaps his kin had been layin' around in this room, playin' checkers or *Shove ha'penny* since before I was even born.

I stepped real careful, with a silence I had known for most of my life; the ability to not make a sound is part of a slave's life. I found I was not breathin', felt dizzy. Sat myself down and let my eyes look. *No need to scurry, Jeremiah,* I said under my breath. I looked to my right, saw a dusty pillow sittin' beside me, a few feathers pokin' out of her fabric. I picked it up, put it behind my back, and leaned. Feelin' the comfort of

it behind me, I whistled a tune that my Daddy had taught. I only knew a minute of it, forgot the rest, started again at the beginnin'. If he could see me now! Sittin' here with a feather pillow, surrounded by years of white privilege, just whistlin'! If he could only see me!

The far wall held shelves filled with books. I stepped nearer, worried less about the silence, allowed my breath. Felt the wornness of the leather, blew the dust from the tops. Without much hesitation, I pulled one toward me, read her cover *The Emboldened Ones*. First page I opened to had Jack's handwritin' in the margin, unmistakable. Without knowin' why, he had written *This deserves further study* and a page deeper in read *Share this with Mother*.

I read the sections next to what he had written and could not make out what had spirited him. I touched his written words, took my time, found more. Brought the book to the sofa, adjusted the pillow behind me, moved an inch toward the light from the window. Found his words more interesting than the book itself, in a moment read *Could this be true for all of humanity?* I must've fallen asleep after that.

I shuttered awake, a soft hand on my shoulder; was startled just the same. A fear scorched me in that moment, was I wrong? To be lyin' here, in a white's room, pullin' a book from the shelf that did not belong to me? *Supper is ready, take your time. Bring the book if it interests you.* The corners of his mouth grew, formin' a bit of a smile. *Or would you rather eat in here? I'll pull the drapes closed.* I had no voice in that moment, shook my head no, then a quick yes, did not know the movement for maybe. *Anywhere's good*, I said, rose and placed the book back, studied where it was so I could find it again. His handwriting

was comforting, worthy of another pass.

At supper I found a white feather on my lap from the pillow. Thought immediately to hide it—instead brought it up and placed it by the plate. *For good luck*, he said. *Make a wish*.

This or better, I whispered. Twice.

jack

Mealtimes were the hardest, of course. We were the only two living at the place, and had to keep separate. Always on the lookout for neighbors, folks passing by, and gripers. Gripers were what we called those who didn't have any place to go, slept in barns and trenches, ate what they could, stole when the mood struck. Seems they were always griping—about the cold, the heat, the hunger, the white folk, the black folk, the rich folk, other poor folk. That's how they got the name. Any one of them could've turned me in for sympathizing with a negro. The reward for turning someone in was more than a year's salary for most folk, even the well off. Turn in a negro lover and you could live the rest of the year high on the hog. So, we ate most of our meals separately or in the safety of drawn drapes, closed windows and doors.

I had, I shall now admit, a deep longing for companionship, and he slept not but twenty-one yards away—yes, I had counted—from my hearth and home. It was not failed on me that the cause of this separation was but only for two things, which no one but the Lord himself could change. We were both born men. And we were of a different color.

jeremiah

The first time was more than I ever imagined, and I certainly didn't imagine it would be with a white. I didn't plan it, and knowin' what I know now, I wouldn't have waited so long!

I had been livin' there on the land a few months, spendin' time together with Jack—startin' the days in the back kitchen, drinkin' coffee, talkin' 'bout the land, what needed fixin', provisions, people he knew in town, those he trusted, those he didn't.

In the beginnin', he did most of the talkin'. Though he asked me questions, I mostly answered short-like, just what I needed to say to not appear rude. Then, at some point, over those cups of coffee, plus the evenin's by the fire, or workin' in the yard, I would tell 'em things, 'bout the runnin', the beatin's, my Daddy, how much I missed my family. How I thought 'bout goin' back, sneakin' in and findin' 'em, helpin' 'em move on.

He asked me question after question, and listened hard, as if he couldn't wait for me to answer so he could learn

more about me. Can you imagine it? Wantin' to learn more about me!

Then, one night on the porch, purely gazin' out to the trees, watchin' 'em sway in the breeze, hearin' 'em rustlin', he asked, *you ever been in love, Jeremiah? A special person have a hold of your heart? Someone back at the Clarks'?*

Took me by surprise. *I haven't ever...* I was gonna say *I haven't ever lay down with someone, in the way people do*, but was that really true? I had lay down with Peter, but we didn't do more than kiss this one time. *I haven't ever... I...*

And, then, I heard myself say: *I don't like girls, like the way most boys like girls, I...* The rest of the words couldn't come out, words I hadn't ever said, even to myself. Ever! Why did I tell him that for, anyways? Was this the thing he needed to throw me off? To sell me back? Regrettin' it too late, I started to stand. *Best be gettin' back, I s'ppose*, grabbed up the blanket that was coverin' my shoulders.

Me neither, Jeremiah, if that helps any.

That stopped me in my tracks. *I mean, I like women well enough for friends, conversation. I love cousin Sylkie more than life itself, but...* We were dancin' now, dancin' 'round what was comin' next, like a herd of horses that once they started runnin' there was no stoppin' 'em. *Hope you won't mind me askin', and I mean no offense, but...* my heart almost stopped beating, *so you sayin' you like other men folk, Jack?*

There it was. The question I was wantin' to ask him ever since my stirrin's for him took hold.

Through the shadows on the porch, I could make out his face, the grey stubble, the smile that came with the

question, the stars reflectin' in his eyes. That last part I might be makin' up, but I swear I could see 'em. Stars, yessir, stars.

Not all, he said. I most certainly do not like all men. Some of them I'd rather see dead and buried, the way they treat folks of color, it's a criminal shame... I don't know what got into me, but I pressed farther. But, do you, then? Like men?

We looked right at each other. No place to go. No one there but the two of us, and the night sky. *Yes, I do, he said. You ever been with...? No, he said, moving closer. You?*

We stole into the kitchen for our first kiss, and words between us flowed. Told each other how we liked to sneak looks when the other didn't notice—but we both admitted that we'd noticed. He told me he loved when he made me smile or laugh *so I can see your beautiful white teeth, how they shine.* Then, he ran his fingers over them, explored my mouth with his tongue. *I always wanted to look at the blue of your eyes, blue like the sky, but I was scared. Maybe you think me strange, doin' somethin' wrong, or maybe you think I was... odd, or somethin' broken.*

You're not broken, Jeremiah. But... I do think you're odd, he laughed, ticklin' me under my arm. *And, that's one more thing I like about you,* he said, smilin', wrapped his arms 'round me, our mouths found each other again, hands slowly explorin', like we had all the time in the world, our manhoods hard, our clothes dropped to the floor.

He took my hand, led me up the stairs. I tripped a bit 'cause I wasn' watchin' where my feet fell, lookin' instead at his body, the muscles of his white legs flexin' as he moved, climbed. Thinkin' about tastin' his white skin, nibblin' his shoulders, the ones now filling the stairway.

After, he said *more than anything, I'd love to have you stay in this bed with me. I want to wake up and see your smile first thing, but that'll put us in such danger.* Instead, we dressed and he walked me out to the shack, looked me in the eye at the doorway, started to cry. I reached for him... *No, no. There might be people watching,* the snot runnin' down his nose, those beautiful blue eyes turned red, watery.

Why are you cryin' Jack? I disappoint you in some way? He turned serious then. *Not at all, Jeremiah. I have waited for this for so long. Outside of a few furtive kisses with girls in school, I never had this... this... Have thought about it for years, of course, and now that we had tonight, it seems a whole lot of emotions come with it.* He cried harder, and through the tears said *I'm happy, I am! These are tears of happiness! I promise!*

Fallin' asleep that night, or let me be more correct in sayin' *tryin'* to fall asleep, what I remembered over and over was this: sittin' on the porch, askin' if he liked men, findin' our way to the kitchen, deep kisses, walkin' up the stairs and seein' his whitewhitewhitewhite skin, and then, later, *I promise.*

I loved those words!

The first time a white ever promised me anythin', and I believed him! Wanted to grab hold of him, pull him into the shack, claim *IpromiseIpromiseIpromise* all through the night. Tomorrow over coffee, I thought, I gonna tell him *I promise.*

Just didn't know what I was promisin' just yet.

jack

His kisses tasted like the bark of an oak tree, his tongue like molasses. When it happened, the earth and I had, in an instant, fallen. I knew I would never be the same.

Never had I kissed a man before, and lived nearly all of my forty-seven years innocent. Barely a whisper of love nor intimacy had been alive in me, and now, breaking the taboos scared me beyond measure. With each moment of love, I knew there to be a noose around my neck, and his, if ever we were to be discovered.

I felt tremendous remorse for banning Jeremiah to the shack each night; I ached to give him all the comforts he deserved, but I was forbidden by the laws of the land. I did what I could; yet needed to keep up the appearances of a slaver. For both our sakes.

I longed for his arms, the comfort they brought me. Yet, Lord as my witness, I am not here to take up space with my bouts of loneliness and longing. My truth is this: I would have given my life for him. Contemplated it more than once.

To prove that I am a man of my word, even if that word is private and only to myself, I found myself sitting in front of Karl Henceton, attorney at law, a man worthy of my trust, sworn to confidences. Yet I still shook, the sweat pooled in my boots, finding its way to my brow. Under my arms was a well of water. Nonetheless, I asked, phrasing it this way: *Suppose I didn't have any kin, Karl, and didn't want my land and any monies turned over to the fine state of Georgia. Could I, if I was leaning to or supposing, leave what was lawfully mine to my negroes? As an inheritance of sorts?*

Let it be known here that in those moments that followed, as he looked at me from behind his father's oak desk (may the Lord grant eternal rest to Mister Henceton) I felt that Karl was seeing through me, could look easily into my mind and know that I was indeed asking about more than relations between a negro and a slaver.

No.

As he said this, he rubbed the stubble on his chin. With his one word, I exhaled for the first time. At least the question had been asked and answered. He didn't throw me to the streets, didn't raise a ruckus, calling me out as a sympathizer.

Not in the state of Georgia, anyways. Negroes cannot own property, so as you say, the estate would end up in the hands of the state anyway. He leaned in, and with words whispered as low as could be *and it'd be mighty dangerous for the negro or negroes, too. Shine too much light on them, and they would be strung up—for just the mention of inheriting something. Just the mention of it!*

He said this with such passion that spit flew from his mouth, landing on the papers between us. He looked down, ignored it, and found my eyes. *I won't put anyone in that kind of danger, Jack. I am fully sorry, truly I am.*

If Jeremiah were not to inherit, and my will were to be voided, I would move on to my next plan: I would live forever.

jeremiah

I never thought I would ever lay with another. Of course, I knew there were men and women that lay together, got married, made babies. Knew that was expected of me. But I never had the inclination to do it. *You got a girl?* I heard this over and over again, mostly from Daddy and the men on the plantation, and I'd just shyly shake my head, stumble over some words about *not yet*, as if the next minute I might be fallin' in with a girl. I knew it was never gonna happen. I just let 'em believe it *could* happen, and let it stay at that.

But, I knew my heart. Had let it patter after men in the fields, their shirts removed, their muscled arms, hairy chests, wanted to follow the line down to where it met the top of their pants. 'Course I never allowed my eyes to linger. Got good at lookin' straight ahead at my work but findin' ways to sneak a glimpse at their bodies, their strong chins, their full lips. It was enough to make me crazy! Can you imagine it? To have your desire so strong that it keeps you up at night and you can't even look?

So, the night I finally fell in with Jack, to feel his lips against mine, our bulges against one another, I wanted to cry. Did cry. Years of keepin' myself shut away came floodin' that night in the kitchen, and I saw it was possible to share myself with a man. Had not known that before, the possibility of it. And now was tempted to shout it from the mountain tops, scream it 'cross the river, whisper it to the moss. *I am in love with a man! I lay with a man... and it is good!*

'Course I said nothin' 'cept to him. Then, last night I said this: *What about the others, Jack? There's others, yes?* He was filling the goblets with wine. *What's that?* The drapes in the dining room were pulled tight, the candles ablaze, the table filled with a big ham, slices of pineapple, scattered papers that did not appear, from the way they lay about, important. *There are others like us? We are not the only ones with this inclination?*

I suppose, but I have not met them. Not what is broached in polite dinner conversation. 'Oh, and by the way, Mr. Fredrick, have you on occasion felt the need to bed your neighbor, a Mister Clem I believe?'

He laughed at his own words, the sparkle in his eyes bright, lively. *What I mean, Jack, is that it must be scary for 'em, to be leanin' alone. I would like to extend a hand, say 'it's alright. You are not the only one. Give it time. Men bein' with men is alright, it is good.'* That's what I would say. He stopped and looked at me.

And, how do you propose to find these others? Post a sign in Forsyth Park?

He was only half kiddin' now, could sense, I suppose, the seriousness of my words, the yearnin' I had to find others. Though we didn't have an idea of how to go on, we sensed they must be out there. *I don't know, Jack. Do you suspect anyone of leaning like we do?*

I have always suspected a Mister Samuels, but he is safely tucked away in marriage to Missus Samuels. I cannot very well accost him in the market, asking such things. 'Have you ever considered leaning, Mister Samuels? If so, will you join us 'round for dinner this Thursday?' It is not a conversation to be had, Jeremiah. Not even a topic to be broached. His tone made it sound like that was the end of the conversation.

Where does he live? I asked.

I'm sorry?

Mister Samuels. Where does he live?

He stopped in the middle of carvin', the fork and knife at rest atop the ham, and looked up at me. *It is too dangerous, Jeremiah. You are colored. It is dangerous and unwise enough to approach any man about his leanings. But to approach a white? You will be hanged. And for what? To what end?*

Yet, you are not, I said.

I am not what?

I looked straight into his eyes. *Colored.*

There was a long silence, longer than was comfortable. For a while the only sound was the forks scraping along the plates, the wine bein' swallowed down his throat. The dog scratched at her neck, then groaned, rested herself on the hardwood. After many moments, he said *and what do you suppose I would say to him? Say to anyone, Jeremiah? That I have a beau, a black beau that I bought at auction, that now shares my bed and drinks from my goblets? A beau that wants to gather together with others that are leaning and... and what? Have a ball? Dress in our finest and prance about the halls, slide down the banister, sing 'round the piano? Is that*

what you would have planned for us? I will have none of it! His right fist holding the butter knife pounded the table once, then silence.

I sat there, dozens of words on the tip of my lips, but spoke none of 'em. Each seemed too forthright, too desperate. Instead, I rose, took the plate, walked toward the kitchen, said only *thank you for supper*, and, stoppin' in the doorway, added *keepin' secrets is tiresome, Jack. And lonesome.*

We need to talk about going North, he said to me more than once. Finally, I said *wherever is best, but I can't leave Momma and Debra here. We stay here at least 'til we can be together, yes?* We sent word again to folks at the Clarks' to let 'em know I was safe, and that we were working on a plan. It would take months, if ever, to get everyone together, months I was selfish to know we would be alone, guilty knowing that Momma and Debra were suffering untold horrors, and there was nothing I, or we, could do. Acceptin' that for the sake of our safety, we were to sleep separately, makin' our own way, was a small price to pay. I prayed the Lord would find a way to bring us together. We deserved that much, yes?

The next week, we read in the *Savannah Republic* that a mass slave auction was gonna be happenin' in March; more than four hundred slaves on the block, with the Clarks' needin' to settle debts. My Momma and sister would likely be there! *No need to worry, Jeremiah. I will take care of it. If they are there, I will bring them.*

And I didn't worry, instead lay awake at night thinkin'

of ‘em, wonderin’ if they got word that I was okay, seein’ ‘em in the back of the carriage with Jack, seein’ ‘em safe. Imaginin’ me huggin’ both, holdin’ ‘em in my arms.

I marked the days ‘til March third.

Those days waitin’ for the slave sale were long and hard. Needed to set my mind elsewhere, so I found myself back in the barn, standin’ in front of things I might bring life to—things I could, dare I say, make art with, admire, and think *I did that*. Before now? Did I ever once consider that after I picked a row of cotton? A hundred rows? When I was slaved, did I feel proud of myself for sayin’ and doin’ things that had me avoidin’ the whip? No, of course not.

Yet, buildin’ somethin’, the joy of takin’ pieces that Jack and his parents had left layin’ ‘round in the barn, and make somethin’ of them?

Now, I had it in my mind that this was a good way to spend my time, ‘stead of worryin’ ‘bout Momma and Debra. I’d rather be building somethin’. After so much had been torn, broken. Families. Homes. Children broken from their family. Daddy broken on the side of the road. I had seen ‘nough brokenness and could take no more of it.

Instead, I wanted to create somethin’, even if it was just takin’ forgotten things that were not pretty or useful, and blendin’ ‘em together in a way.

The first piece I made was this: an old suitcase that was no longer of good use, full of dirt and spiders. But I saw that it

still had some prettiness to it. Not fit for travelin', but maybe it was pretty 'nough just to look at? Inside, I found a way to place dead branches, two corn cobs, a horseshoe, small stalks of cotton tied together with twine. I spent hours arrangin' and rearrangin', added dried flowers and a piece of painted canvas that was torn, and had just been layin' inside the barn door. I cut it to fit, makin' the back of the suitcase pretty, prettier.

After a week or more of fiddlin' with it, I stepped back, sat on the stool, and looked at it. Looked at each part, the way the branches filled up the left side, held the dried flowers, fell in neatly before the canvas. The cotton leanin' just so, the horseshoe sittin' atop. When I was ready, I carried it to the house and, maybe because I was runnin' a bit out of excitement, all of the pieces fell into one another and, when I opened it up to show Jack, it was just a pile of trash, everything fallin' on top of the other. *I'm sorry*, I said. *I spent a week on this*. I felt embarrassed by the ugliness of it.

Well, if you like it, Jeremiah, keep going. I'm sure it's gonna be fine. I took and threw it in the barn, slammed the doors, cursed *nevermindnevermindnevermind!* Knew then that buildin' wasn't as easy as I supposed. I could, of course, quit anythin' that smelled of hard work or difficult. There was no one there to push me, force me.

I let that sullenness sit for a day or two, maybe longer. What I noticed was that, as I was fallin' asleep at nights, I would see it in my mind; almost smell the mustiness, feel the splintered wood, the fray of the canvas, the weight of the horseshoe. The image of cotton came most often, and heavy. And knew then that this was not leavin' me. I was gonna learn to build, even if it was hard. *Come on Cracker*, I said as I tossed,

foldin' the pillow under my head, turnin' on my side. *You have done hard before. This? This ain't nothin'. It's easy. Get back to it, baby.*

So, I found myself out of bed, walkin' up the path to the barn to give it another go, lantern in hand, feet bare, eyes glarin' to make out what lay in front of me.

Stopped in my tracks.

There, standin' in the dark was a man, black as coal, eyes like the moon. *Please, please*, he pleaded.

I knew that look.

Knew him to be a runner, scared, hungry. Not heard any dogs yet, so figured we were safe for a minute. *Come with me*. I led him to the house, thought better than to call Jack. This man did not need to see a white tonight.

I offered him to sit at the table, poured water in a glass. *This a white man's farm?* he asked. *Yes, yes it is. But he is good. More than good. You hungry?*

I did not venture to learn his story, where he came from, where he was goin', what he needed. I already knew. Where he came from was dangerous, deadly. Where he was goin' was North, likely he didn't know nothin' more specific than that. What he needed? This. A place to rest his sorrowful feet and heavy back, fill his stomach. I began openin' cabinets, pullin' fruit from the pantry, crackers. I sat it in front of him, let him eat. *Your Massa let you do this? Come in his house, go through his food, sit at his table?*

Not all whites are evil, I said, my hands in prayer as he tore into the crackers that sat in front of him. *My name is Jeremiah, I live here as a free man. The man of the house is Jack Tadler. Remember*

that name. For the others comin' up behind you. This here a safe haven. Maybe part of the railroad one day. You heard of that?

I waited for him to meet my eye. He didn't. *Now eat to your fill. I will fetch a bundle to take with you, food, a few coins, whatever I find, it's yours. I would be happy to know your name, if you care. If not, I understand.*

He looked at the fruit in front of him, a bowl of puddin', slices of bread. I knew we were not in a hurry. It had taken him a lifetime to get to the table, be seated in this chair, fill his lungs with an air of freedom, and his belly with food.

I didn' know, he said finally after drinkin' the water, drainin' the bottom of the glass. I didn' know there was good ones. I only know the ones that beat, mame, kill, cage. They be the ones I knowed all my life. How you found a good one?

For a moment, when I opened my mouth, I felt the truth wantin' to spill out, lay it on the table. I was not ashamed of the truth, but I knew that if I were to say *he bought me* it would set this man back, have him keep believin' all he ever believed 'bout the whites. I stepped around the answer, told him this: *there are more like him. His cousin Sylvie is kind, too, and likely there's more that we haven' met yet. I don't know. What I know to be true is that there are no beatin's here, no cages. And you can, if you choose, call me a friend.* That felt enough for the moment. *Now, let me get you a bundle.*

I let him there, alone in the kitchen, and knew that what we had built in this house now felt disturbed. Jack and I had our time together to be close—away from the windows, curtains drawn—wrapped in the other's arms, our kisses long and searchin'. Now, the air was suddenly held, stopped. A fugitive was in the kitchen. Bein' here was a disruption,

although temporary. *Temporary*, fell from my next breath. This life I was buildin' with this man was temporary, and could be torn apart, broken in a moment. *What can be built can be broken*, I said a little too loud.

What did you say, m'love?

Jack was standin' at the top of the stairs, wearin' not a stitch. I ran up fast as I could, stood a few steps below. *There's a man in the kitchen. A runner. I am feedin' him, givin' him what he needs for the journey. He's afraid of whites, of course. Can you go back to bed?*

Did anyone follow? I did not hear dogs.

I have heard none either. Doesn't mean anythin', Jack. There are not always dogs. I know it is dangerous, and I should've asked first, before bringin' him in. I'm sorry.

I was now on the top step, beside him, found it hard to have this conversation with his manhood staring at me at eye level. *You live here on this land, too, Jeremiah. You are free to do what you see best. Know that I trust you. I shall return to bed. Will you join? After he is gone?*

He turned to go, then called after me. He went to his room and returned not but a minute later. *Here*, he said, his right arm outstretched. I held up my palm, and he let two gold coins fall in my hand. *Tell him to keep these safe. One in each shoe if he has them. Does he?* I shook my head. He turned again, and I was suddenly full of worry that the night was turnin' to day, that light would be here before long. He came back with a pair of boots, socks. *Let us pray these fit.* I reached out, a quick kiss on his cheek. *There's more where that came from*, I said with a smile. *I must go.*

I reached the bottom of the stairs in a quick. Our new

friend was standin' there, eyes flarin' red, arms crossed around his chest. Had he witnessed our closeness? The room was now heavier than I'd known it. *Here, try these on.* He sat on the floor, pulled at the socks and boots; we were both relieved that they fit. *For your journey.* I showed him the coins, then quickly knelt in front of him, slipped one in each boot. *You remember the name?* I asked. *Tadler, somethin' Tadler?* he asked. *Yes, Jack Tadler. Only share it with those you trust. Of course we can't afford to have trouble here. But we help where we can.*

I stood first, reached my hand down to pull him up. *Let me finish your bundle. Best you leave now. If they find you, you have never heard of this place, never heard the name of those who helped you.*

Godspeed, I said, handin' him the bundle.

And he was gone.

When the day of the auction finally came, I rose at first light, went to the kitchen to make us breakfast, counted the time 'til I heard Jack stirrin' upstairs. When his boots hit the hardwood, I went to him. *I know how much this means, but don't get your hopes up, Jeremiah. It'll be a long day and we don't yet know if they are gonna be there. Let us pray.*

We went to the front room then, Jack lit a fire while I sat on the sofa, wrapped in a scratchy wool blanket the color of brick. When he sat beside me, our hands grasped together, it was me who spoke, which surprised us both 'cause he was always the one to do the prayin' for us. *Dearest God, thank you for today, thank you that we are here alive, together.* Jack squeezed my hand just then and I kept on. *And today we ask again for the safety*

of Momma and Debra and the other four hundred, and most especially that Momma and Debra find their way here, to be with us. That they may lay their head on a pillow tonight, a full belly, and feelin' the love of this house, this family.

This time it was me who squeezed his hand, so tight he whispered *ouch* and we both chuckled. *Please Lord, bring them here,* said Jack. *Let the angels of mercy guide this sale today, let Missus Anne and Miss Debra be brought up and guide my hand to...* we knew not to say the word *buy*, so Jack paused there.

To bring 'em home, I said. *We know this to be true, powerful and possible, and we release it to your divine glory. Amen.*

jack

Jeremiah made breakfast while I hitched the horses, filled the carriage with apples and blankets, jugs of water, stew from yesterday which had been heated up. Could feel the tension in the city all the way down river, a mixture of hell and hopelessness, a din of voices could be heard across the miles, and I felt sick to my stomach. *That's alright, I'll just have tea this morning*, I had said, choosing not to tell him why I didn't eat, though he could guess.

This might not be that bad. Remember what happened the last time I went to the block? We smiled at each other then, as my foot found the carriage steps, and I thought of Mother and Father. I got back down then, and went to him. Kissed him hard like I was going off to war, praying no one was alert to us, put a hand on either side of his face, then asked that we kneel down in the dirt. *Lord, please watch over this world this morning, find it in your grace to have the whips laid down, the locks left open, the iron collars dropped to the ground. Let your four hundred souls find freedom of any kind, and most of all, compassion. May our words find their way to your heart, Oh Lord. Amen.*

Jeremiah stopped kneeling, sat on his heels, and sobbed harder than I'd ever seen. *It's all comin' back*, he cried and I knew to let it be, let the tears flow, didn't want to stop him, not saying *there, there, it'll be alright*. None of that. Instead, I sat in the dirt, a witness to him.

I nearly forgot that for weeks I wore a collar... metal on my head and neck, had to sleep upright... the sobs louder now, his fist in his mouth, biting on his knuckles. I was behind him, holding him, rocking gently. I thought to say that'll never happen again but couldn't; couldn't make that promise. Could happen, might happen today if someone saw us there in the yard, my arms around him. That would be more than enough for a slave stealer to grab him, torture him, put the collar on. Upstairs, in the nightstand is my Colt, take it out and lock yourself in the bedroom. Don't come out 'til I come back. The gun is loaded, but the safety is on.

I reached for him then, helped him to his feet, walked him inside and up the stairs, assumed he didn't know where or what the safety was, hadn't fired a gun. I opened the door to the bedroom, pulled back the covers on the bed, took off his boots, retrieved the gun and showed him the safety. *I am going to get you water, and a book. I might be gone all day, maybe longer, but I will come back to you the first moment I can. Will send word if possible. The Lord is watching over us, Jeremiah.* Went to touch his chin then, to gently squeeze it between my thumb and the knuckle of my index finger, but he flinched, turned his head away.

I was never so aware of my whiteness, until then.

When I was a mile or so away from the block, the stench

hit me. I had forgotten to bring a kerchief, and the smells assaulted my nose and mouth—feces, urine, sweat, and bodies. I could smell fear, death, torture. Four hundred is a lot of persons, and when they have been starved and beaten, dragged for miles by chains, the stench becomes unbearable.

The crying was the worst—people screaming for family that had been lost, separated. Sounds of metal clanging. I thought to turn back, go home, crawl under the covers with Jeremiah, tell him *I made a mistake. Can't bear to see the horror of it.* Lie and say his family wasn't there... Instead, I hitched to a fence post, teams of horses far as the eye could see, hid my provisions from eyesight so as to not tempt thieves.

Walking to the block, I could see into the flatbeds of other carriages: piles of chains, locks, branding irons, slave collars, whips, cages. I stopped in front of one, closed my eyes, drew a breath pungent with metal, human waste, dried blood on the wood of the carriage.

Dear Lord, shine your light on those that find their way to the back of this carriage today, may they be surrounded by family, and a strong faith that all is gonna be okay. Grant them the grace of being treated graciously. Please hear my words today, oh Lord, and grant this fervent prayer. These folks, each and every one, need your Divine intervention. Amen. I knew that grace might not be possible, but I never let a chance to pray go unspoken—I hoped I wouldn't be the only one praying for the negroes that day.

Coming into the fairgrounds, the shock fell upon me hard. Seems folks had come to Savannah from all over the Eastern seaboard, dressed in their finery, blankets spread out, men smoking, playing cards, the women wrapped in layers to keep out the morning chill, Spring hats upon their heads.

Buckets of chicken, casseroles in crocks, mounds of biscuits, beer. They had come for a god-damned party!

I felt dizzy and leaned against a tree, three men nearby smoking and laughing. One of them, an ugly sort with a long grey-white beard, yellow teeth and a pistol in his hand, noticed me, and found his way to get my attention *gonna be a damn good day to get niggers, cheap! Ya look like ya need a swig*, he tried to hand me his flask, the smell of him strong and fierce. I brought my lips together, gathered saliva in my mouth, ready to spit in his face, thought better of it, swallowed and pushed him away.

Had barely an idea of what they looked like, his mother and sister. Jeremiah had planted a rough sketch in my mind weeks ago. *I haven't seen 'em in a bit, more than a year, they might be beaten down. God knows how harsh they've been treated since I ran. I was told Debra had her good front tooth torn out, as a way of identifyin' in case she ran. Can you look for that? A pretty girl with no front tooth? 'Bout seventeen years?*

His momma had blue eyes, lighter skin and a scar across her cheek, he said. *Probably a white man got ahold of Momma's momma... where else the blue eyes gonna come from?*

He told me this weeks before as we were in the bath together, a tight space that, if it weren't for love, would've found us complaining. *And here I am, in love with a white*, he said and looked at me, one of those long gazes I suppose most lovers exchange, though with both of us unfamiliar to the game of love, so much of what we did, said, explored, was new to us.

What I want is two things, he said. *I want to see past color, to not see the world as black and white, them and us. One day I hope that is so true for me that I walk down the street and just see people, God's people. Not a white, not a black. Just people.*

He reached into the water, brought up the floursack cloth to squeeze water on my head, wipe my eyes, the bridge of my nose. Touched the tip of my nose with his finger, smiled. I kissed him then, gently at first, knowing to move slowly even after all these months, did not wish to force, harm, presume. My tongue found its way, and gently I explored his mouth, trying to find the crevices of unspoken words, muted screams, tears held back.

Oh, and there is a third thing. I've not got a surname, and I need one. Have been writing it down on paper, in the dirt, anywhere I can and I like the look of it, the sound, the meaning behind it.

I waited, not saying a word. Though the bath water was past cold, I dared not disturb the moment. *Free. I wanna be known as Jeremiah Free. That's beautiful, I told him. Mister Jeremiah Free...I anoint you.* And it was my turn to reach for the washcloth, bring water to his head, let it run down his face, neck, chin, chest. *You skipped the second thing. What's the second thing you want, Jeremiah Free?*

Oh! I want to be able to forget, and remember. To remember all of what's happened to me, Momma, Daddy, Miss Sage, Peter, Debra, my people far back to Africa. And I want to forget, too, at the same time. Take that part of my memory and let it be, close it down, wash it away. That too much to ask? Forget, remember, not see color, change my name? That too much to ask for on a Sunday morning?

'Course not, I said, and shivered from the cold.

To walk among a throng of terrified people, to have my color stand out as something feared, hated, made me regret

myself, my existence. I wiped my brow with my hand, said under my breath *this isn't about me. I'm here to find the ladies*. Right away I noticed this: none had their mouths open. Their lips were pinched shut, some of them crying, of course, but none were doing so with an open mouth. How do I find a missing tooth in this hell hole? Was not about to follow course and force open their mouths, inspect them like livestock. Instead, I wandered around, praying to be guided to them, catching any eyes I could, trusting that I would find answers in their eyes.

And I did.

Standing next to each other in the barn, tied up, shivering from the cold, the exhaustion, it was her blue eyes that caught mine. I noticed a subtle scar that must've been pronounced back in the day, the young girl beside her had eyes blazing, ready for a fight. *Missus Anne? Miss Debra?* At the sound of their names they contracted like wounded birds, like their own name, or more likely, a white man knowing their name, was too powerful, too dangerous. I tried to reassure them, *there, there, it'll be alright, you'll see*.

Came back minutes later with a jug of water, waited 'til no one was around, offered them a drink. They both gulped nearly all of it, then stopped. *Over there, the lady that slumped over. She need it bad*. After giving the woman the last of it, I slipped out, knowing I could do nothing but wait. As I left, my hands found the wood of the barn and I said my prayers.

Your love, Lord, is needed here, it is needed now more than ever, if it be Thy will. Then I kissed the wooden planks.

The men were on the block first, sometimes huddled with their family, yet by day's end, no single women had been brought up. I took paper and pen from my bundle, dipped in the ink, scrawled *Staying here til tomorrow. Mother and sister appear safe. Prayers to our Lord for a safe return, J.* Found a white boy about twelve who was hauling water and cleaning manure for pennies. *Take this note and be quick about it.* Gave him the address and promised a nickel if he came back with proof of delivery. *Stand below the far-left window and yell his name, tell him you have a message from Mister Jack. You will be paid upon your return.*

I thought to ask for proof of Jeremiah's last name, or have Jeremiah write his name on the paper in return, but knew that seeing a negro writing, or having the name Free attached to him would rouse suspicion in the boy. He'd start talking. *To prove yourself and that delivery's been made, ask him about his sister, what is something different about her?* I waited the longest hours of my life, saw the boy come running up, gasping to catch his breath. *Your boy said it's a tooth! Her tooth is missin'!* Placing the nickel in his dirty hand, I looked away, holding my tears. I have never, in all my years, been so happy to spend a nickel.

I stayed awake that night, keeping vigil. Could hear desperate murmurs at all hours, mostly crying, calling out for family. Too often I heard *Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?* Near daybreak the singing began: *Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' forth to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot...* My soul was aching to get up, go and feed, comfort, nurse, but knew that to do so would bring unwanted attention, call me out for sympathizing; and, once discovered, I would be denied today's purpose.

Near evening of the second day, I finally saw Missus Anne pulled onto the block, hit on the back of the head for

screaming Debra's name, and she fell to the ground. I jumped with a start! Caught the eye of those near me and sat myself down. Closed my eyes, my hands clasped. *Lord, bless my purpose here. Let me ride home today with these gentle souls in my care. Let there be a reunion tonight as we praise your name. Amen.*

Felt for the bundle of money in my billfold, not knowing if it would suffice, but trusting it would. And knowing, just the same, that I wasn't here for one, but two. *I'm here for both*, I whispered to myself, more as a prayer, I suppose; a way to keep focused on what lay in front of me.

I raised my arm high, up toward heaven. The bidding was low for both; Debra's missing tooth marked her as a potential runaway, and most folks steered clear of that kind of trouble. Missus Anne had even less value, nearly nothing due to her age and poor condition, and her calling out to Debra marked her a troublemaker, too.

Sooner than we all knew, we rode away in the carriage. I stopped a safe distance from the sale, pulled to the side of the road, went to the back for provisions. Both of them flinched as I handed them forks, spoons, the stew, water, apples. *No need to worry, ladies. I am, God willing, taking you both to see Jeremiah before long.*

I looked to those astonished blue eyes, Missus Anne did not immediately turn away. Instead, she began to scream, thought better of it, muffled herself, and sobbed. Never had I seen someone cry so. *Thank you, Massa, thank you*, Debra said. I looked straight to her.

My name is Jack.

missus anne

I never imagined my life gonna be like this—chained, beaten, skin scarred from front to back, top to bottom. Even the soles a my feet have been put to the fire, branded. Not a day gone by these past years where I could discover anythin' for m'self; every bit of everythin' be either given to me, simple foods not hardly fittin' for a hog, or taken from me. The worst part of every day, from mornin' 'til night is the not knowin' the whereabouts of my Jeremiah. I knew, seen it for m'self with my own eyes, what happen to Harold. My b'loved, pulled from my arms while we was sleepin' in the shack in Westforge. Accused a lookin' badly at a white man; taken from me in the middle a the night, castrated right in front a me, in front a God, and killed in the road like some animal.

Why, oh why? There be nothin' bad of this man, I screamed at 'em. *'Cause we can. We do whatever the hell in damnation we want,* said Massa Clark, as he kick me in the head, drag me four feet from where Harold lay, bleedin', me unable to get to him. I still hear his cries when I try, fitfully, to lay my head down at night. And, here I is, readyin' to be sold. Again.

Yesterday or days ago—a tall white, wearin’ a blueblack velvet coat and vest, a voice quiet as a church mouse, come to the barn, us holdin’ up for the sale. Come right up like he knowed me and Debra, leaned in close—far too close—why whites always wanna git up in your face? And I whimpered for fear of a lashin’. Slowly, and in barely a whisper, he say to me and Debra *there, there, it’ll be alright, you’ll see.*

When the sun was set high in the sky, they pushed me out a the barn, and I fell on all fours. The weakness of my body for not havin’ eaten was to blame, sure as the push from behind. What hit me first, when I was dragged to the sale, was the smell; the smell of unwashed flesh, spit, sweat, blood and feces. Hundreds of bodies lined up, chained to one ‘nother. Even babies still at their mothers’ breast had rope ‘round ‘em, as if they was goin’ to crawl their way to freedom.

We hadn’t a look of surprise among us, most been up for sale b’fore. Their eyes told of it. Not but ten minutes later, I seen Debra, near the back, tears and dirt streamin’ down her face. We been separated early on, while still dark, and I lost track of her. Oh, how I longed to run and hold my baby! Too much been taken from me, and here she be, not but a few yards away, and I weren’ able to touch her, might not never see her again. She my baby! My only girl!

Can you imagine? I knowed to scream out her name would cause ‘em to tear me up with a beatin’, but I needed to see her eyes again, to look at her at least once more. But to make my voice loud enough to raise above the ruckus and be heard? To not be heard and still beaten? *DEBRA! DAUGHTER DEBRA! IT’S YOUR MOMMA! DEBRA!* I never did see what hit me. But it found its way to my neck, just where it met my

bad shoulder. How they always know? How they know, when they never before seen me, where my hurtin' spots are? By the time I found my footin', she was gone. *DEBRA!*

Some time later—don't matter if it be ten minutes or two days—I saw him in the crowd, the man who whispered to us, a pinched look to his face, his shoulders bunched up near his neck. I followed his eyes, strainin' to see where he was lookin'. It was the auction block he be lookin' at. There, raised just a few feet above ground, a fat negro man, about six feet tall and nearly as wide, was on the block to be sold, his lips chapped from too many days without water. They turned him 'round to show there weren't no whippin' scars on his back; by the by he was an obedient negro, that's what they was sayin'.

The white man be pullin' money out of his pocket, seemin' to count how much was there or just to reassure hisself that he had plenty? Was he gonna buy the heavysset? Why he come to us and whisper calmin' words to Debra and me like that? You ain't never known real inhumanity 'til you seen what it be like to witness one human buyin'—yes, buyin'!—another. But far worse, I don't need to tell ya, is seein' your own flesh and blood, your own chil'ren, be bought and sold. An auction—wordswordswords, dirty words—where they put your baby up, your own flesh n' blood, part of your soul, stripped her chest bare to show her brown mounds to the crowd. Can you imagine how this be? To a mother? Your own child?

This day, hundreds be forced to be standin' up there on the blocks, treated like less than cattle, half-naked, bleedin' and cryin'. Youngin's cryin' out for their mammies, daddies cryin' out for their beloveds—sisters, brothers, uncles, grandmothers—all bein' torn apart and achin' for each other.

You ever hear what tearin' apart a family sound like? Can you imagine the sound of it? I pray to our Lord that you won't never hear it. It beyond what our spirited souls can bear. If you don't agree with me, then don', but I been there. I heard the sound of tearin' apart. It be in me, ain't no gettin' it out.

My turn to be bought. Up on the blocks, my bare feet soaked in blood from the shallow wooden steps where poor negroes went b'fore me, beaten and sweatin' all over the block, the steps. I slipped twice on the fluids of the others, moved jus' fast enough to avoid another whoopin'. *Donotdonotdonot look at 'em, nothin' worse than seein' the whites of their eyes, even accidental.* A fate worse than death be lookin' a white in the eyes. I seen what happen to my Harold. Would they chop off my breasts for that? The same breasts that nourished my chil'ren?

I keep my head low, until a negro man—a negro!—come up to slap me under the chin with his calloused hand. He smelled a tar and sawdust. I dare not lower my head again, but my eyes? My eyes been lowered for years. I be damned sure not to raise 'em now.

The biddin' started. I felt the tears leakin' out a me, fallin' on my face, wettin' my neck and chest. My chest heaved at the thought of all I been though these past years, hurt and near ruin all flooded out of me—in front a people! They could see how fragile I be. I ain't no good, not a my own possession. Do you hear me?

The negro that slap me was now in charge a the biddin'. He grab hold a my wrist, brought it up to the gray, sad-colored sky, wanted to show that I had all my fingers, had some bit of worth still in me. *This here elderly negra, 'round fifty years, still strong, conditioned to housework and farmin', no known injuries, no*

marks upon her back, legs or hands. Wherever you need her, she go, he yelled in his dirty, heavy voice, the sound of meanness fallin' on my ears. *How much fer her?* And me there, heavin' with the weight of the world, not hearin' any numbers. Did it matter if I be three or thirty dollars? What of three hundred?

For the first time, I noticed my feet, standin' on the boards of the risers, bloodied and deep in the sweat of those who stood here before I did. I was taken with wantin' to clean 'em, to wipe my feet on somethin', to get a splash of water on 'em. And not for the first time, I thought perhaps I might be crazy. My throat burned from days a screamin' and little water, ached from the pain of cryin' and dryness—yet I did not yearn for water for my throat, I wanted it to clean my feet. Is that the thinkin' of a sane woman?

Everythin' be spinnin', mouths movin' but no sound could be heard 'cept for the beatin' of my heart in my ears. Then, somehow, the white who whispered near my ear b'fore, he raised his hand, and in a moment, the realization that he bought me fell across my mind.

Then, maybe moments or years later, a miracle fell down on me, when that same white, he also buy up my innocent Debra. We together! *Together!* Could my prayers be any more answered than that?

debra

There be a light at the end of the tunnel, but I don' have any true understandin' a what come to be these past few days. Hard to put into words the burstin' I felt when I come to realize that the same tall white in the velvet coat, smellin' a salt and talcum, found it in his heart to gather up Momma and me, and buy us together. How he know we kin? How he know in the barn yesterday, ankle deep in manure and our own waste, come right up to us like he knowed us, and whisper in our ear? The seconds b'fore he come in, as I watched him comin' near, I lost my breath, scared as I is of bein' close to a white. That closeness only ever led to trouble, yet, here he was, whisperin'. No white ever whispered nothin' to me b'fore, less you count words comin' out between gritted teeth, which ain't the same.

And I knowed things were gonna be different when he led us to the carriage and said we could sit inside. I dared not look inside, but I could smell the finery of it, the red of the fabric reflectin' off Momma's face, a gold braid trim along the window openin'. *No Massa, we need not ride inside*, Momma said,

shamed to be so filthy. *The back bench be fine with us.*

A long moment passed before he spoke, tellin' us we could ride wherever we want, and *please do not call me master*, he whispered—again with the whisper, and the word please!—*you ladies are welcome to call me mister, never master.*

Why his kindness scare me so? Why my throat, already bone dry from thirst, begin to close even tighter? Momma grabbed my hand and nearly broke the bones with her hard pressure, which I knowed to mean what I had knowed a thousand times over *saynothin'saynothin'saynothin'saynothin'* and instead of words comin' out, I began to cough, loud violent coughs from inside, and b'fore I knowed what was happenin', a bile came from me, a flood a dark liquid that, if I had eaten anything but dirt these past days, would'a certainly been vomit. But there be nothin' in my stomach, so all that came up was juice, smellin' a barn dirt and torture. And, God as my witness, I did not mean it, but I threw up on his boot.

And, not for the last time, I saw the corners of Massa's mouth turn up. He actually, God as my witness again and again, he actually smiled. I thought for sure a slap be comin', I did not trust a white when they smiled. Instead he say, *I offer again, sit inside ladies, you will find comfort there.* I helped Momma in, then climbed inside.

I did not breathe the whole way.

jeremiah

The sweetest sound—I mean the sweetest!—was hearin’ the carriage comin’ up the road. I knew in my heart of hearts that either or both, my Momma and sister, were gonna be there. I ran all the way to the front door, swung it open, jumped off the porch and did not, would not, stop 'til I found both of ‘em, buried my face in Momma’s neck, a pool of tears between the three of us.

Happy tears for once, I said, standin’ back, lookin’ at ‘em, more huggin’, more tears, some jumpin’ up and down. *Lord be! Lord be! It’s our Jeremiah!* said Momma.

Come in, come in! There’s food enough for forty, even if there’s only four of us! We are gonna eat, sleep, sing, love and eat some more, I said. *Y’all go on in, I’ll see you a bit later*, Jack said. *Know you are welcome, and the Lord is good*. He grabbed the reins then, headed for the barn. I knew I wouldn’t see him again today, or tonight.

Momma took her time climbin’ the stairs, and though she never complained, I could tell she was beat down, pained.

I invited them in to see the house, to eat in the kitchen. *Out here on the porch jus' fine, Jeremiah. Can we jus' sit up here?*

You get to do whatever you want, Momma. Eat wherever you want, sleep, rest. There's no work to do here, Mister Jack take care of everythin'. He wants to give us what he call a respite.

You gonna have to explain that to me, Jeremiah. Don' know that word. You Debra? I turned to Debra just then, she brought her hand up to cover her mouth 'fore she spoke. *I don' know that word, but I sure is happy to sit out here. And, you say there's food, big brother?*

They washed up while I set the table with linen, the finest plates and silver, cloth napkins and glass goblets. I moved it all out on the porch, dragged the table and chairs out there too, piles of food, lit a candle though it was daylight. *He... he let you do this, son? To touch his things? Eat off his plates?*

Yes, I said, suddenly concerned about bein' out in the open. But thinkin' better of it, we might not wanna make a habit of bein' out here. If someone sees us livin' high on the hog, it's gonna cause a ruckus. But, for today, we are here to celebrate and... I reached for the glasses then, poured us some lemonade, passed 'em 'round. *And today we toast to bein' together, and to Daddy. You here with us Daddy!* I said to the heavens, and we touched our glasses together.

After a bit Momma did say Clark punish us after you runned off, whipped us and threw us down in the hole, maybe 'bout a week we was in there, that so Debra? But it weren't that bad, Jeremiah. Gave me time to say my prayers, kiss the dirt walls, tell the Mother Earth I loved her, catch a spot a sunlight each day. The worst part was messin' all over myself, standin' and sleepin' in the waste of others. But time pass by fast if you know how to spend it. I spent my time prayin' for you, Jeremiah,

and yo' Daddy. Said prayers all day long. Mostly I prayed 'Let me see him. Let me see him well 'n happy'. And here you is, sittin' up on this porch, eatin' mounds a food, not a bruise on ya, far as I can tell. Our prayers been answered, yes, Debra?

Yes, Momma. Debra rose, a buttered piece of cornbread in her hand, walked to the porch railin'. I noticed the tension in her back, arms, recognized the stiffness my people carry with us all the time. I had it too, the first months I was here, and of course all the years of my life before here. I was full of tension. Not so much now, but it comes at me at different times, especially when I hear gunshots, barking dogs, the sight of whites.

I went to her, wrapped my arms around her from behind, I love you more than life, lil' sister. And we're together now. What a blessin' that be, huh? She turned, her hand coverin' her mouth, though I could see the corners turned up in a smile. And you needn't worry none. A dentist here gonna fix that tooth of yours. Jack asked him 'bout it and he can do it. Good as new.

She let her arm drop then, and asked you call him Jack? Well, I said, makin' my way back to the table, things are different here, scooped up a spoonful of jam, swallowed it down. We'd always known there was some good whites, that they was out there but hard to come by. Well, Jack is on our side; he went down to the river fixin' on findin' you both, bring you home. He does not believe in slavery, so this here is a place we can be safe, get rest. That's what he means by respite.

There so much I wanna say, said Momma, but this food! This be more food than I ever seen for a negro woman! Whites allowed this kinda feast anytime they want but... And, instead of talkin' she just started fillin' her plate, her face full of smiles. This here house be

part of the railroad?

Not yet, I said, and wondered how Momma heard of it, then supposed most that were slaved had heard of it. The only thing he and Miss Sylvie, that's his cousin, be part of so far, is goin' to get you, bring you back here. I asked him straight out, and he said he would do it. And, by the grace of God, here you are. Both of you! And, the best part? You need not do any pickin' here; no need to lift a finger or bend over, unless you drop somethin' you want back.

I filled up their glasses again with lemonade, said *drink up ladies! I'm gonna go draw you a bath!*

debra

Not that anyone ask my opinion on the matter, but the way I see it, this world is goin' straight to hell. And I have been livin' in hell for years, so I know. Do I dare tell you that my entire life, from the minute I was borned, been hell? And now I been bought by some white who tells me *it'll be alright*. What the hell he know about my life and what's gonna be alright and what ain't gonna be alright?

I see the way he walks 'round this place, takin' his time like he ain't got a care in the world, like he got all the time to plant roses and pat dogs and whistle. Who in his right mind walks 'round whistlin' all the time when everything is mightily fallin' apart? And why he have us here anyways? He do most a the work hisself and these past weeks been filled with nothin'. There ain't nothin' for us to do here and I, for one, would rather be workin', not slavin' mind you, but workin', earnin' my keep. All this idleness, every damn minute of it, makes me suspicious beyond belief. Why we here and why is there no work to be done, and who in his right mind buys blacks and make 'em do nothin'?

Last evenin' Miss Sylvie, the Massa's relation, come by. *I care to introduce you to my cousin*, he said. Introduce us? *What?* I ain't never been introduced to a white b'fore and I need not be startin' now. *Evenin'* was all I said and looked down at the ground, got a minute to notice her shoes, blue like the sky, scuffed and dirty, like she been workin' too. His whole family workin' while their blacks doin' nothin'? That how it work around here? Fine by me.

That be just fine an' fancy by me, Miss Blue Shoes and Massa Whistler. I gonna go sit m'self down.

As I was sittin' outside, lookin' at nothin' in particular, my eyes fell to the ground. I saw a stick and next to it, clear as day, written in the dirt for all to see, was a word. A word I known all my life, seen it written dozens a times b'fore, and I yelped. It ain't no good to be writin' here or anywhere; writin' get you killed.

We had learned that, had seen it with our own eyes. Felt the chill run up my spine, looked around to be sure no one else was 'round to see it, stretched out my leg quick-like and wiped it away, like the very sight of it was dangerous. Threw the stick, too, to get rid of it. No one 'round here need be seein' *Jeremiah* written in the dirt or nowhere else, right? You got that right.

Our Jeremiah had learned his letters and numbers better than any of us, and we was all proud of him, but we knew it was somethin' to be hidden from the whites, like the music we used to sing b'fore they took that away.

As I sat there, I stole the chance to look down at my

hands, the worn and tornness a ‘em, the years a pullin’, pickin’, sweepin’, scrubbin’ shit-stained basins and carryin’ water that I weren’t allowed to drink, though I nearly died a thirst more times than I dare count. You ever had that? A thirst so deep you thought you’d die of it, and here you are luggin’ pailfulls of it into the kitchen for the damned whites to drink?

One time when I was a girl, I set the pails on the counter, near to tears from so much thirst, and let my fingers fall into the water, bring ‘em up to my mouth quick so no one see, sucked ‘em dry for ev’ry last drop and was tempted to stop there but the water taste so good, *so damned necessary*, I thought, that I got brave and took a scoopful with my hands and *what the hell ‘n tarnation you think you doin’, nigger?*

A fist hit me on the back of my head, then grabbed me by the hair and shoved my head in the water, the same water that I thought a minute ago was gonna save me was now ‘bout to drown me. I grew limp, limp from all the years of not fightin’ back; I was ready to let go, to let that water fill my lungs, let ‘em just be full, let my body be full a water one last time b’fore I die.

Just when I felt my body go limp *this is it*, I thought, he pulled me out, threw me to the floor and somehow the bucket of water come tumblin’ after me, spilled over the thin dress—if you could call those rags a dress—gettin’ me all kinds of wet, gaspin’ for breath. The water that I was cravin’ but a minute ago? That same water that almost kill me? It was now all over the floor. *Clean this place up, and don’t let me ever catch you drinkin’ from our pail again. And burn the pail while you at it, bitch.*

See why I told you I was livin' a life of hell? You need more proof than that? This all the proof I need. And if you think it suspicious that now I not trust a white that let me sit around, lookin' at my hands and erasin' words in the dirt, then so be it. I seen hell, lived it nearly my whole life, so trust ain't part of the words I use.

I am used to usin' words like suspicious, drown, hit, kick, fear, tremble. Them's be my words.

massa clark

Part of me feels better now that I got ‘em sold. No need to worry about ‘em being underfoot. Got rid of all ‘cept Hadley. She's too old and large, of course, and nobody would want her. I kept her here to fill my plates, wash the clothes, clean the chamber pots. The others? They were sent out on a fire sale of sorts, hoping their backs would bring ‘nough to clear my debts. Yet, those niggers did not clear half of it! So now I am here, slaveless, and still drowning in monies owed. Why did I even bother? I should’ve kept ‘em all, kept ‘em working the land, instead I watched as they were carted off to auction, not one of ‘em said *thank you, thank you for keeping us, feeding us*. Not one! The overseer bastards didn’t even let me go to witness the sale! *Best you stay here, Massa Clark. We take care of it. Get ‘em sold, every last one of ‘em.*

When Hadley brought in my eggs the next morning they smelled sour, like she might’ve poisoned ‘em. Took the plate and smashed it against her face, annoyed when I saw the blood dirtying my floor.

Them's my people! You sold off all of 'em! My chil'ren, grandchil'ren. Husband. They all gone! She was screaming, and fit to be tied. Could not believe my ears, the backtalk! Saw the red dripping at her feet. *Shut your nigger mouth and clean this up, Hadley! Enough of your dirty blood ruining the floor!*

She turned to the table instead, picked up the silverware. *I said the floor. You leave the table for...* Then saw the wild in her eyes, looked down just long enough to catch sight of the spoon in her hand, stabbed me in the stomach with it, least she tried. Grabbed me 'round the neck, *them's my people*, she screamed. She must've found the strength then, figured out the force, the angle. Stabbed me again, and over, 'til I fell where I was, my face hitting the hardwood.

Last sight was her blood, inches from my face. Can you imagine it? The last sight before you die you seein' her blood? Didn't seem fair.

Right away, or a hundred years later, I was damned to a place with no walls, earth, sky; before me were nameless, faceless beings—the dead slaves I'd beaten, branded, slaves I had thrown in the hole, those I'd supposedly raped. I saw their eyes, coming toward me, reaching from all sides. The nerve of them niggers! I was being swallowed!

Even though I was dead, I feared dying, and was at once drowned, suffocated with a cloud of white—fibrous, coarse, impenetrable. It was, by all known accounts, a cloud I had loved and cherished all my life. Held her boll as if she was a baby, needin' my care.

Cotton.

Cotton, big as plates. I wanted to scream out, curse the sacrilege, yet had not a god-damned voice. In the end, it was a spoon that got me. Can you believe it? My own god-damned spoon, a gift from Mother on my wedding day. Studded up into my gut by a nigger.

And I missed my breakfast.

missus anne

I don' know why I found m'self wanderin' into rooms, but figured there was nothin' else for me to do. This day, I let m'self sneak in for the first time to the front hall, and found a room, floor to ceiling in shelves, a rich room of carpeting and red walls the color a blood. Never had I seen so many delicious things, paintings in gold and silver frames, oil lamps with crocheted lace wrapped 'round their globes, wallpaper a men sailin' the seas, and the scent a finery, too; yet, I suspected the rooms had not seen a cloth or mop in some time.

It was dark 'cept for near the far window, her heavy drapes pushed aside. First thing I notice was the shelves, heavy in books, maps a places I never dream a visitin'. I crossed to the nearest shelf, my hand reached up to touch, just to touch, one of 'em bindings.

Momma! I let out a yelp and turned quickly toward Jeremiah's voice, noticin' him now in the far corner, in shadow. *You scare the bejeezus outta me!* I went to him with a start, gatherin' him in my arms. Whenever I caught sight of him—I suspect he

grewed tired a this in the days to come—I gathered my boy in my arms, repeatin' *there, there* and releasin' a heavy breath, assumin' he needed my comfort, yet it was his that I was needin'.

What are you doin' in here, Momma? He ask me in that sweet tone a his. *I could ask you the same, m'beloved,* I whispered.

I reached out then and touched his cheek, my eyes adjustin' to the dark room, findin' his body nervous, tight. Was he okay? Was my boy okay?

Right after, we both looked at the shelves 'round us on all sides, and as my eyes took in the room, I could see the bigness of it, piles a papers and books on tables, the sofa filled with pillows set askew and a ceiling a painted horsemen. *Are you...* was 'bout to ask if he were allowed to read any a these but I stopped, grown so tired of the word *allow* that I wanted to stop her in her tracks. 'Stead I offered *will you be readin' any a these, son?*

Had started to read one, but fell asleep. Came back in here today to pick up where ... His voice trailed off. Then, a horse began neighin' jus' out the window. *Jeremiah, are you about?* we hear Mister Jack say.

We both scurried into the hall, more quickly than necessary, perhaps 'fraid we be caught sneakin' 'round the world of words. Mister Jack was jus' outside, ridin' atop one black horse, a chestnut colored one next to him. We both be at the front door then, standin', not sayin' a peep. I near closed my eyes to keep out the dust, covered my mouth.

Mister Jack had his hands in the breast pockets, as if he was lookin' for somethin' lost. We watched him scramble 'bout

his clothes, reachin' into his many pockets, 'til he pulled a piece a paper out. He sighed at once, and looked over to find us, lookin' guilty, I s'ppose. Least that's how I felt, guilty for bein' in the library, the house, alone and without permission. And nearly caught!

There you are. Fancy a ride? We have things to discuss, Jeremiah. And with that Jeremiah turned to me, kissed me on the cheek, whispered *thank you, Momma* and grabbed his hat from the hall rack. I watched 'em ride off, tryin' to avoid the dusted air, turned in the hallway in search a water. I was thirsty, and walked to the kitchen to find the pitcher sittin' on the sideboard, her top stained in water rings. I found me a cup and filled it. Two questions immediately come to mind: why did my Jeremiah thank me just then, and why his hat be hangin' in the hall?

As I stood there, I began to marvel—such a word!—marvel at the life I had before me, temporary though it might be. What was happenin' here? I was but a minute ago walkin' into a white's library, uninvited, now helpin' m'self to water when I feelin' thirsty and usin' a glass—a glass that white folk probably drunk from, and likely would again. My lips the same place as theirs.

That give me a great pause.

I looked over to notice that there in the kitchen stood a table with four wooden chairs, a dark shiny kinda wood, upholstered fabric the color a wheat, the seat and back decorated with silver buttons that once pulled the fabric together nice-like, but now was saggin'. You might not be used to seein' this, but I took it upon myself to pour 'nother glass a water and sit in a chair, careful not to make a sound, pulled it

out jus' enough to fold into, and rest.

A shiver came upon me then, strong and quick and tore through my whole body. Not in an unpleasin' way, but surprisin' just the same. Who was I to be drinkin' when thirsty and sittin' down on an upholstered chair with her fine buttons, and restin'? Just restin'?

I thought to m'self how the world had changed these past weeks, gone from me pickin' sun up to sun down, barely able to feed my chil'ren, fallin' asleep with my fingers feelin' the pages of a book hidin' in my pallet; worried everywhere I turned I was wrong, doin' wrong, sayin' wrong.

Now, I was sittin' in a white kitchen, allowin' the sweat a the water glass, a white water glass, to cool my hand. My oldest born just mounted a horse not but a minute ago to ride off with a white man to who-knows-where. And here be the thing: neither of 'em with a look a anger, fear, worry or disgust on their face. You ever heard a that b'fore?

Lordy, my! How things change quicker than a hiccup.

sylvie

I have felt for years that danger is around the corner. How can it not be? When most of the town is taking up arms to defend the capture and confinement of negroes, and harm those of my own race who are hiding in the shadows, trying to aid the most tortured persons among us. Our seething outrage is a danger in itself.

I am especially worried for Jack, of course. He is a fine man, my darling cousin, but not always with the brightest head about him, and once the gust of wind blows toward him and his relations, there will be a wrath.

Rumors, as you might expect, spread through here like hell fire, and stories without truth, nor merit, grow wider and more outrageous by the minute. I have seen it, have lived it.

I am not one to relish living in this century, in the South, our poor beloved South! Our ancestors are surely turning in the very graves where they are interred, dead, silent witnesses of what we are bringing onto this land.

Did they ever foresee slavery and the division that he

would cause? (I know enough to refer to slavery as he. A woman would not see fit to bring this abomination upon the world.) There are no social gatherings where *he* is not discussed, and for those among us that oppose him, we are faced with either keeping quiet, teeth gritted behind false smiles, allowing others to believe we are in agreement, or we face our own peril by opposing.

And Jack? Now with three negroes living upon his land, it looks to others as if he is participating in the enslavement. And yes, I am, with most hesitancy to say, knowing that there appears to be a closeness between him and Jeremiah, a deep fondness that, if discovered, will end in the lynching of us all.

Do I oppose this love? Their tenderness? Speak out against it for the sake of my own life? These questions, as you can imagine, keep me awake, my eyes staring at the ceiling, catching my breath 'til dawn.

I have considered begging Jack to dissolve any such relations that are suspect, yet I know as I say it, it will be moot. Jack is but a stubborn man, and I will not deny him love. He has lived his life without it, far as I can remember, until now.

And, if he has found it with another, even one whom is both colored and a man, then I must wish them well, fully aware, as I am, of the deep danger that threatens our very lives. At every turn there is something that threatens our lives.

There is no wonder my very breath escapes me.

missus anne

Allowed. That be a big word when you's colored. Allowed to do somethin'. Allowed to use the privy, or walk outside. Allowed to drink water. There be too many times, too many things, I be unallowed to do in my life. Unallowed to squat if'n I had the runs, unallowed to put up my hand to cover my eyes from the sun. Unallowed to stop the sufferin' a my babies, my husband.

But, I ain't here to tell you a my grief, not here to show witness to the difficulty of my life. Instead, by the grace a God, I got a moment to tell you this: I is now allowed to breathe. Can you imagine it? To finally fill up your lungs?

The first mornin' I did it, standin' outside the shack, the palms of my hands restin' on my lower back, thinkin' I didn' have to be in the fields, cleanin' the chamber pots, not lickin' the plates a the whites for my meals. I allowed m'self to jus' breathe in deep. And I coughed! Lordy Lord did I cough! For a long while the air fillin' up my lungs was more than they knew what to do with. So they jus' threw the air back out! I

didn' mind. Let m'self bend over, take in all the air I needed, let the spittle out, and after a while, calmed m'self a bit, took in air through my nose. *You is allowed to breathe, Annie*, I say to myself.

And I did, again and again and again.

Debra come out the shack, lookin' sleepy, her hand to her mouth to cover a yawn. *What you doin' out here, Momma? Who you talkin' to?*

I am out here breathin', talkin' to myself, I said. *And don' tell me I ain't allowed! I won' hear of it.* She found herself in my arms, restin' her head on my shoulder. *Let's jus' stand here and breathe, baby. Breathe.*

I began to cry then, those big gulps a cryin' where you feel like you ain't ever gonna stop, and I was most grateful that I didn' have to answer why, or hear *shhh, shhh* from my only daughter. We jus' stand there in the dirt, feelin' the heat come up from the day, and allowed m'self to feel wrapped in my daughter's arms and cry without shame or explanation.

It was beautiful. Better than chocolate cake beautiful.

debra

Only just lately did I find sleep. Had no idea that most people go to bed in the night, wake in the mornin'. But I always put m'self on a crate, and sit up, keeping my ears posted for the door those years I was at Clarks', worried straight that the overseer or some other black or white come to get you.

The brandin' always happened at night, happened to all of us, a "C" on the bottom of our foot, burnt there when we was kids, most of us limpin' for the better part of two weeks, three. You see someone limpin', you know right away what happen. Clark hisself say *get 'em burned and branded right there where they set foot on the earth. They think twice b'fore runnin' off. Makes 'em good for resale, too. The skin ain't all marked up with my letter, but I know it's there.*

They started on the little ones, 'bout three, soon as they old enough to run. You never seen so much pain as a three-year-old baby get burnt up on the bottoms of her feet, the smell fillin' the room, stickin' to the walls. That is why I didn't sleep; always a mess of smells, torture, beatin's and burnin's.

One time Mister Jack ask me 'bout layin' down. Told

me I could have any bed I want, pillows and blankets. A mattress! *I don't think I need that. I do just fine sittin' up.*

He looked at me like I were off, like maybe I didn't know we was supposed to rest at the end of the day. *I know about it*, I told him, *I just don't know that I s'pposed to have it for m'self. I get up easier when I already sittin', so don't worry about me, I be just fine.* He just look at me then, finally sayin' *you know you are allowed to rest here, right Debra? It's a God-given right. I want you to know that.* Then he took me into a room upstairs, a dark room I didn't know of that smelled of dirt and sour apples. *You are welcome to try it.* He motioned to the bed, but I froze solid. Thought he wanna have his way with me and this here was his idea to get me into bed. *I'll leave you to it.*

He walked out, closin' the door behind him, and I squinted to see in the brown light. I stood there for the better part of an hour, 'til my legs hurt, cramped up. Silent-like, I moved over, touchin' the lace beddin', lookin' down at my bare feet and worried I was gonna make a mess. After, I turned to walk out, but instead, removed most of the bed clothes, nice 'n slow, coverin' my face from the dust, then piled the coverlet on the dresser, and climbed in.

Nearly nineteen-years-old and never lay in a bed b'fore, as I can remember. Never lay with a pillow under my head. My hands reached out on either side of me, feelin' the coolness, the near crispness of the cotton. *I bet I picked this*, I said aloud, thinkin' of the mighty bushels I had broken my back pickin', the strain at my neck, the heat causin' sweat to pool near my privates, the blood fallin' from my callous fingers, stainin' the boll, day after day. I just lay there and cried. Crisp, cool, cryin'.

Maybe the C on my foot stand for comfort? How you like that?

jack

While it is but a pleasure to see Jeremiah find a way to express himself, there's not a bit of opportunity for a colored man or woman to better themselves around here. I think about the kind of future that might befall Missus Anne, Debra, Jeremiah, and yes, me and Sylvie. There is far too high of a chance for us to be discovered, to have others learn that I've a deep passion for Jeremiah. That I have indeed bedded him, without force nor manipulation. We would all hang at the discovery of it, or worse.

Yes, you may not know of it, yet there are worse things that could befall one than hanging. I have witnessed worse; I will not dirty these pages with the telling of it.

Last night by the fire, I broached this subject with Sylvie, and we prepared a plan. She remembered our cousin in Wilmington, and will write to her presently to ask of housing and safety, though I beseeched her that safety is paramount.

Perhaps we could write the letter now, while we're together? There is no need to wait, isn't that right cousin?

She looked at me as I knelt in front of her, nearly in prayer, and the light of the flames caught the wetness in her eyes. *Tell me what troubles you, m'dearest?* She reached then for a handkerchief, and I knew by the blue embroidery it was a gift from her husband Josef, now deceased.

He had, not but five years and some months before, approached a group of lynchers near the river, confronted them while out alone. They dragged Josef from horseback and held him down, forcing him to watch 'til the lynching was done, and, at the final moment, beat him to death. A farmer nearby held witness, told us of it the following day.

Sylvie had wanted to leave Savannah then, to go North, and begin anew. I couldn't leave with her, abandon Mother and Father, and besides, the land and houses needed selling before we could run off.

All of this is catching up with me, Jack. All of it is far more than any of us can... she began crying harder then, I felt inept in comforting her, though I tried.

Then, I heard myself say, *Sylvie, I feel the need to share something with you, something that will undoubtedly become more complicated as we move forward with our plans. I have prayed time and again for this to not be true, that I could keep it quiet, that I could stop myself from feeling...*

She reached out, put her two fingers to my lips. *Shhhh. I know of what you are to tell me, not because anyone has spoken it, but because I have known the rhythm of your heart longer than you have, Jack. And, you know as much as I do that you cannot love a man, a*

colored man at that, here in this blasted South. This is yet one more reason why we must leave quickly, sell off everything at once, and go North.

Do you? Love him, I mean?

In that moment, a flood of emotions fell upon me, tears came from places I didn't know had been hidden, wrapped in a gauze of fear and giddiness. Through the sobs I spoke. *I know it can all be taken away, in an instant. Just as Josef was taken from us. And yes, I believe I do love him. I wish it weren't so, it's so damned dangerous. For all of us.*

She was drying my tears then, and lifted my chin so that our eyes could meet. *But it's all worth it, isn't it, Jack? I know. I know that love can be dangerous. It can break your heart, break it wide open, but it's worth everything.* She smiled at me then, and wiped my face dry. *Allow yourself to love. Otherwise, what have we?*

I took her hand in mine, so grateful to have her by my side. *From moment to moment, my heart changes. I want to leap through the fields, shouting of love, shouting his name, shouting anything that sounds of joy and beauty, and then my heart stops, Sylvie, as if in arrest, and I remember who we are, where we live, and I think to crawl down the basement steps and hide from humanity. All of that's wrapped within me. But now, now that you know, I have an ally in you, dear cousin. And for that, I am steeped in gratitude.*

Just then the back door opened. I knew it to be him.

We're in the parlor, Jeremiah. He came and stood in the doorway. He was always skittish to enter the rooms of the house, hesitant in not knowing if he was invited, welcomed, allowed. *You are white, and this is a white's house,* he had told me months ago. *I have lived my life afraid of everything white, now you*

expect me to wander 'round here freely, goin' in and out of rooms, openin' cabinets, eatin' food that is not mine? I don't know that I can do that.

Please come in, Sylvie is here with us tonight. He took one step, almost two, then back again. *Good evenin', Miss Sylvie.* His eyes studied the carpet. I could tell he was holding his breath.

You need not call me Miss Sylvie, remember? I am just Sylvie. She rose then and went to him, her hands reached out, lifted his chin until his eyes met hers. I remembered that her same hand had, but a moment ago, taken my chin and raised it so my eyes could meet hers. It was Jeremiah's turn now. *Jack was just this very minute telling me of you two. I am delighted that you are together. He loves you, as do I.*

Jeremiah turned and looked at me. He'd known for some time I was going to share our secret with Sylvie, but neither of us knew when. *Good evenin',* he said again, this time there was a smile upon his face, a shy, subtle smile, yet a smile just the same. *May I come in?* I reached for him then, my arm about his shoulder *yes, of course, please,* and guided him to the sofa.

Jack, I think it best to draw the curtains, Sylvie said softly, *to keep in the warmth of the fire.*

The curtains drawn, I sat beside Jeremiah, reached for his hand, held it in mine, noticed it was near frozen. *Why are you so cold? We must get you a pair of gloves.* Jeremiah sounded unsure, his words barely audible, *it's just that the room has a small draft, that's all.* He never knew what to call the space where he lived, on the side yard. Shack, which it was, home, which it wasn't, or, lately, room is what he'd settled on. *Lord! I worry how it must be for you out there, the coldness of the room. I will tend to it right away, Jeremiah.*

Saying this caused me to look at Sylvie, as if she had the answers we needed at the moment. *I am at a loss, Sylvie. How I long to have this man, this beautiful man, come and stay here with me under this roof, to sleep by the fire, to eat each night from the table, yet...*

She shook her head. *It'd be the death of all of us, Jack.* I held up our hands then, fingers entwined, as if the black and white colors needed to be shown here in the parlor. *Let us pray.*

After, we bid good night to Sylvie, walked her to her carriage. I went directly to Father's wardrobe and found gloves, two sweaters, a woolen blanket. *There is hot tea, let me get you some, my love.*

Yes, we should toast, he said as we walked down the hall toward the kitchen. *It is now official, Mister Tadler! Another human bein' knows of our relations! There is no hidin' it now!*

Then he kissed me. With our lips pressed, our eyes stayed open, fully taking in the sight of the other. It was, by all accounts, the sweetest moment of my life.

I cannot, to this day, feel a warm cup of tea in my hand and not think of it.

debra

There be no way of knowin', no choice in the matter of course; it is blasted to be born with this color on my skin, cursed with bein' a girl with breasts that catch the men's eyes and cause me to hold one arm, two if they free, 'cross 'em to hide 'em from people oglin' me. To be born a slave, no choice in matters of where I sleep, eat, shit. And now to discover that my life is about to be over, threatened with death, I'm sure, 'cause my brother is...

I love Jeremiah to life, I do, but there be a bigger part of me that loves my life more, and I ain't gonna see it end just 'cause of 'em two. Have they no shame?

Seen it with my own eyes, the two engaged in a type of sex, I s'ppose. Last Sunday, when I was walkin' up the stairs, careful not to creak the wood—I knowed the third and fourth steps be louder than the others, and I wanted not to announce m'self to the world. So, quieter than a spider web, I noticed the door closed to Massa's room—Mister Jack—but there, clear as day, was two sets of shadows fallen on the floor, under

the door. As I bent down closer, my nose to the ground, two pair of naked feet; one set black. And I crawled closer, curious in my mind to see more.

I could barely see nothin', so pressed my cheek harder down on the wooden floor to glimpse as much as possible, held my breath, strained my eyes. Their feets was facin' each other, standin' toe to toe, the black ones curlin' back, almost in a dance of some sort—that be what I thought at the moment, *Lordy Lord, they is havin' a dance!*

Then, *oh, Jack!* It was Jeremiah's voice! Couldn't do nothin' but start punchin' my own head! Couldn't make a noise, couldn't scream, dare not be discovered spyin', so I punched my head, over and over. I knowed damn well what it mean to have a master and slave foolin' with each other, a far different thing to have it be two men, one of 'em my own brother!

I do believe I'm fallin' in love with you, Jeremiah.

Harder punches to my head! Then, quick as day, I scrambled back down the steps, flyin' over the noisy ones, my cheeks wet with tears. Why? Why it have to be them? Why this house? This place where I finally feel a moment's peace, a place where I can escape all the bad things of the world, and here they was, bringin' shit to this place. If one, even just one person knowed what I know, we all be swingin' from a tree b'fore sunset.

I was only halfway down the hall when a knock at the front door startled me. *Who there?* I shouted louder than necessary, hopin' to interrupt the bumpin' that was sure happenin' by now in the room above. They prob'ly already started in their nastiness, and each moment they together be

one moment closer to swingin' from a tree.

It's cousin Sylvie. Jack's cousin. May I pass?

I took my time walkin' to the door, hesitatin' so as to catch my breath, felt for the knob in my hand, turned it, pulled the door toward me. *Afternoon, ma'am*, I said, lookin' down at the ground, lest she see my shame in full light. *You needn't call me ma'am. Sylvie is more than fine. Is Jack... have you been crying? Dear Debra, what is the matter?*

I stared at her feet, noticin' her shoes, could near smell the mud caked on 'em and without thinkin', bent down, reached for 'em, *here, let me clean these for you*. And with a start, I fell backwards on my ass, started cryin' harder. A flash came from some time ago, maybe last fall, when I did near the same thing, noticed mud on a missus' shoes, and bent down to clean 'em. B'fore I could say somethin', just as I reachin', the missus' shoe hit me in the face, a full force of hatred behind it.

Do not touch me, nor my clothing! What ails you, child? Get yer filthy bottom off my floor, and clean the blood from your fat lip. With that, the missus kicked off both her shoes, hittin' the wall behind me, splatterin' mud. *And clean up this wall, too. Leave the blood for later, lest you forget your place*.

This time, with Miss Sylvie, it was different. She bent down to touch me, a soft hand on either shoulder, whisperin' *my dear girl*, 'til the sobs came louder, unable to stop what fell from my eyes, my gaspin' of air, my neck and face prickly with shame.

Next, the sound of Mister Jack's bedroom door openin', and with it, I scrambled to my feet, runned from 'em. All of 'em. Runned out the back door, into the yard, and just kept

runnin', runnin' through the hickory, the burnt grass, the
blazin' sun. Runned from the splattered mud on the walls, the
leering at my breasts, the shame and blood on my face.

I just runned and runned.

missus anne

Night times at the Clarks' be the worst, that's the whites fav'rite time to torment us, take up the hatchet, the pick axe, come to the shack to do damage. Ronnie, next door, like to talk about bein' away, how he was gonna make his way North, grab up all the money he could by drawin' pictures. *Gonna sell 'em right on the street, for two dollars!* His Momma, Big Sally, like to chuckle at his tales, but told him to jus' keep quiet.

All of us loved his drawings, made a crushed berries, coffee, sticks from the cotton. We make a point of savin' 'em, the straightest sticks we would hold up, a break from the pickin'. *This one gonna make a fine drawin' pencil, Ronnie,* we said with pride, as if we was the ones guidin' his hand on the parchment.

Missus Clark, she had her some paper back then, like to write on one side *her practice letters*, she called 'em, told the house slave to throw 'em away afterwards, which she never did. There was a whole 'nother side, blank and ready! We passed

that parchment from one to ‘nother, ‘til it reach Ronnie. *You stop talkin’ about bein’ away, Ronald. Someone hear you talkin’ ‘bout it, no tellin’ what they do to you, son. Please heed me!*

The word must’a got out, alright, ‘cause one night ol’ Jolson showed up with a blade, held Ronnie down on the ground, his lungs breathin’ in the dirt, coughin’. *This’ll keep you here a bit longer, nigger.* Took the blade, sliced the bottoms a both feet, from front to back, blood turnin’ the earth to soup, his Momma cryin’ all the while *leave my boy alone, Jolson! You a goddamn nigger, Jolson! Leave him alone!*

Jolson didn’ mind her, acted like he was cuttin’ up cabbage. Went on, did what he come to do, then looked to Big Sally, tipped his straw hat, *evenin’ ma’am*, before he turn to go.

She followed, beatin’ him on the back *you a goddamned nigger!* He turned to her. *Quit now, or you be next, Miss Sally*, and he wiped the blade, still fresh with blood, on his checkered shirt, and she fall at a heap at his feet, the tears still comin’, just as they did for the rest a the night. *You don’ deserve to wear his blood, Jolson. Don’ deserve it!*

And, as much as it must’a hurt him to walk the next months, Ronnie at least stayed put, kept up the drawin’, stopped the talk of bein’ away. *I glad you here, Ronnie, that be the truth*, Big Sally said to him over and over, ‘til we all picked it up, too. *We glad you here Ronnie, that be the truth*, we said when we passed him on the road, found him in the field, waited outside the privy. Pretty soon, as we tend to do, we made a song out of it...

*We glad you here Ronnie, that be the truth.
Every day and night, we woulda missed every tooth.
There are days when you draw with the weeds and the dirt.
Sit down right down 'ere, let me heal where you hurt.*

He just smiled at us, sometimes sing along. It was much later we all learned Ronnie was ol' Jolson's son. That part must'a hurt more than the blade.

I burnt a candle most nights at Mister Jack's, kept it on long as I could, past sleep time. After a bit, Mister Jack ask me why I needed so many candles, gettin' a new one from the hall closet every few days. *I need 'em*, I said, and hope he leave it at that. *Okay, then*, told me he gonna get more, many as I need. After a silence, I spoke up. *I don' feel safe, 'specially at night. The candle keep the ghosts away.* Then he said to me, *best to get a lock Missus Anne, that way, you turn in for the night, lock the door, don't let anybody in 'til you say so.*

When you a negro, locks always be a bad thing. Doors be a bad thing. You never know if you allowed to go through, which side to be on, needin' permission to go from one side to the other. But I didn't say nothin' about it jus' then.

Later, when we was out on the porch, I start thinkin' 'bout the years I spent lookin' down at my arms, legs, seein' the brown comin' back at me. I tried to have it be beautiful, to think it beautiful, but I jus' see it as a hurtful thing, a color that make me wrong, bad, sinful. I looked out at the shack then,

could see it in the side yard clear as day, the creak a the rocker markin' time. I loved sittin' there, not bein' scared a nothin', not thinkin' what was wrong or where punishments gonna come from.

No, I s'ppose I not need a lock, Mister Jack. I need somethin' else entirely.

What's that, Missus Anne? What do you need? He looked right at me with those kind eyes a his. I was jus' thinkin' how I need new skin, a new color. This color cause me problems my whole life. My whole family been in trouble 'cause of it, goin' back years.

I kept rockin', the sound fillin' the quiet, knowin' full well there be nothin' else needed to be said. I gonna live all my life in this skin, and all a my life some people will hate me for it. No lock gonna cure that. *You s'ppose it gonna rain? Sure could use it...*

Reached down, patted the dog. I had 'nough of talkin' color for one day.

missus lee hoffman

Dear Mister Jackson Tadler,

I am in receipt of your letter asking after my services. I have, as you seem familiar, been tutoring for nearly thirteen years and am proud to have taught dozens of children to be better readers, which in turn, allows them the privilege of being better citizens of our fine Savannah, and the World.

Though I cannot help but notice, your letter left several details unanswered, to the curious mind. How many children do you have, and are they currently enrolled in school? How are their letters? Are they writing in cursive, and have they the skill of reading aloud in front of others?

Forgive me if these questions seem intrusive; I find it best to prepare for the child(ren) before any tutoring is scheduled.

*With Sincerest Regards,
Mrs. Lee Hoffman*

Oh, my! How gullible am I! To re-read my words above, so damned prim and proper, as if I were addressing heads of state!

That first morning, a Monday, I believe, I went to the residence at the appointed time and rapped upon the door. An older slave answered within a moment. The parlor was to the left, and she showed me in.

The room was cool, which I found most reassuring, yet dark, which is not conducive to learning letters. I stood, a scant few pages of recommendation in hand, ready at once to attest to my abilities as an educator, though not formally trained. I was, admittedly, weary—the past four interviews had not gone well, and led to no contracts of employment. It would be more than disheartening if this appointment resulted in another missed opportunity. I daresay I was beginning to perspire at the thought of it.

Presently, the doors opened, and a charming man entered, Mister Tadler, I supposed, thanked me for coming, invited me to sit where I would be comfortable and handed me a lemonade. I found this odd! Why was he, the Master of the house, carrying on with bringing me a beverage? Had I not, but a moment ago, met the house slave? Was she not about? And had she not the wherewithal to carry a glass upon a tray and bring it to me in the parlor?

Forgive my hesitation in not sharing much in my letters, Missus Hoffman. This is a delicate situation...

A delicate situation, indeed! After he dared explain that my pupils would be his negroes, I found myself jumping up, spilling the drink on my dress, and much of it onto the carpet, and nearly ran from the house. Never had I thought I would be

called upon to teach slaves!

When I arrived home, breathless, dripping with sticky lemon juice on my dress and shoes, I sat on the edge of the bed, fell into my husband's arms, and sobbed. *I'm so sorry, Charles. I'm so sorry*, I repeated again and again—unable to form the words to describe what I was sorry about. For not securing employment? For endangering our lives? For being poor? For being able to feed us only once a day?

Charles, lying upon the bed, coughing and spewing into the bedpan, wiped first my cheeks, then his chin. *There, there, Lee. It can't be as bad as all that. Do not worry about the money. There will be more to come. Tell me what happened.*

I stood, paced the room, went to the window and closed it, then immediately opened it, thought of doing the same with the curtains. I knew not what to do with myself! I went to the footboard, grabbed hold of it, looked at him, wiped the moisture from my eyes. *They were negroes. Mister Tadler told me that the position was for tutoring his negroes, which he meant to say were not necessarily his negroes, but that yes, they were negroes... Oh! I know not what he said! I tried to listen, but suddenly the drink fell upon my dress, some of it into my shoe and onto the carpet. I shoved the glass at him and ran home, not stopping 'til I reached you, and... I cannot be called upon to teach them, Charles! To think of it!*

Charles said nothing. Looked at me and raised his hand, and I moved to take it, to sit beside him. He kissed my hand, his lips dry as the day, and I went to open the window, discovering it was already open. *Oh, how forgetful I've become! My hands fell against my dress, the stickiness on the fabric felt vile. I kicked off my shoes, threw my dress from my person. I need to bathe. Please forgive me, Charles. I cannot speak of this any*

longer.

I'm sorry, my love, he said then, but the basin is still not fixed. Carl won't repair it without promise of payment. I didn't know what to tell him....

I fell to my knees then, and sobbed like I hadn't known possible. I did not know I could have tears show so immediately. I rose, paced back and forth, my stomach loud with hunger, my thoughts flying to the cupboard in the kitchen, which I knew to be bare. *I will wash my hands and feet then, and will rest beside you, Charles. I can think of nothing more today.*

When I woke from my rest, I recalled dreaming of a darkened room, a school perhaps, where I sat in the back row, my arm raised ready to be called upon to answer questions, feeling full of answers, but the teacher (I did not recognize her face. Preacher Tom's wife, perhaps?) stared just above me, not seeing me, ignoring me. The other students sat in silence and a feeling of frustration was heavy in the room. *I know the answer,* I said aloud and it must've startled poor Charles sleeping beside me. *What's that, Dear?* he asked, and I awoke, immediately checking the color of my skin. My shoulder ached, as if I'd had my arm raised all afternoon.

I was just dreaming, dear. Dreaming that I was in school, a student in the back row, and the teacher refused to call on me, as if she couldn't see me. Wouldn't see me. And when I awoke just now, the first thing I did was check my skin.

I don't understand, Lee. Why would you check your skin? Are you feeling unwell? Charles asked.

I'm going to get a potato from Missus Nolan. I'll make us a soup, we'll both feel better. I left the bed with a start, drew my sticky

dress upon myself, and a pinny to hide the stains. Caught my reflection in the mirror just inside the door. Oh, I looked a sight!

As I walked to the front porch, noticed I hadn't my shoes, reached back for the door, and checked, for the second time in the last few minutes, the color of my skin.

charles hoffman

I fell in love the moment I saw her in Forsyth Park, knew in an instant my life was to be different, told my friend William: *I need to meet that girl*. And did. Started courting her the very next week, found we had much in common—our beliefs in God, our love of this city, spending days deeply buried in books.

Came to ask her hand in marriage, standing in the same spot where I first laid eyes on her; after our marriage, we set up house.

When Lee told me she'd be needing help with the housework, the washing, the cooking, it staggered me when, after I mentioned to her that I was to put an advertisement in *The Republic*, seeking services, she retorted *oh, you need not bother with that, Charles. We can buy a young nigger or two, perhaps a mother and daughter, have them sleep in the basement, install a privy down there if we need to.*

How had I not known that she thought it to be acceptable to buy another, enslave them? *Yes, a privy. I'll not*

have them anywhere near our own toilets, of course. I could not find my own retort. I... I need to go out... I stammered. But, Charles, it's after midnight. Where are you going at this late hour?

I left without an overcoat, did not say goodbye, did not kiss Lee's cheek. Walked the city the better part of the night, found myself down by the river, alone, or so I thought.

Over my shoulder, saw two eyes peering out from behind a tree. Knew in an instant it was a runner, could see the fear in him. *God be with you, son.* Reached in my pant pocket, withdrew all the bills from my billfold, placed them on the boulder between us. *And, here is a bit of money to help you on your way. Take this, you'll be needing it.* Repeated, *God be with you* and, clearly as I could, whispered my address. *If the missus is there, she will likely not take kindly to you, but if you see me coming or going, of course I will help you.*

Walked on a bit, saying my prayers, praying for his soul, noticed the first bit of daylight piercing the sky, the grays turning pink. I half ran back to where I saw him last. *It's becoming light out, you won't make it far. I'm here to ask if you want to come home with me...* His eyes were moist, and found mine. *I will treat you good and fair, can't say what'll happen if those you ran from find you staying with me, yet least for now, you will have food, a pallet to lie in. And no dogs biting at your heels as you try to make it North. Name's Hoffman, Charles.*

I spoke in a quick whisper, and when I had finished, let all that sit in the morning air, not trying to push—let him have a moment of free will, make a decision for himself.

I ain't eat, don' know how long, he said. I could hear him swallow, was close enough now to see the white coloring around his mouth, indicating dehydration, perhaps starvation.

Name, as I said, is Hoffman. You need a safe place to be. Allow me to provide that place for you, least for now.

Looked down at the boulder between us, saw the money was gone. *Of course you can keep the money. We want you to have it.* Realized I just told him my first lie, hoped it be the last. *I want you to have it.* Extended my hand, kept the palm open. *It's not safe for you here. Let's go home.*

He moved toward me, didn't take my hand, and wouldn't expect him to. *You got a name?* His head moved left and right, back again, looking around. *Name's Elijah. I don' like bein' in daylight. I know,* I told him. *We'll be home soon, sooner if we walk fast, not too fast to arouse suspicion.*

When we walked in the front door, Lee was there to greet me, yelped when she caught sight of Elijah. *Now, I did what you asked, and brought home some help. Best you not be asking me questions and I will not be needing to lie. His name is Elijah. He is in need of food and water, a place to rest. Come with me,* I said, trying to catch his eye.

We walked into the kitchen, found the pitcher, poured him a glass of water. *Not with our glasses, Charles. Please!* I looked to Lee, spoke as calm as I could: *best you go and get dressed, Lee. Stores will be opening soon. We need provisions. I'll set up the bed.* When she went upstairs, I reached for his shoulder and he flinched. *I'll fix us something to eat. You can get settled while she's out of the house. Takes her a bit to adjust to things... people...*

What if they come lookin'? His voice hushed, quick. The glass sat still on the table. *Well, best we lay low for a bit. Week or more. Drink. And help yourself to this.* I slid a bowl of fruit down the table, it came to rest near his side. *You said you were hungry. Let's start with food. Worry about the rest later, Mister Elijah.*

He looked at me when I said his name, brought the glass to his mouth. *I... is there somewhere I can sit?* I pulled out a chair. *Sit right there. That chair's not being occupied by anyone,* I told him. He looked back through the kitchen door. *Don't worry about Missus Hoffman. Eventually, she will be glad to not have to do the cleaning up herself. Today, this week, she might be appearing nervous. She'll settle down. You like eggs?*

I kept my back to him while I went to work, and for a moment was worried that he might hurt me, come up behind me and... what? Take me prisoner? Kill me? The thoughts interrupted my peace of mind, allowed myself only once to turn round, check on him. He sat there, darting his eyes back and forth, taking ravenous bites from an apple.

The silence in the room was broken by a pack of dogs, howling in the distance. *Best to lock the doors, help yourself to more apples.* I went to the front room, threw the locks, knew Lee would notice. It might alarm her that we were now living behind locked doors, give her one more reason to lash out. *Lee, I'm gonna lock the door,* I yelled up. *Let me know when you leave so I can lock it behind you.*

There was no answer, and I could smell the eggs starting to burn. I let go of the lock, walked toward the hallway and caught her coming down the stairs. *If they come, I will turn him in. I will not risk my safety, nor yours Charles. I am not of the mind to harbor fugitives. Tell them he broke in and...* She reached for her coat, I helped her put it on.

If they come, I interrupted, *let me handle it. I will tell the truth. I found him starved by the river, brought him home and fed him. That's the truth, and I won't lie, Lee. I won't.*

While Lee was out, I worked quickly, best to avoid

arguments about what I was doing. While he ate, I gathered pillows, blankets, extra provisions from around the house—a candle, matches, a cloth for cleaning himself, soap and a basin, noticed I tripped twice coming back up from the basement, stopped to catch my breath each time.

After breakfast, we walked down the stairs, me leading the way, him behind me. I let the thought of being harmed stay only a second, fished it from my mind. There on the pallet was a makeshift bed, the wedding closet that held Lee's dress turned on its side, the basin, water, soap, candle arranged neatly. The blankets folded, the pillow atop. *Whatever you need, you ask. I'll be back with a fork and plate. The water won't last, but there's more where that came from. Best you stay out of the yard for now. I'll fetch more water when you need it.*

Thank you, Massa Hoffman, thank you kindly. I caught his eye. *You can call me anything you want, but never Master. Never.*

I walked to the south wall, reached up to open a small window, struggled with the rusted hinge. He reached over me, opened it with ease. *Of course, you are welcome to close this when it's cold, but thought you might want some air.*

This, I hope be 'nough fo' the breakfast, the fruit. I turned, saw he held the money from this morning. I went to him, reached and curled his fingers around the bills, squeezed his hand closed. *I'll be upstairs, checking in on the missus and the provisions she's about to bring. You sleep. There's a bucket in the corner to do your business. God bless you, Elijah.*

As I turned to leave, he said, *God bless you, Sir.* I climbed the stairs with care.

missus lee hoffman

For years, we spoke only of the weather, the books we read; talked about neighbors and the prices of things. Never again did we mention the slave living in the basement; lived in two worlds for years—Charles over there with his ideas, and me here with mine.

When something needed doing, I spoke to Charles *ask your boy to clean the yard, bring in more water, the mattress needs turning*. That first day I found oil paint in the shed, painted a red dot on one fork, spoon, bowl, plate, cup. *These are for him. I find him using ours, I will leave this house, you understand. I won't return*. Avoiding him went on for years, 'til Charles fell ill, and I needed to run the house.

The first time I spoke with his boy, Elijah, he'd been living with us for the better part of five years. Found him in the kitchen, replacing the window pane in the back door, a chisel in his hand. *Charles can't make the stairs. He'll be needing to be carried down*.

He stood frozen at the door, surprised, I believe, to

hear my voice. Five years is a long time of silence, living under the same roof, ignoring, pretending he wasn't in the yard, at the back porch, hauling in wood and water. *And, I am running the house, least for now, 'til Charles is fully recovered.*

I left the room, considered going back to say thank you, thought better of it. Instead, whispered to myself *Dear God, bless my soul*, as I climbed the stairs.

You will need to find your heart, Charles finally said to me, after lying in bed for months, only downstairs when he was carried, sometimes out to visit the hospital, which quickly became evident was a waste of money. *Elijah is a good soul, looks after us. He might be the only man here after I'm gone...* It was his first mention of it. *Hush now, Charles. You are not going anywhere. You will be around here for many years, a favored thorn in my side.*

I tried to make light of it, adjusting his pillow, closing the drapes to keep out the afternoon heat. As I said, we did not speak much, did not cross a threshold of topics: illness, death, the pile of bills on the hall table, a man living in the basement.

I was startled when a knock came at the front door. Found two serious-looking gentlemen standing side by side when I pulled the lace window covering aside.

I do not know what to tell you, gentlemen. Mister Hoffman has been laid up these past months, there is no money to be collected, there is nothing in this house but a boy and scraggly chickens in the back. Misters Cameron and Carlyle, here to collect on monies owed, looked at me through the crack in the door, not a bit of sympathy between them.

*Best to sell the boy, there's money to be made there. You do not need a boy to look after chickens. One of them, I care not which, spit his tobacco in the yard before claiming *we'll be back on the first... to settle up.**

Why, oh, why did I cry then, at the thought of losing negro Elijah, a man I cared not for? Why?

And now this? This has been most hard on my heart, finding these poor negroes at Mister Tadler's in want of an education? Before marriage, I'd spent my days ordering: demanding, managing, watching over, bullying, and punishing. Those verbs I am fine with. It is not easy work, but I did rise to the occasion, and do what needs doing. And now, this? To be tasked with educating them? That is more than I was put on God's green earth to do. I am not yet brave enough, and fear I never shall be, to sit at a desk, bow our heads over the page, breathe their air—oh, the thought of it!

When I was a girl, you'll understand, I was taught that negroes were to be kept at a distance, at least one meter, unless they are attending to our bodily needs, cleaning, wiping, dressing, and such. Even when served supper, I was given to leaning back in my chair to allow for the space necessary for proper distance. And, I was comfortable with this—I am one that is distressed by the germs of others, you'll understand. Aren't we all? If one is paying attention, then one will know what is right, and having personal space is best. One meter

seems about right, yes?

And yet... and yet... there's Charles, my dearest husband. A man I adore more than life itself, and I respect the wisdom that he brings forth, the philosophies he imparts. He speaks of *fairness, equality, humanness*. What did I do to deserve these subjects brought out in the open? To have *compassion* spoken of at the breakfast table? What of it?

And, then, the illness; the loss of monies. I am now rising to the occasion of cleaning up after him, and, along with negro Elijah, his man servant all of these years, though he would never call him that, tending to his every need. Mother would be horrified if she were here, seeing how hard I try to provide for us. To have her only child out looking for work, denied at every turn, excuses given of *the dreaded economy, unnecessary expense, others better qualified*.

I daresay I was desperate when I walked the steps to Mister Tadler's home, prepared as I was with credentials, references older than dirt, some of them passed on, the children wed now. But, am I desperate enough to breathe the air, guide the hand, flourish the mind of a negro? This must not be the way of the Lord... mustn't we find ourselves another way? Something less vile and dangerous?

Please, dear Lord in Heaven, guide me to find work that has dignity!

jack

I know this will not be easy, likely will be dangerous, and your hesitation is palpable, Missus Hoffman. There are others I can call upon if you'd rather not. We were again seated in the parlor, in the same places as before. I had been in the kitchen cutting a loaf of bread and simmering tea for supper. The tap at the door was soft, but I had heard it just the same. I was surprised to see her standing there alone, half expected she might have come with a posse to arrest me, or worse. Instead, she asked if she might come in for a bit, and we spoke again of the employment I was offering.

It's just that, well, as I'm sure you are aware, Mister Tadler, this is flagrantly against the law. And, I am not one to seek out breaking the law. It gave me a fright, as you are well aware. I do hope that the carpet has not been badly damaged.

It is not the carpet that concerns me, Missus Hoffman. This house is all but falling down as we speak. That worries me less than the feelings of those who live here; that gives me the greatest pause. Suppose they had been within earshot when I proposed the tutoring, and next thing they

hear was the slamming of the door? Seeing you all but running full speed down the walk? Can you imagine that, Missus Hoffman?

She began to cry then, and for a moment I considered comforting her, my arm half raised toward her shoulder, but thought better of it. I was not feeling sympathetic, though I knew not a moment of her circumstances, she hardly drew sympathies from me.

I had a dream just this afternoon. When I left here, I went home, and sought comfort from my husband, Charles. I fell asleep and dreamt I was in school, ignored by everyone about me... and... I was colored.

She stopped then, and looked at me. I said nothing. Had this dream the power to change her that suddenly?

Charles gave me a talking to when I awoke. Slavery is a wedge drawn between us, so deeply that we have not dared speak the word these past years. Charles, you see, is far more open minded than me. He... he said that coloreds deserve education much as anyone, it was literacy that would save them from their plight... but that he knew better than to tell me what to do.

The tears came again, this time heavier. And I did reach out to comfort her then. We had crossed a chasm.

After a moment, I spoke. *Thank you for telling me the thoughts of your husband, but it is not he that I am considering an offer of employment, Missus Hoffman, so his beliefs do not help us at this juncture. And your beliefs are nothing if not clear. So, why are you here? To ask after the carpet?*

She wiped her eyes then, and if I had wits about me, or an ounce more compassion, I would have risen to find a handkerchief. Instead, it was the back of her hand that dried her face, however ineffectively.

It was, for lack of better words, an awakening of sorts, Mister Tadler. During the dream, and thereafter, my chest was full of constriction; I daresay even now I cannot breathe correctly. When I considered for a moment, through my dream, that I could be colored, that I was being ignored simply because of it, that learning was being denied to me, I... the tears came harder. I rose then to fetch water and a handkerchief. A moment, was all I said as I left the room.

I was surprised to find Debra standing in the middle of the kitchen, pouring our tea. *There's someone in the front parlor, a teacher. She is in need of water. She's had a bit of a fright.* I walked to the pitcher, filled a glass, grabbed a napkin from the sideboard. *What she teach?* Debra seemed—I know I might be reading too much into this encounter—yet she seemed almost... interested. *Reading mostly, I suppose. Plus, maths and history. Sciences? I'm not entirely sure.*

History? White history? She spat the words out, then seemed to garble them back in. Again, I am making unsound judgements of this girl, this woman whom I barely know. Truth is, I knew nothing of her, other than her name, that she was Jeremiah's sister, and that she was presently standing in my kitchen. *I don't know. We could ask her. Do you want to ask her?*

I carried the water and napkin in one hand, rapped softly at the door, though it was already open, I did not wish to startle Missus Hoffman any further. *This young lady is Debra...* and it occurred to me, not until that moment, that I knew not of her surname, or even if she had one. Nor Missus Anne's. *She has questions about your lessons.* I drew a chair closer, sat it in front of Missus Hoffman. *You are welcome to sit, Debra.* At once I felt the heaviness of the room, the awkwardness; should have expected it, but failed to.

Their eyes did not meet. Neither spoke.

Finally, Missus Hoffman offered *I am happy to make your acquaintance. Debra, is it?* Debra nodded. *I am Missus Hoffman, and I teach young girls and boys to... well, to tell the truth, I have never taught someone of your race. I was here this morning, and most embarrassed myself, the details of which are not important.*

She stopped then, and searched for my eyes, hoping I wouldn't press the story further. I looked at her blankly. *I am coming to realize, after a most enlightening, or shall I say heart-stopping afternoon, that education is important to each of us, even if the law says... well, I am not entirely clear what the law says. I pretend to know, yet... what is important now, in this room, between us, if we choose to work together, is that you are as committed to your studies as I would be. Only time will tell us that, yes? Your Master said that you have questions?*

What happened this afternoon? Debra asked, meeting her eyes, and didn't immediately lower them. Missus Hoffman straightened out the folds of her dress. *Beg your pardon? Well, you said you had a heart-stoppin' afternoon. Well yes, I... when I left here, I went home and... my husband Charles was in bed, has been sick for years... I began to tell him of this morning, and there was no money to fix the plumbing...* She brought the napkin to her eyes a little late, we both witnessed her tears, at least I had. She did not let them stop her, instead cleared her throat and continued. *I dare not bore either of you with the details of my day, my life. It will suffice to say that I have had a change of heart, and hurried back here to... to meet you, Debra.*

I don't understand. I can appreciate that the day was difficult for you, ma'am, but none of that sounds heart-stoppin' to me. No money for plumbin'? That ain't nothin'.

I stood in the corner, smiling. Seems that our dear

Debra was not letting Missus Hoffman off the hook that easily. *Well, some of the details are troubling, and perhaps not right to be discussed at this hour of the day.* She was trying to find my eyes as I took a chair beside Debra, intent on pulling a thread on my jacket that wasn't there. I wasn't letting her off the hook, either.

Seem to me you wanna get inside my head and give me a white person's education. That be a big bit of permission to give someone, you know what I'm sayin'? The pause was pregnant between the three of us, and I allowed it, scrambling in my head to find reason to intermedicate, found none.

Was the heart-stoppin' part when you found out we was black? That what got your heart a' stoppin'?

As a silent witness in this room, I allowed myself to notice two things in the moment, things that told me more of Debra than I could have possibly surmised previously. One—being in a room with two elders, two white elders, did not seemingly intimidate her. And, two—she called herself black.

Debra, I began, I do appreciate your questions and let us give a moment to Missus Hoffman to collect herself. In the meanwhile, I offer you this: I am determined to find you a tutor to enliven your abilities. It is obvious to me that you are rich in potential. And I am delighted to see it, to witness it. I thought to reach out and touch her shoulder then, but didn't, yet she must've sensed it—she adjusted in her seat, moved ever so slightly away from me, away from the hand that hadn't reached.

Missus Hoffman composed herself. *Well, yes, that is part of it, to be perfectly honest. I found it to be a fright...* She abruptly caught herself. *A surprise. There is more, though I am weary to tell of it.* We both sat facing her. Silent. *I have believed, until now, in the*

juxtaposition of classes, deciding, rather unfairly, that one race is far superior... and in all my years of teaching I've not had a negro sit across from me, as we are now. Have not had one sit across my desk for a lesson, I've only demanded the floors mopped, the bedclothes...

She rose then, and went to the far wall, as if a book on the shelf had suddenly caught her attention. *I have been quite unfair about it; that's the truth of it.* She exhaled deeply, I could feel the weight of it from where I sat, my back to her. *Or better said, I have been a bitch about it, quite honestly,* letting out a bit of laughter, followed by a snort she attempted desperately to take back. *Forgive me. It would be a privilege to tutor you, Debra, and whomever else is in need. If you'll have me, Mister Jack, I could begin tomorrow.*

I looked not at her, but to Debra. She was the one whose opinion mattered most at that moment; I would allow her the lead, the decision. *It be clear that you ain't never been a bitch to me, so there ain't nothin' to forgive there. I only see what's right in front of me, and your heart seems good. And, truth be told, my Momma, brother and me need the learnin'. So yes, tomorrow at eight for Momma, then me, then Jeremiah. He already know a lot, so you might have to keep up. I don't know much of spellin', but in this here house, we change the a to an i.*

This caused Missus Hoffman to turn, her face quizzical. *We don't use the word master here, we say mister.* She found my eyes then, mouthed a silent *thank you*, then asked *may I be excused?*

Missus Hoffman was perfectly speechless, her lips parted, silent; the stains on her dress suddenly in need of her attention.

I had yet to see her breathe.

missus anne

There was a time, maybe twelve or twenty years ago, when I thought 'bout learnin', considered it might be good for me to go to school, learn to read. 'Course, by the color of my skin, it weren't allowed. Then Debra come into the shack, burstin' with news, news she say gonna make me fit for molasses. *We goin' to school, Momma!* She said it almost in a scream, but whispered-like so no one be able to hear us. I didn' know any details a course, but there be so many miracles these past few weeks, one more jus' be addin' to the pile.

School? I sat m'self down on the mattress, smellin' the newness and heat come off it. *Mister Jack brung some woman over. She a teacher, a white one. I know she ain't too happy 'bout teachin' us, but she gonna, startin' tomorrow. We gonna go to school, Momma!*

Where? It be dangerous to be goin' into a school, ain't it? I didn' wan' our new situation to be ripped right out, b'fore even gettin' a good taste of it. *It gonna be here, in the front room I s'ppose, maybe in the kitchen. And Jeremiah goin' too, I just ain't told him yet.*

And there, without another moment passin', I began to

cry, not for m'self, but for my chil'ren. I knowed Jeremiah been taught his numbers, some letters, had arranged it for him years ago in secret, thought to have Debra learnin' too, but by the time it was her turn, Miss Sage was dead. Found half descended in a creek, drowned to death. There was no learnin' for Debra, 'til now.

The next mornin' we rose early, waited outside the back door of the Big House, but to our surprise, Mister Jack opened the door soon as he see us. *I have breakfast ready for you, and presents*, he said. *No need to wait outside, remember. You both are welcome here anytime.*

There were plates full a flapjacks and syrup, grits, potatoes, melon and apple, strawberry and cream, coffee and sugar, and some kind a juice I never got 'round to tryin'. *You both will need your energy for school this morning, best to eat up*, he said in a voice too cheery for the early hour. While we was sittin', eatin' all this deliciousness, gifts appeared outta nowhere, laid in front of us. *May I be excused*, I asked, and without waitin' for an answer, ran out the back door, back to the shack. Jeremiah was just wakin' and must'a heard me outside, cryin' all over myself. *It be too much. I can't be takin' all this in, Jeremiah. When it gonna end?*

Jeremiah come and be next to me. *Jack is a good man, who believes in treatin' us good, Momma*, he said. *And it is about time we treated good by whites, right? What happened this morning, Momma? Did the teacher hurt you?*

There were flapjacks, and presents, I sobbed. Then, without thinkin' too hard on it, I breathed in deep, and let m'self smile a bit. Then began a sort a giggle, and snot ran right outta my nose. What a sight I must a been! Snortin' and laughin' and

breathin' heavy and hard. That was my first day a school!

Are you OK, Momma? Debra was in the kitchen, eatin' the last a her food, and talkin' all normal-like with Mister Jack. The presents was still there, neatly wrapped in kraft paper, each with a blue ribbon. *I's sorry. I get m'self overwhelmed sometimes, nothin' against you personal, Mister Jack.*

You know you are welcome to just call me by my name, the Mister isn't necessary. Here, sit down, I will warm up your food. He started to get up. *There ain't time! The teacher be waitin',* I said a lil' too forcefully, suddenly worried that I was gonna be late and the teacher be angry. *Let me take care of Missus Hoffman,* he said. *I am sure she will be fine starting her day in the parlor with a cup a' tea and a moment of quiet; collecting herself a bit, yes?*

They were the most beautiful presents I ever got, tied up with a ribbon. After I began to unwrap one, *I have an idea, Momma.* Debra grab the ribbon from the table where I set it, and stood behind me, tyin' the ribbon to my hair. *That looks nice, real nice, Momma. You look pretty!* Smilin' again, I took a bite a strawberry, and a dribble a red juice found its way to my chin. I wiped it with a cloth napkin. Cloth!

When openin' the presents, I didn' want the paper tore, so I took my time, pressin' out the creases as I went along. And there I seen the most beautiful sight: a fountain pen—I didn' know its name 'til later in the day. I ain't never seen one before! My finger went to touch the point, the sharpness of it surprised me.

Next, a bottle of the blackest liquid I ever laid eyes on,

like gold if gold were black and liquidy. And a copybook, fine and new, not a mark 'cept for the cover, which had a word written in a fine, bold script, black as the night. There are only two written words that I know: *God* is one of 'em. The other, starin' back at me from the cover, her letters reflectin' in the mornin' light, shiny-like and lovely: *Anne*.

My name.

I smiled big. Third time today, and it weren' even eight in the mornin'!

jeremiah

My last teacher was beat and drowned, so I was mighty suspicious to be goin' to school again. I heard 'bout it that night in the shed, my sister half whisperin' to me, her eyes aflame with excitement.

We were sittin' on my mattress, and she told me 'bout her meetin' with the teacher, about how she was gettin' all uppity with the white. *What the hell was so heart-stoppin' anyways?* When she saw my eyes go wide, she told me that the 'hell' part was made up for the benefit of tellin' a good story. Then, she stood in the middle of the room and mimed readin' a book aloud... *And then one day the two lovers, Beatriz and Harry, was found in bed together, though they wasn't married! Only one of them be dressed and the other holdin' what appeared to be a large piece of cake, and both of 'em was gigglin'! Half naked, eatin' and gigglin'!*

With that, she fell into the bed laughin', her eyes brighter than before. *Oh, Jeremiah, can you imagine it? Walkin' into the house and sittin' in a proper room to learn my letters and numbers! To be able to read, for the love of the Lord? To think of it! I might even*

ask Mister Jack for a drink of tea, you know, like a proper lady and all, keepin' my mouth wet for all the readin' aloud I'm gonna do!

Sittin' there on the bed with her, it hit me big. I had been livin' here, not slaving, not told what to do, where to go, when to work, not ever hearin' orders about pullin', shuckin', haulin' and movin' white people's things from here to there and back again. Now it hit me, and I cried hard, my right hand tight in a fist in my mouth, cryin', bitin' down on my knuckles, stoppin' just before I drew blood.

My savin' grace in all of this was Debra never asked *what's wrong, why you cryin'?* She just let me be, rubbin' my back, soft and gentle-like. Finally, she said *it's nice bein' here, ain't it? He a good man, Mister Jack. You love him, right?* The thought of it made me cry harder. Then I dried my tears on the shirt sleeve, caught my breath and said, *yes*.

I needn't ask how she knew, Debra was born knowin'. We always say *'ask Debra'* cause even though she was younger than all of us, we looked to her. And when she's not around, we say *'what would Debra do?'* She was the leader, she was the one who knew. So, Debra knew about me and Jack before I said anythin'? 'Course she did.

Then, it all came spillin' out of me, like a dam at its breakin' point. *I knew forever and ever I was different. All the other boys chasin' girls at Clarks', tryin' to get sex, makin' jokes about it, braggin' about how much they was gettin' or how much they was gonna get. I laughed along with 'em, pretendin' I was right there, gettin' some myself or wantin' to get some.*

I looked at Debra then, to see if she was listenin' or had lost interest, but she was right there with me, noddin' her head for me to go on. *I kept to myself mostly, you know that. Spendin' my*

life slavin' for the Clarks or bein' with you and Momma and Daddy. I just kept quiet, hopin' I would turn out alright, hopin' no one would notice me bein' different. Then I come here, and there was no one to impress, no one to wonder why I wasn't gettin' married, havin' kids, screwin' like everyone else. Was almost like bein' here was the first place I could breathe, ya know?

The tears started again, I paid them no mind. *Jack was so kind to me, treatin' me like a normal man; his kindness pourin' over me. Sometimes, after bein' here a'while, when it felt okay to look at him, our eyes would stay lookin' a little bit longer, and one or both of us would smile. You have to know, Debra, this had been bottlin' up in me for a lifetime! 'Til finally, one night, we was on the porch and he asked me if I ever been in love, and I asked him, and then... we found ourselves in the house, our arms grabbin' hold of the other like we didn't want to let go. Then our lips were kissin'...*

You ask me if I love him? Yes, yes I do. I love him more each day. And, he loves me. One day months back he asked me what he could do for me, how he could make things better between us and I told him 'Can you get Momma and Debra? Bring 'em here?' Yes, he said, but we won't be alone anymore, we'll go back to hidin' our togetherness. I know, I told him, but I will find you. I will always find you. And, now here we are, Debra, and you know, and cousin Sylvie knows, and now we can breathe again.

It was then I realized how much my knuckles hurt, this new habit of bitin' 'em hard like they was chicken fat. I brought them to my lips to kiss 'em and make 'em better. I looked up at Debra, not knowin' how she would react to my heart being spilled all at once like this.

When I first knew, Debra said, I was scared 'cause it be so dangerous, Jeremiah. Bein' black, bein' with a white man like that could

bring all kinds of trouble here. But you know what, brother? Best to be shot and killed for havin' love, than to not love at all, right?

She tickled me just then, and we fell onto the bed, laughin' like when we was kids.

missus anne

Don' let y'self believe it be perfect livin' here; we still be needin' the whites for everythin'. The food, the water, the blanket, the shack, all of it. We ain't got nothin' of our own, and no money to buy nothin', so we still be slaves to the white, in a way. Let that truth sink in. Then, out a the blue, Mister Jack call us all to a house meetin'.

Tomorrow at one o'clock sharp, after your tutoring, if you can, he say to each of us and we, not knowin' what it be about, wondered aloud in a whisper—we whisper all the time, a habit too hard to break—*what kind a meetin' do ya think? He want us to work, we gonna be sold, driven away, we gonna be traded down the road, down river, he disappointed in us for not helpin' none?*

Debra and me looked to Jeremiah 'cause he been here longer, seemed to have the Mister's ears, could tell us 'bout what was comin' if he knowed anythin', give us clues. *I don't know, could be 'bout anything, but doubt it's something to worry over,* he said. I didn' sleep that night, mostly 'cause I knowed a bit 'bout what to expect for school the next day, if it be anythin' like this mornin'.

This mornin', I found m'self in the front room, the one filled with all them books made a finery, and there be a white lady sittin' there, her back all stiff and proper, like she more nervous than me. I stayed jus' outside, not wantin' to be a bother, waitin' my turn, in case she was busy with somethin'. *Good morning, you must be the mother. Please, sit down. I'm Missus Hoffman, and I shall be your teacher, if you allow it.*

She had the worst smile I ever seen, like there was pain behind it, and I got the feelin' right away that she didn' wanna be there; that it too hard for her to be in the room with me. 'Cause I a negro woman? Like Debra say? No matter to me, not one bit. I been wantin' this all my life and I's ready. *Let the games begin*, I thought inside my head and burst out in another big smile. Four times today! *Four!*

I took a seat at the big round table, a vase full a dried flowers upon it, a long gold piece a fabric down the middle, stretched from one end to the other, endin' in them fancy tassels, I think they called. Never sat at such a fancy table, and with the most care I could muster, I put the new bottle a ink and pen, the copybook with the word *Anne* on the table, careful to avoid the fabric, though it already be full a stains. Then thought better of it, wanted the copybook near, placed it on my lap, both my hands holdin' on. Noticed my hands were sweaty, and worried that the pages be gettin' wet, so I put the book back on the table. *There's no need to be nervous, umm, Missus... Anne.* I said, *Anne with an e.*

So, you know your letters then? That's very good, Anne. No, I told her. I don'. I only know to see my name, and the word God, but don' know nothin' else.

I looked down and seen my name again, and all a what

was in front a me: a fine room, flowers, a pen, the copybook, black ink, a white teacher. My stomach full from breakfast, I noticed I was needin' to find a chamber pot, or a hole in the yard, somethin', and soon! *May I be excused? Jus' for a bit?* I didn' know if I was allowed to leave my things, and start to reach for 'em, then knew I didn' want to be bothered tryin' to find a place to put 'em while I was attendin' to my business. *I leave these here, jus' for a bit. That be all right?*

When I returned, the teacher ask if everythin' was alright, and I said yes. *Best that we get started, else the whole hour will be gone and we won't even find our way to the letter A, as in Anne, and alphabet.* She teach me how to hold the pen, dip it in the liquid blueblack ink, bring it to the page, copy the letters she have on her paper.

I seen on the pages, the stark difference b'tween the black and white, could almost feel the colors, my eyes starin' at 'em. The last time I remember this was when Debra be born. There be a new baby at the Clarks', George, and I was wet, so they had me come in and feed him. I spent the hours lookin' down at his little white self against my black, lookin' at it for hours, wonderin' how it come to mean so much to so many. *You is lucky*, I whispered to that baby, *lucky in color*, I'd say, as his lil' white face suckled on my breast.

I made it, sloppy as it was, through the first ten letters, up to J. Slow and hard, over and over, ignorin' the cramps in my hand; my left hand hurt right along with the right, balled into a fist for no reason other than for sympathizin' with the other. *That's all the time we have, Missus Anne. I suggest you practice what you have learned here today, and we will review tomorrow. Good day.*

Then, just like that, I breathed. Heavy, like I hadn'

breathed since I walked in the room earlier. *Thank you, ma'am*, I said. Picked up *Anne*, the ink and pen, smoothed the pinny and left, runnin' off, lookin' side to side; saw Debra waitin' in the hall. *You alright, Momma? What you lookin' for?* I hardly even looked at her. *I need a place to sit, a table, I got me some homework to do!*

I left her standin' there without 'nother word, found my way to the kitchen. The dishes all been cleared, the table wide open. I sat m'self down, opened the copybook, opened to a fresh page, then thought better of it, turned to where I left off so as to not waste a bit a space. Over and over, I made my letters, slow and steady, focusin' hard; was still there when Debra come up and stood beside me after her lesson.

My favorite letter so far be A, but there be more so I can' say fo' sure what be my favorite 'til the end. She wanted to talk, but I shushed her, couldn' afford the distraction. *Let me be, Debra!* I noticed then my hands was covered in the blueblack, brung them to my lips, kissed 'em, didn' care if my lips got blacker.

I was in school, that's all that mattered.

Was still sittin' there when supper was served. The ink couldn' wash off, and I didn' mind *a badge of courage*, as Mister Jack said. I didn' quite know what that mean, but he smiled and I knowed 'nough to know that courage was a blessin', so I smiled again. How many times I smile on my first day a school? Twenty?

The next day, we had our meetin'. Miss Sylvie was there, and we met right there in the kitchen, had to squeeze

in 'nother chair. Ain't never sat so close to a white b'fore. I sat quiet, lookin' at my hands.

Thank you all for being here. We have a lot to discuss. I wanted Sylvie to be included here as well. Of course each is allowed, umm, invited, to ask questions, too. First off, I know that, with winter coming, it's cold and that shack where the three of you are is not fit, and it's... it's possible for the three of you to move in here, but we need to keep quiet about it, keep it secret. If you choose to be living inside the house, then best that you continue using the back door, and all the drapes would need to be closed all the time, including in your room.

He let all this news sit there, took his time with silence. *There are three spare rooms upstairs and two down here. Sylvie will be living with us, soon as she can settle her own house, but that won't take long, right?* He looked to Miss Sylvie then, who had her own paper filled with blueblack words. I licked my lips when I seen 'em, like I wanted to eat 'em off the page, or better yet, just lick 'em!

It will not take long. I have furniture to sell, and will close up the house for now. I had wanted to sell it, but I am wary of calling too much attention to this family. Best to be quiet, try and make all this appear as normal as possible. If it's alright, I would prefer a bedroom down here, the front room near the parlor, my body is not wanting to climb more stairs than necessary. And if it is to your liking, Missus Anne, you are welcome to the other room here, just off the kitchen. It's warmer. And you would be closer to your studies.

Miss Sylvie caught my eye, smiled at me broad. I think all of us was feelin' the love in the room, right then. Could almost slice it with a butter knife. *Yes, ma'am*, I said. *That'd be right nice.* Oh, how a part of me wanted to scoot the chair back, jump up and run to the new room, one I barely knew was there,

and see every inch of it; count the steps from the bed to the beginnin' a the school room. But, I seen that the papers had a bunch a words, so I sat there, knowin' there was more to be said.

And, this house is in need of care, said Mister Jack, lookin' kindly at all of us. After my parents passed, I forgot to do the tending. My mother is likely rolling over with despair about the shape of it. I think it best to keep Mother proud, and tend to what needs tending. To do that, I will need your help, and am willing to pay for your troubles, your work.

With that, Mister Jack rose from the chair and went to the cabinet, took out jars. Each with a lid and paper money in it. *I am sorry that you are not able to open your own bank accounts, but you can each have your own jar.* He put a jar in front a me, and one each to Jeremiah and Debra. *I will pay you \$1 a day with Sundays off. Do what you want with your money, though I suggest you keep it hidden well, even bury it in the yard if you're so inclined.*

I looked hard at the dollar in my jar and knowed right 'way what I wanted to do. *Any questions so far?* I raised my hand. *You needn't raise your hand, Missus Anne. What is it? I wanna write my name on the jar, or inside of it, on a slip of paper. That be all right? It is yours, you are welcome to do as you like,* he said. I reached for it then, held the glass, feelin' the smoothness of it. 'This be my future' I thought to m'self, and looked at Debra, who I knowed was already lookin' at me. *Momma likes her letters, she might start writin' all over the walls if we ain't careful,* she said. And we each giggled.

I noticed that Jeremiah was awful quiet, like he was full a heaviness, though I couldn' imagine why. A new room! And a dollar! And more where that came from! What there be to be

heavy about? *I had a conversation with Jeremiah a few weeks back, and haven't done any more about it, said Mister Jack, lookin' at the whole of us. Best that we discuss it here.*

He get up then and grabbed the kettle, placed it on the stove. Reached for a mug. *Tea anyone? Yes, thank you cousin. Miss Sylvie be the only one, the rest of us quiet. What I asked him about was whether it would be okay to bring more people here, to provide a safe haven for them to live with us. That is an option, but there's another option, and this is the main reason we're gathered here today, 'cause it affects us all. We could stay and work the place, the land, have more folks here and... well, I don't know. Haven't thought much beyond that. Don't have the power to predict the future, but it is dangerous here; dangerous for you, havin' appearances of being slaves with no rights, and dangerous for us, he looked to Miss Sylvie, as sympathizers.*

He poured the tea then, set a cup in front a Miss Sylvie. *I take some, too. Surprised m'self for speakin' up, but didn' know how long these miracles gonna be lastin', so best to enjoy 'em now. He give me the cup he jus' readied for hisself, and I wrapped my hands 'round it, felt its warmth, worried for a bit 'bout the possibility of stainin' it, but saw the ink to be dry.*

The other option, plan B I call it, he said pickin' up the paper from the table, though he didn' read from it, far as I could tell, is to go North. We have family there, and we would all be comfortable. Safer for you to walk the streets, shop in stores, perhaps, have what you might call a life... We have this up for discussion today, then we need to vote on it.

How many? We all look to Jeremiah then, it was the first he offered all day, and it be only two words. *How many what?* Miss Sylvie asked gently. *How many slaves you able to bring here?*

Not sure, Jeremiah, Mister Jack said. I have only been to the block twice in my life, so I do not have a good sense of how much... he stop then and we all felt the words, like a weight in the middle a the table. He was talkin' round the idea of how much it cost to buy a person.

That be a big thing to have sittin' there, not said, but felt jus' the same. *It ain't just the bringin' 'em here, it's what it means,* Debra said. She got up from the table, walkin' part of the length of the room, turned back, started pacin', talkin' fast. *It be more than that. It means that the two or three or twenty you bring here would be... they would be treated good, treated human-like. And all of us know there be no price to be put on that.* She go to the kettle then, touched it and drew back at the heat of it.

I be the only one here that's a Momma and none a you would understand this, one day you might Debra, but for now I be the only one, and I am wantin' to protect ya both. I ain't never been able to do that, and if Mister Jack be givin' us the chance to have it be so, that we could be up North and find us a future, I say we do that.

I held the jar again, could only jus' begin to imagine what money could do to help us in the North. *I would leave today. Back when your Daddy be alive, we knowed better than to bring chil'ren into slavery, wouldn't wish it on anyone, 'specially our own, but we did. We brought the two a you into it, and you didn' ask for it.* I took a sip a tea then, felt it wet my throat. *I would love nothin' more than to save millions from slavery, but right now, I be given a chance to save two, the two most important to me. I be happy to trade schoolin' and money and a room I ain't set foot in yet. Mm-hmm, I'd do it today. Right now.*

I pushed the tea away from me, moved it near the center a the table, somehow thinkin' that havin' it near me mean I was stayin', was gettin' set in my ways. Looked down

at my hands then, restin' in my lap, knowed it be all right to let go of readin', the letters, all of it, and trade it for a new future for my babies.

Of course we understand that, Missus Anne, of course we do. Miss Sylvie reached for my hand then, holdin' it firm, looked at me with a smile, *that's why we are having this meeting, 'cause there is too much that needs to be decided upon. Jack and myself have been mulling this over for weeks and knew that it was best to say everything that needs to be said today, have it be out in the open and make decisions before too long.*

Jeremiah got up then, moved to Debra at the stove, looked like he didn' know where to go, like the room be too small for him all of a sudden.

There's more.

He go to the back door, looked out, turn to me, then out the window again. None of us said a word, seem it was all right to be takin' time, let what need to be said be said. I ain't never had a conversation like this 'fore, whites askin' for my opinion, the opinion a my chil'ren; I was in no hurry to let it end. When he finally spoke, it sounded like his voice were squeaked, like a bug be caught in it, or maybe dirt.

He stayed facin' outside as he spoke *if we here speakin' 'bout the truth, speakin' about the future, then there is more to be said.* He turned first to Debra, then to Miss Sylvie. *The two of you know 'bout me, until now I've been quiet 'bout it to Momma.* He turned to me then, tears runnin' down his cheeks, and I got up to go to him, but Miss Sylvie kept holdin' my hand, like she be holdin' me there for the good of it.

You probably know that I am different, have always been

different, Momma. I gonna be thirty-four in August and never had a girl... Well, that suits me fine, but if we gonna talk 'bout the future, then best you know that I do have a future, but it will not be with a wife by my side, and children. And it don't matter to me if we are here or up North, but it be best if the truth is out, just as clear as possible. He brung his shirt sleeve up to his eyes then, tried to wipe 'em dry in earnest.

It was only then that I noticed the shirt he be wearin'... a shirt that was new to him, but had been on the back a Mister Jack only yesterday. I yelped a lil' bit at the knowin' of it, tried to keep it set in my mouth, but it escaped fast, snapped my lips soon as I heard it, but it be put out there, right in the room, 'long with the tea, the papers with all them words, *Anne* starin' me in the face. I wondered then how the word *invert* look in blueblack. I wiped my own tears, let go a Miss Sylvie, went to my boy, but he walk away from me.

There's more, Momma. You always said you wanted us to be happy, and I am; just not in the way you imagined it. I'm happy, happier than ever. Thirty-four years I been waitin' for this, and it was worth the wait. He went then and stood behind Mister Jack, put his hands on his shoulders. *I am in love, Momma,* and he kiss Mister Jack's head!

I heard m'self scream and run down the hall, grabbin' for the front door, thought better of it, ran to the front room, slammin' the door behind me, and cried and cried! *My son be one a them, and he with a white?* Yessir, we goin' North tonight, if'n I have a say in any of it. Else they both be hangin', their manhoods cut off for all to see, jus' like his Daddy.

Maybe we all be hangin' too, jus' to set things right in the eyes a the law.

jeremiah

Suddenly, I was ravenous and walked to the cupboard, found a tin of cookies, broke one in half, brought half to Jack and fed it to him. Offered cookies to Sylvie and Debra. Before I left for the barn, Debra said *she be alright, she just need time. She loves you Jeremiah... It don't matter*, I told her. *What matters is that we are all safe, and there be no more secrets. Now, perhaps it's best if we talk tomorrow 'bout goin' up North. 'Nough for tonight, yes?*

At the workbench, I found my copybook where I had left it earlier, planned to be out there practicin' my words; little did I know I would have so much to tell the page. I started up a candle, let her flame light the room, picked up the pen. Then, I noticed my body, full of that feelin' you have of bein' spent after a cryin' spell, like you've been wrung out, mixed with exhaustion and relief. I closed my eyes then, brought a hand to my chest and felt somethin' that felt like... peace.

I know I've hurt Momma by tellin' my truth, but I need to stop bein' in shame. Been in shame since the first time I kissed a boy when I was seventeen. We were in the woods, just

down from the Clarks', and my friend Peter had stolen tobacco and papers. We lit up and laid down, passin' the cigarette between us, takin' our rest on a Sunday mornin'. *Let's play a game*, he said. *You like truth o' dare, Cracker? You know I do*. So we start playin', askin' the other if they want to do a dare or tell a truth. One minute he was darin' me to sing a love song, *sing it low so no one hear ya*. I sang what I knew from Momma—*Only know one love, one love be fillin' up my heart, my heart all big with lovely love, love*.

I was lookin' in his eyes while I sang, and the next dare he said to me, *I dare ya to put your lips on top o' mine, pretend I's someone else, someone you like a lot*. I inched up closer, so we were shoulder to shoulder, the smell of leaves and tobacco heavy in my nose. I slowly put my lips there, and supposed I was to move away quick, sayin' how disgustin' it was to kiss a boy, but I didn'. I kept my lips there, pressed harder, feelin' the fullness of his lips, the thrill of it. Kept kissin', mouths closed, touched his cheek with my fingers, felt the swell in my britches. Then, he giggled at me, showin' his beautiful smile, a gap between the front teeth, got up and ran off. I lay back, my fingers to my lips, my member hard, feelin' happy.

I only saw Peter one more time after that. They were draggin' him off, a posse of whites. I recognized a few of 'em, cried out when I saw him, knew he was gonna be dead. Never did learn why, but heard he was strung up. Can you imagine it? The only kiss I got was from those lips, lips that must've cried out for mercy, and no reason given?

Sixteen years later, I finally got to kiss again, this time a white man! Months after, we were holdin' each other and I said *I been waitin' a long time, Jack. Last boy I kissed got killed, so I*

stopped thinkin' 'bout... 'bout love. Just figured I was gonna settle down with a girl some day, have babies, forget 'bout all this...

Told him then about Peter, though there wasn't much to tell, the dare, the taste of him, the giggles... then, he was gone. *I'm sorry about Peter, real sorry, Jeremiah... and I'm here now, holding you.* I felt the big comfort of this moment. *Let's just be enjoying that for now,* Jack said. *You sure?* I asked. *I'm only sure of my love for you, Jeremiah. That's the only thing I'm sure of.*

He had me turn over on my side, facin' the wall. I again noticed the cracks on the yellowed plaster, the brown lines runnin' down where rain must've let in. He began kissin' me then, gently kissin' all the scars that crisscrossed my back; kissed twice, three times the most severe ones up by my neck. Then, I thought this: to go from such horror, the horror of being whipped, to the gentleness of now, in the exact same places on my body... well that was 'bout the best thing I could ever think of. To feel heaven, after all that hell. *Thank you, Jack. I love you, too.*

After we made love, those times were the worst; we were supposed to whisper sweet nothin's to each other, tell each other silly things that we think about, or what we dream to do with our lives. *I wish we could Jeremiah, but you being found here in the morning would be the death of both of us.*

I had to go back to the shack each time, be alone, no longer feelin' the warmth of him.

missus anne

When I come 'round to school the next day, I was burstin'! Couldn' wait to show the teacher what I put down, how much learnin' I did. *This is quite impressive, Missus Anne*—she call me Missus!—and we set out to do the rest of 'em letters, though they got harder somehow. I couldn' focus like I did the day b'fore. Last night had no sleep in it. I toss and turned, cursin' the Lord that made Jeremiah this way. Saw us all dead every time I close my eyes. Did I do somethin' to make him this way? Cuddle him too much when he be a baby? Shield over him when the whip came near? Was I supposed to have him whipped more?

Did only write five letters in my *Anne* copybook K, L, M, N, O. Wrote 'em over and over, had the best time with O. Easy as pie, my hand goin' 'round and 'round, lovin' the loopde loop, wanted to make it on ev'ry surface I come upon. *I was hesitant*, Missus Hoffman said, lookin' down at the paper. *My husband Charles has been ill for more than a year. Doctors aren't sure how long he has. It has been tough to find work. And, well, relations being what they are in this town, I didn't know if I had it in me to teach*

negroes.

She kept writin', lookin' down, *then this morning I lay awake in the bed and noticed I had a feeling that I couldn't immediately place. I was thinking of you and Jeremiah and Debra, the lessons we had before us, and as soon as I began to ready myself, I was feeling a sense of enthusiasm. Imagine that! Enthusiasm to teach negroes.*

I stopped my breath then, closed the copybook, didn't mind that the blueblack ink weren' dry, might smudge all over. *I think we done for the day,* I said as I stood, grabbed for the ink, pen, *Anne. But, we still have most of the hour,* she said with a squeak-like voice, seemed taken aback that I be leavin' her, standin' without askin'.

I am beyond thankful to Mister Jack that he arrange this. It mean the world to me. But, I ain't no charity case for you. I be a woman. And while maybe not all learned like you is, I ain't got a house and a bed and a husband—my husband was stoled from me, right outta bed, his manhood cut off in the middle a the yard, his chil'ren watchin'. Yes ma'am, Debra and Jeremiah watch that happen. And, you feelin' good cause you get to teach us? Feelin' what you call enthus'asm over us? Well, it don' feel good to me. It feel like pity, like you somehow is even better than us than you was b'fore, 'cause now you be doin' charity work...

I couldn' stop the tears from flowin' now. They started when I made mention a Harold, wiped 'em away, but the words jus' kept on comin'. *Debra say there might be 'nother teacher 'round these parts. May be better doin' some learnin' with her.* I turned to go, spilled blueblack on my pinny, which make me mad—mad 'n ugly all at once.

You are so right, Missus Anne. I... I have a lot to learn. I am sorry. It's Charles... Charles is the kind one, he with a huge heart and open mind. I should be the one to die first, not him. He's too good. Should

be here longer, and yes, as I said, I have a lot to learn. It was her that was cryin' now. Oh dear, I have forgotten my handkerchief.

I moved to her, pulled up the corner of my pinny, wiped her tears, giggled a bit. *Why are you laughing at me?* I jus' couldn't help m'self! *Sorry, ma'am. I smudged a bit a blueblack on ya.* She go to the mirror on the wall, leaned in close, seein' the streak marks under her eyes, high up on her cheeks. *Well, aren't I a sight!* We both laughed then, our eyes met. She look away first, smoothed her dress, turned from the mirror, left the ink where it lay. *Practice your letters, Missus Anne. We resume bright and early tomorrow.*

I left, standin' outside in the hall, breathin' full and heavy. In all my years on this blessed earth, never did I speak to a white in this way; never even stood up without askin' permission. Two days a school, and already I be uppity! *And it feel good!* I turn to go out through the kitchen, 'stead walk m'self out the front door, her glass knob fillin' my hand, and I stay there a bit, feelin' the finery of it.

B'fore times, when I was a slave, I never do what they call *linger*. You be beat for lingerin', for touchin', for lettin' your fingers feel the threads in the bedclothes, or placin' your palm on the carved wooden doors. And now? Now I was lettin' the big knowin' through, sayin' '*you ain't no longer a slave.*' I might be again, if the winds turn. But right then? In that moment? *I was free.* Free to learn my letters, linger with the doorknob, touch things.

I started touchin' everything—the paintin's in the hall, findin' the ridges left from the small brush hairs, let my lips touch the coolness, the smoothness of the glass in the paneled doors leadin' to the kitchen, fingerin' the wooden frame,

smellin' the brass hinges. Sat on the steps leadin' upstairs, felt the loops a the carpet in my fingers, bent down to smell it. *Why you not in school? Why you smellin' the carpet, Momma?* Debra had just came in, found me there, bein' strange-like.

I'm lingerin', I said.

White people always tellin' me not to linger, and now I be lingerin'. I wanna linger all day long! Ever feel a glass doorknob? A paintin'? Come 'ere and touch this, Debra! She didn' move. Her eyes took me in. Can only imagine what a sight I be, all bent over smellin' the carpet, but she smiled big, filled her whole face with that one tooth missin'. She take her time comin' to me, bent down on all fours, inhaled deep. *Had no idea it smelled like this, Momma.* Her hands spread wide, took in the feelin' of it. *It smell like winter.*

Debra, is that you out there? called the teacher. Debra turned and walked in the parlor for her lesson, closin' the door behind her. I stayed right where I be, takin' in the hall with my eyes, fingers, palm, nose. Feelin' my bottom restin' on the carpet, wiggled a bit back and forth to feel it good.

And then, I had me a thought: I had nowhere to be, nothin' that needed doin'. No need of hidin' or worryin' 'bout bein' hid. I walked to the kitchen, back down the hall to the front door, walkin' past the parlor, considered goin' upstairs but thought better of it. Went to the back porch and sat m'self down on a rocker, *storm's comin'*, I said to the dog. *Suppose you wanna sit here with me and watch the rain? That sound good to you?* Saw her nose sniff at the air, her eyes findin' mine.

You seen my writin'? I asked, showin' her my name written on the cover. *That be my name, right there.*

jack

The first time I walked in a meeting it was all suspicion. Who among us could be trusted? Who was here to betray our names, what we said, who our families were, and tell it to the impassioned slavers? Being there was a wish of death if we weren't careful, and each of us, those that weren't spies, if there were any among us, were there to fight for what we believed in.

Welcome to the meeting of those who seek the freedom of the oppressed. Though a large man, by any measure even gruff to the eye, his voice was soft and calm, almost a whisper. The rest of us, our eyes darted around the room, half looking at the others, half wanting not to be seen. My name is John S, and those who know me know the rest of my name, those who don't know me, well, you needn't worry. It's okay to be anonymous for now. What we are headed toward is dangerous, and by showing yourselves here tonight, you have already been privy to that. Yet, our gathering is not nearly as dangerous as what our black brothers and sisters face each day...

The rest of the meeting was mostly about the problems we presently faced, the problems we would certainly come to face, and learned of who else sympathized with us. A list of

collaborating businesses was passed around and we were asked to study it, memorize as much as possible. The list would not be posted, *yet hopefully it'll be added to*, said John. *Each meeting is to be in a new location, known only to us and those you can vouch for.* I looked around, studied the faces, knew a smattering of them by name, two others I'd seen but couldn't place.

Sylvie, sitting next to me, would know others. She was, I gathered, nervous, yet she was the first to speak up. *My name is Sylvie, and I needn't be anonymous, Mister John. I am here to do what is right, and I start by sharing my full name.* She drew a breath, *my name is Sylvie Hines, and I am here...* she started to cry, her voice cracked.

As she stood, her hand reached down and I raised myself up next to her, my arm around her waist. *Forgive my cousin, this has been a trying time and we have not had a room to voice our concerns, until now. I am Jack Tadler and we have witnessed the vulgarities, the atrocities, against the negroes, and if we can find one or two friends in this room who share our sympathies, then the risk of being here is worth it.*

Sylvie squeezed my hand then, and I took it as a sign to let her speak. *We have had many sleepless nights and fervent conversations about how to advocate for our brothers and sisters*, she said, *and as I look around this room, I know many of you, and it does my heart good to discover that we are not alone.*

She took in the whole room, looking in the eyes of each person that would meet her. The entire time the room stayed silent; not a shuffle of feet, not a cough. She gave herself near a full two minutes to find the eyes of each that were there. *I've made the acquaintance of a new friend, a woman to be trusted, who helps our negro brothers and sisters move on.* She didn't use the word

escape, though none of us needed her to. *I will not give her name, but she is one of the bravest I've met. Of late, she has begun a railroad of sorts, not one that you are used to, but one of people, people who are linked together, in secret, to help others move on...*

Sylvie continued then, seemingly having gained confidence as she spoke. *You will be asked to create safe havens, if you choose, for those that are on the move. A shed, basement, a place known only to you... to hide, feed, clothe, offer supplies, especially water, 'til a plan can be formulated.* She opened her bag, pulled paper, pen and ink. *I have already signed my name here. I am willing to risk... to risk what's needed to be part of the railroad, and I ask for others to sign it as well. Your name will be held in confidence.*

The room erupted then, whispers no longer held in the room, uproars from men who would not stand for what was being said, afraid of the words she'd spoken. One yelled out, *you mean you expect me to put my life on the line... who in damnation are you? This is treasonous!*

Sylvie stood there, shoulders and back stiff. She stayed that way, me beside her, until the shouting subsided. *Forgive me gentlemen,* she said, and it was then that I noticed there were no other women in the room. *I thought I had come to share in the sympathies with brave men, men who were worn tired of watching fellow humans strung up in the backyards, hung from trees, chained, beaten, dragged by horses through the streets, put in holes for weeks, lying in their own excrement, dying of thirst. Brothers who have been castrated for looking the wrong way on the street. People who have been denied an education, people who...*

The anger found its way to the top of her throat. *You are a sorry bunch of men! I now make it my mission to, instead, find women; women who are braver than you.* She grabbed her bag with both

hands, pushed passed me to leave.

Missus Hines, wait!

The man who spoke rose from the back row. He was older, full of belly and white whiskers, and spoke with an accent I couldn't immediately place; I would later learn he was Irish. *Name's Garrison, ma'am. We've got a cellar, and happy to oblige ya, Missus Hines. Could fit ten, maybe twenty folks if ya have the need. I'm not a young man, if they string me up for doin' what's right, I'll be glad of it.* He went on, gave a list of his provisions, spoke as if he'd just been waiting to open up his place. *We have clothes for both men and women, not for children, I'm sorry to say. My wife is an earnest cook, happy to make pots a' stew, biscuits, sew up leather flasks full a' water. And, Lettie is a nurse, too. She can tend to the sick, if they need tending to.*

Sylvie half ran to him, wrapped him in her arms, sobbed harder than at any point before. *Thank you, thank you! And, do tell me your name again?*

He signed the paper, put down his address, his wife's name, wrote out the provisions. The rest of the room looked on, many feet were shuffled, the underneath of fingernails suddenly in need of cleaning. *My wife, said another, choosing not to stand, told me to do whatever needs doing. 'Don't come back here 'less you got a solution or a project', she told me. So, it seems that me and the missus will be part of the train as well,* he said, clearing his throat more than once.

It is a railroad, corrected Sylvie, handing him the paper.

It went on like that for nearly an hour, names gathered, promises made. Some folks left of course, slipping out the back door, not saying a word. They could turn us in, bring danger to

our homes, but the fire had already been lit, the embers stoked. We were, by now, committed, a name given *The Savannah Abolitionists' Society*. *To be known only by the initials*, declared John. *S.A.S. The word abolition will get you killed.*

Next, I found Sylvie standing on a chair *we shall meet at my home, in two days time, eight o'clock sharp*. A man, quiet until then, raised his hand. *Two days? Why so soon? Best we meet once a week, my opinion*. Sylvie spat back, *we cannot wait another minute! Two days is a long time. I trust you will be there. If not, we shall move on without you. Yet, in my opinion*, she said through clenched teeth, *you will want to be on the right side of history, yes?*

I glided home, my feet barely touching the ground. Had I now found a gathering of men, along with Sylvie, where it was safe to profess my ideals of freedom? My compassion for our fellow brethren? That we could actually do something for others felt like a fire inside of me; an unquenchable fire. How might this change the lives of the many we would likely never meet?

I wanted to kneel in prayer at the thought of it, yet felt unsafe out by the side of the road. Then, thought this: *what if some folks, part of the railroad, were to pass by here, hiding in the shadows in the coming days, afraid of the light, the dark, the sounds and the quiet? What better place to lay a prayer than here?*

I knelt in the dirt, said my prayers. Let the earth hear them, keep them, and ask for blessings for those that were to pass by here. I bent to the earth, kissed her. Felt drunk in the possibility of what was to come.

Thank you, dear cousin, I said aloud, brushed the dirt from my knees and lips as I stood, and walked for home.

sylvie

I now lay awake most of the night, fretting. There are men, white men, who have taken it upon themselves to display their hatred late at night in front yards, using the cross as their symbol of righteousness. *Can you imagine it?* The sacrilege! As if folks weren't scared enough already, now we have this to see out our windows. Is there always to be this hatred toward another? This is the most inhumane of circumstances, the very worst time to be alive. I am grateful, though, to *The Republic* for allowing letters to be published anonymously, affording one the chance to speak honestly of the horrors that befall us.

Last Saturday, my letter was printed and has caused a mild uproar, which, I daresay, was my intended response. How else are we to change the course of history if not by shining light on the darkness, and beg for bold reversals of positions? Why, even if only one woman or man allows for a change of heart, then I vow a continuation of my campaign.

This week's letter, to be mailed tomorrow, reads in part:

We are all God's children, and you will be judged by your actions! Let us not condone what our neighbors try in earnest to convince us of. Let us rise above it, force slavery to be part of the past, a shameful, sorrowful part of our Southern past. Be open, fellow Georgians, to finding your ways old, outdated. Have you never thought to ask yourselves why their eyes are crying out, while you beat upon their backs, their heads, cut off fingers, hands, limbs...?

I stopped short of naming other ways to harm another, thought perhaps I would be giving ideas to the slavers, ways to harm and maim. But what of it? Were my words, printed in a small Southern newspaper with a dire readership, proposing to change minds?

Then, in my grief, I asked the opposite: could a slaver's words, regardless of where they were written or spoken, regardless of the eloquence, ever convince me that it is right to enslave another human being? Never. Not in this lifetime, and God-granting, not in the next. Then, how am I to suppose that my words will change, when their hearts are already set in stone?

I have, as of late, an idea that may bring harm. I shall approach the Reverend Francis of Saint John the Baptist church and ask to be allowed to address his congregation. This will surely turn heads. I feel it is my duty to do something, to take action in spite of myself.

You would join me if you were here, would you not?

missus lee hoffman

I am now of a mind slightly different than before. Yes, there was a time, months, truthfully years, when I found the negro to be unneeding of education, believed them to be unworthy of learning. Why bother? What is it they need to know to pull cotton from the stem, wash waste from the bedpan? There is not much learning needed to move God's soil from one part of the acreage to another. The knowing of letters surely is not needed for this toil, yes? Comments owing to the unnecessariness of this have been thrown about for years in my circles. *Keep them in their place, once and for all* has been heard so often—it practically did not need to be said further. We knew it, and let it be the truth. Why not? What harm would befall us for having them kept ignorant?

And then, out of financial desperation, surely no fault of my own, I had cause for teaching not one, but three! The negro woman, Anne, perhaps not much older than myself, where I saw a fire in her I had not witnessed in another, white nor negro. I could practically warm my hands, feel the heat as I sat across from her. I am not embarrassed to say that I

previously had not the occasion to find myself in the company of a seated, *seated!* negro before and I, dare I say, learned that she, this spirited black, had a yearning for knowledge I had not seen in all the students I had the occasion to teach previously. She was the first, and it changed me.

She changed me.

As did her daughter, Debra, with so much fire in her, as well, and not afraid to let her passion come through. *They* changed me. So much so that the following occurred:

We had, again through no fault of my own doing, fallen out of graces with society, but I trudged back, begged for invitations, let it be known that, while my beloved was incapable of attending social gatherings, I would be most delighted. There was likely a neediness in my voice that I could not cover. Then, by the grace of God, a card arrived. And I went.

I did not wear my best dress; felt it would behoove me to wear something closer to my station—a barely employed teacher whose sickly husband was carted around the house on the back of a negro. And yes, there is the off-chance that those in attendance did not know, nor care, that I was working outside the home. I could not very well speak of my charges to anyone other than Charles, so those in town knew not of my burdens. And, so I went, my head high, my spirits shaking like a chicken.

Oh, I could sense the whispers, the laced fans brought up not but an hour into the gathering, when talk of slavery was broached. My ears pricked with heat, thought it best to keep my silence. And I did. For an entire five minutes.

You know they have not the intelligence, certainly not the manners, of any of us. Best to keep 'em in a pen, bring 'em out when the crops need tendin'. Nothing more than that. He was a squat man, his jacket open, revealing a tweed vest pulled tightly across his engrossed stomach; lips the color of nicotine, a pipe hung between them, the stench of tobacco surrounded him. *Pardon me, what did you say your name was?* I asked.

His eyes gave him away at once, he mistook me for a lady with a certain flirtation in mind. He reached to kiss my hand. *Claiborne, William Claiborne. We have not had the pleasure.* His pale, freckled hand held there between us, taking up space. I could feel the eyes of his gentlemen friends watching, waiting for me to respond in a ladylike fashion. I did not oblige. Instead, words fell from my lips that I had not intended, and found myself trembling when they spilled forth. *At what point did you decide what is best for the negro, Mister Claiborne? And, is it with those same lips that you spew this vile vitriol that you say your prayers on Sunday morning?*

His jaw clenched. With immediacy, mixed with a moment's regret, I had let know I was not a friend, did not share in their atrocious ideas; likely lost every ally I may have had in the room as well, fragile as those acquaintances might have been.

This outburst had not been my plan! Falsely arrived with a small hope of procuring a loan, some monies to tide us over. For there was more wealth in this parlor than in all the banks this side of the river. Yet, clearly, no one would now lend to a sympathizer, a down-trodden teacher with a sickly husband and a heart for negroes!

We were on our own now. I took my leave, called not for

a carriage but walked the entire way, the air cold against my skin and I cared not. I had fire, *Annefire*, and that kept me warm. The tremors of a chicken long gone.

I arrived home to find Charles in good spirits. He was sitting up at the table, pen in hand. *You're home early*, he said, and looked at me with a spark. *Had you missed me too much?* I bent to kiss him on the head, wrapped him in my arms from behind. *How did you know? All send their love to you and wishes for a quick recovery.*

He studied me as I sat beside him, fingering the letters he was writing. *What have you done, or said, Lee?* He looked at me askew. *Me? Why must you think I have said or done anything? Because I know you, and I know when I share the room with a devilish girl!* He bent toward me and pulled me close. We kissed. *I need not tell you, Charles, that these are troubling times. I know not what causes one to have such hatred for another. Is it always to be this way? Have you ever thought of...*

He watched as I stopped midway, dared not finish. I was set to propose that we leave the dreaded South, venture abroad, find our way to England perhaps, but... it would pain him to hear such talk, knowing we were prevented by ill health and worsening resources. I switched course. *Have you ever thought of writing your stories? You are gifted with the pen, m'dear. I expect there is more than one publisher this side of the Mississippi who would find your work most appealing. I have said this before, you will recall.*

He adjusted in the chair with some difficulty. *It is fortuitous that you ask this tonight, my love. It was only this morning, being carried about, that I thought to write a children's story.* The pen in his hand was brought to his bottom lip, rested there for a bit.

I know not much more than the title, but I daresay I could come up with something... riotous. Not set for public approval, perhaps, but might give me a moment's legacy, which would not be the worst thing. It would do me good to have a project. He paused at the thought of it. I could see it amused him, spirited him, and I was glad of it. *A title you say. What do you have?* There was a glint in his eye. *'On the Back of a Negro.'*

The air around the table became heavy, cold. Such a theme would be, in his word, riotous. We knew, without need of mentioning, that this was not the time nor the land to give story to the negro. And, a children's book at that? They would not have it! Fires would be found at our doorstep, mud slung at our backs if we dared step in the street, the park. My hand went to my neck. I thought to remove it quickly, yet allowed it to stay, for the comfort it brought me.

We sat in silence. I gathered at once that a pseudonym might be favored, keep us safe from the Claibornes of the world. Yet, Charles' mention of a legacy stood in the room with us. He would be deceased before long; we knew it even if we failed at the mention of it. It would, therefore, by association, become my legacy. I would never be let near a child again. Certainly not a white child.

Who do you have in mind for illustrations, my love? Might I suggest someone? I told him of Debra's hand, how she made marks on the paper during our lessons, drawing this and that, a restlessness upon her. Had took to commenting on it to her, and she turned the paper toward me. The likeness of her brother was on the page, a broad smile, eyes more lively than life. Her hand brought forth a realism so remarkable, it was as if he were there in the room with us. *Shall I invite her? You could*

sit here at this very table, tell her your plans. See if there's interest? He paused to consider it for a moment. *I would not, m'dear. The danger it would bring to our door...*

Charles, when you die... I stopped to swallow hard; wished for a glass of water but continued. *I will be wishing the same for myself. I will not be long in this world without you. Why not leave a legacy?* There was quiet then. This was the first mention of death between us, and it rang heavy, and true. *You will enjoy her company; she is as feisty as you are. It could do you both good, and will get you out of my hair.*

I smiled, rose to kiss him, again felt the dryness of my lips. *Are you as thirsty as I? Give me a minute.* I walked toward the kitchen cupboard and was struck by this evening's fires. What I had said to Claiborne, overheard by countless others, flying out the door without a carriage waiting, and now this? An offer to bring Debra into our home and... what? Illustrate an ill-boding children's book with my beloved? It is no wonder I am of thirst!

The knock on the front door was louder than I had intended. The stillness of the Sunday morning disturbed by my hand. *We have class this mornin'?* *Did I forget, ma'am?* Debra stood before me, the screen door and darkened hall behind her, mostly shielded her face from view. I apologized for the early hour, told her that I wished to have a conversation. As we sat on the veranda, I again commented on her fine drawings, her skilled hand. Went on and on about Charles' health, the danger of writing the book, what it might bring to our doorstep. I over talked; I am sure.

Does he have a say in this? she asked. *Charles? Well of course. I have said he is writing it.* Her expression shifted. *Not Mister Hoffman. Elijah. Does he have a say?* I paused. Hadn't even considered it. *Well, I do not know. The project has yet to begin. But, my Charles is quite close to Elijah, depends upon him. I hear them laughing when I am not around...*

It occurred to me then, even as I was speaking, that my presence seemed to bring a heaviness into our home. Charles and Elijah tended to silence their words when I entered a room, all joviality evaporating. Previously, I had not cared, there was much to be attended to. And, I did not wish for my words to fall upon the ears of a negro, of course. Yet, now, as I considered Charles' passing, I wished to give more generosity of spirit, to lend what I might to the sustainability of our home. Seemingly, Elijah was bringing forth what I could not.

Thank you, Debra. Yes. The story certainly includes him, and of course his permission should be sought. I will speak to Charles about it. Could you come 'round? Perhaps after lessons tomorrow? And then, this thought turned toward me: if I were to finish the lesson and invite her 'round, would she expect to walk along with me? Would I demand of her to walk a meter behind? To not speak? To enter through the back door?

Suddenly, this became too complicated, and I felt wary at the considerations before me. *Or we could also...* I had not thought of an alternative solution, had only surmised that she could meet with Charles at our home; had not planned beyond that. There were ramifications to consider, I now realized. The air had once again, not for the last time, become burdened. *Or in the evening, perhaps? Charles has a spark of energy in the evenings, I lied. Shall we say five o'clock?*

At the strike of five, there was a knock at the back door. I was already standing near it, jumped at the sound. She stood there with her hands empty, and bloodied. *I had the sketch pad, paints, brushes. White folks saw 'em and took 'em from me, pushed me to the ground, shouted 'I shouldn' be touchin' supplies I likely stoled from a white.'* Said somethin' 'bout not havin' the law on my side and... *I's sorry to be late, ma'am.* She did not seem moved by this latest harassment; to the contrary, she seemed to almost expect it. *You need tea, and a cloth. Please, come in, Debra.*

She stood just inside the kitchen, holding her hands, her mother's fire evident just under the surface. *We have plenty of paper, charcoal. I am sorry for your trouble.* Debra stood by calmly. *I's all right. I's lookin' forward to meetin' Mister Hoffman.*

I brought her in, told Charles of the afternoon's troubles. *I will bring the tea in a moment.* She sat in the same chair where I had been the evening before, conspiring with Charles. *I am sorry you had trouble, Miss Debra,* Charles said in earnest. *And yet, if we continue with this project, I'm afraid there will likely be more of it to come your way.* She took the cloth, wiped her hands with what seemed all the time in the world. *Mister Hoffman, I been raped, my baby kicked from my womb right before a tooth was robbed from my mouth. I seen my Daddy naked and murdered in the street. I been sold, starved, and nearly drowned. And you believe a book's gonna to scare me? A book?*

In the kitchen, I reached for one of the cups with a red dot underneath, the ones to be used by Elijah, to bring the tea to Debra. Thought twice about it, then picked up a cup from our own cupboard, filled it for her. Debra took the tea from my hand, allowed the cloth on the table. I followed her eyes to the corner, where Elijah stood. She rose and went to him, taking a

liberty I was neither used to nor likened to put a stop to. *Mister Elijah? Your opinion's important here, ain't it, Mister Hoffman? The book be 'bout him as well.*

Charles' eyes found mine and I saw him smile, broad and confident. *Leave us to it, will you m'dear? Elijah, have a seat.*

jeremiah

One night I fell asleep, even though I promised myself I wouldn't. When I heard noises of the outside world waking up, I let myself stir, my eyes open, and saw Jack next to me, his chest rising ever so slight, just' breathin'. I went to move, to slip out of bed before someone come find us, to go back to the shack. *Stay here*, he mumbled. *Jack, I fell asleep, I need to go back*. He pulled me back toward him. *Stay here. I want nothing more than to have you here. I know, but it's dangerous*, I whispered. *Five more minutes?* he said, rollin' over, findin' sleep again.

I got up, put on my pants, went downstairs to make coffee. As I stood there waitin' for the boil, lookin' at the sun peekin' through the sky, I wrapped myself in my own arms, feelin' the beauty of the mornin'. *This is what love feels like. Yes, indeed, this is what love feels like, Cracker*. And, I danced a little, let the joy soak in. And then, the next breath, this flashed—what if I am a disappointment? What if he gets tired of me and wants someone different, someone better, someone with money? Someone white?

I stopped breathin' for a minute, left my coffee on the table, opened the back door and went out, walked to the shack. Didn't go back to the house for the rest of the week. *Guess love don't always feel good, Cracker. Don't always feel good.*

That same night, as I laid awake in the soft bed, itchin' imaginary bugs, I pictured Jack in my mind at a fancy party, clinkin' glasses with his beau, the two of 'em, no scars on their backs, no people starin' at 'em for being off color. The two of 'em standin', or sittin' on a velvet sofa, legs draped over the other, talkin' of the fine weather, the slave trade *I knew a slave once, he weren't a bad fellow.* Then the conversation turned to runaways, brandin', the best way to lengthen a sack of oats so to feed more slaves, longer, cheaper.

I couldn't stop the thoughts! Could see the color of the new beau's eyes, the silver of his buttons, the shine of his shoes. Shoes that had never stepped foot in a field. All of it made me sick, to think that I could be up and gone tomorrow. I cried into the pillow, let all the tears and hurt and fear and sadness soak through me. He don't really love me, this just fun for him, fuckin' a nigger is sport for him. I'm never goin' to no cocktail party, a town meetin'. Best I stay here, keep to myself, lay low, lower than low, and let him find love, love at his level. *That's the way it should be,* I sobbed. *I ain't nothin' but a nigger.*

Jack noticed, of course. He noticed most things about me. Noticed if I stubbed my toe and walk funny, noticed if I was quiet, noticed if my neck hurt or I only drank half my coffee. Stayin' away from the house for a week? Yes, of course he noticed that.

What did I do wrong, Jeremiah? Did I hurt you in some way?
We were sittin' under a tree, peelin' green apples to make a pie

in the afternoon. *You seem as if you are a hundred miles from here, which is fine. I just want to assure myself that I am not the cause of your discomfort.*

I sat quiet for a long time, tryin' to figure how much I was willin' to fess up. *It seems silly to say aloud.* I focused my attention on the apple, noticin' the colors of it, the bruisin' on one side. I breathed a bit and loved him more for lettin' things be, not pryin'. He let us both sit there in the silence, hearin' the metal scrape against the skin of the fruit, the peels landin' in the bucket. *I get jealous of your other beau, the one that is white, with means, who you talk to about your slaves...*

He didn't rush to laugh at my insecurities, just kept peelin', shifted his weight against the hard earth. Breathed. *I can see why you are jealous of him. His big arms and wallet, his embroidered carriage, his gold rings on every finger.* I looked up quick at him, caught his eye for the first time since I left the bed. Then, he giggled, poked me under the arm, made me flinch, and he smiled. *The part you don't see of him is the bad breath, the tantrums, the smelly shoes and the way he bites his food like an orangutan.*

He laughed, and I noticed how his laugh was my newest favorite sound on Earth. *So, you don't want another beau then? I asked, my voice breakin' a little. I only want one, Jeremiah. You are enough to fill all my days upon this Earth.*

But... if you had a white... He interrupted me, which he never did, but this time I suppose I deserved it. *If I had a white, then he wouldn't be you. It is not a color I'm after, it is a person... and there is but one Jeremiah on this Earth, and he is sitting right here beside me, beautifully peeling apples, apples for a pie that we are gonna bake together. And I will feed him most of it 'cause I know of his love for pie.*

And that is more than enough for me. He held up the apple he was peelin', held it so I could take a bite. I love you with every cell in my body, Jeremiah.

I swear I never looked at another green apple in the same way again.

missus anne

When I start to learnin' my letters, I knowed an entire world gonna open up to me. People who could read, includin' my Jeremiah, had real possibilities. I didn'. What I had was what folks call strikes, or somethin' like that; harmful things that might keep me down all a my life. I's colored. I's a woman. I's old. I's unlearned. Of these problems, there be but one that I can change, though it be against the law.

I don' know if you can begin to picture it—livin' in a world with words that be silent, unknown. A world a books, pages and pages that look like black chicken scratchin's on a white page. Do you know of it? The black and white marks 'tween hard covers, held secret?

Once, when cleanin' at the Clarks as a house girl, I stoled away a book. Pammy was due with Clark's child and couldn' do the work; they pull me in from the field, let me clean their linens, scrape their plates, wash out their chamber pots.

After two days they tell me to clean the parlor, a room

I never had cause to step in b'fore, and never seen the likes of; filled with large, heavy books with words and pictures, small ones with hand-written curves fillin' the white. I removed all of 'em, drew the cloth over their sides, cleaned under, put 'em back. Spent most a the day in there and, jus' before leavin', flashed an idea: would they miss one? *To hell*, I remember sayin' aloud, and went 'round to the left, to where I started, and slipped a small book in my underpants.

Never stolen nothin' b'fore or since, not even when my chil'ren was nearly starved, and here I be, stealin' somethin' I couldn' read or understand. Somethin' I couldn' eat, nor use toward my freedom. Somethin' I couldn' even share with Miss Sage, the knowledge of it, the theft of it, would land too heavy.

I kept it under my pallet, would reach under there as I lay fallin' asleep, feel the corners, the ease a the pages openin' to my fingers, like a baby bird openin' her beak, imaginin' what the story might'a been. Many flashed through my mind, half dreamin' stories in the night. Months of this 'til I settled on a favorite: I set my mind to believin' that the lil' book be a story of a colored girl named Nellie, sayin' goodbye to all she know, the familiar things, and set off with a satchel of gold coins and a copybook.

In my imaginary story, Nellie always met with kind people, slept in soft beds, wrote love letters to her sister Krystal, and *felt safe*. This how I fell asleep. Livin' through the imagined life a Nellie girl; her huge joy, watchin' her freedom in my head, seein' the world through her eyes, smiled at her mischief, loved her as I would one a my own. Imagined further the title a the book, could taste it on my lips. Had a habit of wettin' my lips to prepare m'self right b'fore speakin' it aloud.

Nellie Lives.

What ya sayin', Momma? Debra say in her slumber. Jus' my prayers, baby girl. Now, you go on to sleep.

Never did learn what book I took, never read a word of it. But didn' get caught neither, so there's that. And, that book? She still might be layin' there, far as I know, happy to be released from the over-stuffed shelves, the heavy room, thick with dust and worry. That how I like to think 'bout her anyways, happy and released.

And now, not but a few weeks later, I have my *Anne*, a book with my own letters, by my own hand, somethin' I carry about, in no need of hidin'. Sleep with her beside me in the bed, enjoyin' the flutterin' of her pages between my fingers any time day or night. *Momma loves that book more than she loves me*, Cracker said more'n once.

They all like to make fun a me, how I carry her 'bout the place, sleep with her beside my pillow, kiss her g'night. I don' bother to tell 'em 'bout that other book, all those years ago. And now? A book given to me out in the open, by a white man? Her whiteness filled with my blackness, the ink letters catchin' the light when I hold her a certain way? That kind a love keep me awake at night, her growin' list a new words fillin' the page—

Possible.

Freedom.

Nellie.

I see 'em wrote down together, the curves, loops, the wrinkle that mark the page where spittle happen one time

when I look down so long, it dribble right outta my lips, and a panic set in. Then a joy that the wetness didn' stain the letters, the spit Landin' down in the lower corner. Held *Anne* in my arms, roastin' in the sun, sweat drippin' on my neck, the back a my knees, held her to the light 'til she dried completely.

Sorry, I whispered. Sorry I wet you. I ain't lettin' that happen again.

jeremiah

One day the four of us, Jack, Momma, Debra and myself, took off, found a small creek to the south, no one 'round far as we could tell. *If anyone comes*, Jack said in a jokin' way, *tell 'em we're searching for opossum*. None of us knew what the heck that meant, includin' Jack, but he figure we could confuse folks long 'nough to scramble off. Lucky for us, no one came, instead spent the day in the small swirls of water, the tiny waterfalls makin' music as it tumbled over the rocks, the four of us waded in, hangin' on to the low branches to stop us from fallin', the rocks slippery under our feet.

The hot of the day mixed with the cold of the water made me dizzy happy—standin' there, seein' Momma, Debra and Jack. I let myself fall back, my whole body drowned by the cool wet, freezin' my skin head to toe. I came up with a yelp, not too loud 'cause I didn't know who was 'round to hear. I longed to pull all of this in—the sun and water, the smoothness of the rocks, green with time, the smiles of those I love dearest. I cupped my hands, filled 'em with water over and over, splashed my head, face, drank in the fullness of the afternoon.

Later, lyin' on the bank, I said *Okay, now I can die. What ya be talkin' 'bout, Cracker?* Debra said, actin' all worried like. *I feel so happy, might not ever be this happy again. So, if God wanna take me now, fine by me.*

My own fingers caressin' my chest back and forth, lazy-like, my elbows restin' softly on the sand, the sun warmin' me, my ears filled up with the water music. *I am happy enough now, no need for nothin' more.* Momma pitched in *you sure 'bout that, Cracker? 'Cause I brung corn muffins, blueberries, and sweet tea. You sure you can' be no happier, son? Okay, Momma. Tempt me.*

And for no reason at all, we started laughin' like we had no cares in the world; ain't never been happy like that before.

missus anne

I couldn' look at the moss hangin' from the trees. They say that each bit a moss be a symbol for all the negroes that be hangin'. One time, I look up to try and count her grayish hair fillin' the trees in such a way, thousands a pieces floatin' above the street, the parks, the bend by the river. Lookin' up, countin' and countin', and... I got hit right in the chest. A powerful hit, jus below my bosoms. Catchin' my breath, my eyes fell on a white, standin' off to the side, his cane in mid-air. And, then... he spit on me. Jus' like that. *What're you looking at? Don't you know you're supposed to look down at the ground when you out here? These trees be off limits to your nigger eyes. Now git!*

My hand went to my chest then, and I did what I ain't s'pposed to do, what they tell ya not to do. I cried. Heavy wet tears fell down my cheeks. *It makes you look weak*, my people say, my Daddy included. He never once cried, not a day in his life. *I don' cry front a the whites*, he use to say. *Makes 'em think they won*. Daddy was the strongest man I knowed, skin the color a caramel, soft like talc, 'cept where there was scars, which was most a him.

Whites use to make a game of seein' which of 'em could make Daddy cry, at least wince. But he showed 'em the strength of a black man be far more than any white. He jus' stare straight ahead when they were beatin' him; cut off his finger once jus' for game, and still, never made a wince.

But, me? One little ol' cane hit me in the chest in the middle a Ellis Park, and the tears start flowin'. It pained me more when I realized that my tears, from my very self, was mixin' with the spit a this white. How that be? I didn' have no cloth to wipe my face; not wearin' a pinny, didn't wanna wipe on my dress.

I went over to the grass, bent down to the early mornin' dew. Could feel his eyes on me, watchin' every move. All I was doin' was wipin' his spit, my tears, into the earth. That be too much for him. He come up behind me, kick me in the stomach. *Your nigger self is dirtyin' the fine Savannah soil. Get on home or else I put you in a pen.*

Nearly every corner a the city held a pen for captured slaves, could hear 'em moanin', cryin' out night and day. *Blessed be their spirits*, I prayed every time I pass one. *I ain't 'bout to be penned today, or any day*, I said to m'self and hurried on home.

The red clay from the road found its way to my face, which was now streaked, so they all seen me the minute I stepped in the kitchen, achin' for a glass a water, a piece a sour. Thought I might be alone, but they was all there; Debra, Jeremiah, Mister Jack, Miss Sylvie. Like some welcomin' committee that was not planned, but found 'em gathered jus' the same. Odd that I didn' hear their voices, must'a came in while they was havin' a quiet moment, perhaps their mouths filled up with cornbread or some such thing. I opened the back

screen door, and all ‘em be sittin’ there, facin’ me.

Oh, Lord, I felt the shame race through me, fell to the kitchen floor, tears as big as pancakes. They start askin’ what happen, and it be Jeremiah that had ‘em shushed. *Give her a moment; she is safe now. No need crowdin’ around, makin’ her spill her story. Give her a minute.* It was him, too, that found me a cloth, dipped it in a basin of water, put it in my hand. *I know I ain’t s’posed to cry in front of ‘em, but the wind got kicked outta me. And I...*

I took the cloth to my face, the back a my neck, wiped slowly. Slower than needed, but slow just the same. *I not be expectin’ that this mornin’.* *I be lookin’ up at the trees and a white tell me...* That’s when my shoulders start shakin’, the breath harder to catch; was gaspin’, fightin’ for the calm, and couldn’ find it. Let m’self fall in the nearest arms, which happen to be Miss Sylvie. I jus’ stayed there, soakin’ in her comfort. I was all tore up for the day, and it weren’ even mid-mornin’. Already ruined.

It weren’ long after that I got me an idea, one that scare me more than any other idea I had in my life b’fore. I wanted to gather; to have negroes gather together, share ideas ‘bout how to stay safe in the streets. *You mean you wanna have a resistance?* It was a look a shock on my Jeremiah’s face when I whisper the idea to him.

We was both in the barn; I already make sure we was alone. *I cannot again live what happen last week, and though there be danger in front a me, I wanna find a way to gather up...* I knew I shoulda been scared at the thought of it, to even hear the word *resistance* fall from his lips, but I couldn’ be spit on again and let it stay there, stainin’ my spirit. *And no, I ain’t gonna ask Missus Hoffman how to write resistance, don’ you worry,* I told him, a tiny smile on the corners a my mouth.

Once I tasted the possibility a startin' somethin', I couldn' put it down, like a piece a chicken fat worked in b'tween my teeth, my tongue findin' it over and over, all day long. The word kept findin' its way to my mind. I be out on the land, jus' takin' in the day, a dog on my lap, scratchin' her head, and the word would fall in my head. I jus' as soon put it out—cause this weren' only 'bout me. Everyone I lived with, includin' the dog at the end a my hand, would be in danger. *Got an uppity negro on your land? We teach her, and you!* I could hear 'em now. See 'em circlin' the house, guns in one hand, a noose in the other. And for what? To try and fight back? Now, how we s'posed to do that? Unarmed, uneducated, ungathered? We couldn' write nothin' down, couldn' read, couldn' leave a clue. Could only spread a resistance through story, whispered from one ear to the next.

The part I wanted told again and again: *Missus Anne, over at the Tadler's*. I wanted 'em, whoever be tellin' the story or listenin' to the story, wanted 'em to know where they could come, find a haven a sorts, as Jeremiah had said.

First, I needed to tell Mister Jack, gain his permission. I found 'em in the parlor, where I had my lessons. The shaft a sunlight fell deep into the room, the dust findin' its way in the air, which smelled heavy like always. He bid me come in when I knock on the open door, but I stood outside, suddenly frozen in place, my feet unable to move. He take his time with me, never rush me, never shame me for bein' slow, not 'fraid I was wastin' his time.

I stood there, recallin' that once, at the Clarks', I be outside the dinin' room, waitin' for 'em to say they was finish so I could clean the dishes. We use to waitin', all my life waitin'

for one thing or ‘nother. One a the guests, I think he be called Massa Lauer, he come in behind me, and couldn’ fit in the doorway. He push me hard from behind—seems whites was always pushin’ on me—and I fell right in the room, on all fours, the servin’ tray crashin’ to the floor.

Your nigger was blocking the entry. Guess she won’t be doin’ that again, huh? He laughed, went in and sat down with a huff, then looked over my way. *I am finished, and you can clean this now. You need me to train your niggers, Kyle? You know I wrote a handbook, ‘The Care and Punishment of the Slave’. You desire me to bring you a copy?* He say it like it be a joke, somethin’ personal between the two, and Clark agreed, sayin’ he *would be most appreciative of the handbook, thank you.* I try to imagine what the likes of Lauer would put in a book, shovin’ an old lady down in the middle a dinner. That be in his book?

All this come floodin’ back as I stood outside Mister Jack’s parlor, cautious to go on in. I felt small in that room, wantin’ badly to sweep *resistance* under the rug, tangle it in the cobwebs. *What do you need, Missus Anne?* I forced a smile, thinkin’ it might help ease the conversation. *You needin’ anythin’, Mister Jack? Somethin’ I can get you?*

I lost my nerve, couldn’ say nothin’ about gatherin’, helpin’ the cause. Who was I? I was nearin’ the end of my days, had spent all of ‘em ‘cept these past few months with my shoulders bent, my eyes down at the ground, never sayin’ more than a whispered *yes massa, no massa.* And, here I be, thinkin’ I goin’ to be... what? Helpin’ the negroes? Me, barely able to thread a needle, pained when bendin’ over to put dirt in the dustbin? Strained when it came time to cut the melon or lift a tray?

While I was standin' in the doorway, I look down at my hands, the coarseness of 'em, the swellin' that never gone down after years a pickin', scrubbin', wipin'. They looked like the hands of an old man, hands that been runned over by a cart, or worse. Maybe someone leadin' a resistance need to have fine hands? Hands that could write. Hands that didn' carry the shame a toil and hard work?

Missus Anne? You all right? You need something? His voice make me come back to m'self. *Nothin', nothin' at all. I was jus' checkin' on you, is all, Mister Jack.* He sat still for a bit, not sayin' or doin' nothin'. *Come on in and sit,* he finally said, motionin' to the sofa across. Felt like the longest road from the doorway, scared I couldn' make it all the way. When I did, I sat only on the very edge, didn' want to appear too comfortable, take up too much room. And then, he give me a gift he given me b'fore, but this time I felt it all the way inside a m'self, and it cause me to smile again, to enjoy bein' there, in the room alone with him.

He sat real quiet-like, patient. That was the gift.

I never shared quiet with a white. There always be the yellin', the cursin', the shamin'. But, Mister Jack, he allowed us the quiet, and instead a talkin' 'bout gatherin' up with other negroes, I changed course, talked a this 'stead: *I never known Jeremiah to be different in that way. I s'ppose if I paid better attention I might a noticed. He never have too many friends; kept to his'self mostly. 'Course it was hard for him, hard for all of us to be slaved, but he seem to take it harder, riskin' to learn from Miss Sage, knowin' he could be killed for it. I s'ppose he wanna learn his letters more than anythin'.*

I jus' sat m'self there, not sayin' nothin' more. Had no sense to know why I was sayin' any a this, sharin' Jeremiah's

story in front a Mister Jack; didn' see a way out now. *You can't imagine a mother's love; the bigness of it. All I ever dream of, be to have the best for my chil'ren, but never could. I give him the curse... I done my best not to cry then, cried 'nough these past days. I gave 'em slavery. White rules say that when the mother be slaved, the chil'ren be that way, too. So, I gave him that. Worst thing in the world. Then, when he runned, there be no way of knowin' if he be alive or dead. By the grace a God we all ended up here, alive, eatin' real food, sleepin' in a real bed...*

There didn' seem to be much more to say; I said a lot a words already. I turned m'self 'round, lookin' out the window, saw that lazy dog in the shade, a small breeze movin' the tree branches. *If you love him as you say you do*, I added, still lookin' out, *I thank you for it.*

I got m'self up, moved to him, reached out my hand. *We all love you for what you done for us, Mister Jack. Thank you for lovin' my Jeremiah.* He took my hand, and 'stead a shakin' it like we had a deal, he kissed it. Kissed my hand! We held together like that for a minute, then I backed away. The room was gettin' smaller.

Is this why you came in, Missus Anne? To speak of Jeremiah? Again, the silence. *It be too big*, I said, lookin' down at the carpet, noticin' the blue patches mixed with the red, and if I squinted, could almost make out a face in it. *It's jus' that...* I fell into a heap on the face-filled carpet, felt my legs crumple beneath me. Damn! I ain't never gonna start no resistance! I couldn' even stand on my own two legs, couldn' finish a sentence b'fore the water fell from my cheeks. How I think I could... *what?* Lead some resistance?

I rolled to my knees, pushed m'self to standin' and runned off to the yard, caught my breath, fell into thinkin' that

this be what happen to people; that when they wanna do somethin' hard, it always seem near impossible. They wanna run from it, tear off outta the room, say *no thank you, never mind, pick somebody else!*

I don' know where all this come from, but these ideas held me so tight I thought to believe 'em; had to believe 'em. Then I thought a her. Did I think she never fell down, crumpled on her own legs, sayin' *no thank you, not me, pick someone else, I'm busy cuttin' potatoes?* Right then I looked to the sky and started prayin' to her, aloud, not whispered. I prayed to Missus Harriet to give me an ounce a strength.

Standin' there in the yard, I didn' need no bushels a strength, jus' a bit, jus' 'nough to open my mouth, spread the word, start. That be it, I jus' be needin' the strength to start. That be how Missus Tubman must'a done it, right? Puttin' one shaky foot in front a the other, over and over again. I coulda swore I heard her answerin' me, jus' as if she was right there, beside me.

Just start, she said.

I knocked on the door again, beggin' his pardon, told him *yes, there be somethin' else I wanna say. Missus Harriet, she help people, negro people. You know 'bout that?* Mister Jack turned over the paper he was readin', showed it to me. *That's her right here. Her face is on the cover of the paper nearly every day. What do you know of her?*

Got m'self a little closer to see her face. *I only heard stories. Never seen her.* He cleared the table, laid the newspaper

out. *Come here.* Grabbed for a pair of scissors from somewhere nearby. *You are welcome to her photo. Have it as a keepsake. Missus Tubman is beloved by many, feared by many more, hunted by thousands. And yet, she continues. What did you want to say about her?*

My finger touched the grey image, outlinin' her cheek, soft as pie. Wondered at the words that were all 'round her. How would I ever learn 'em? *You know what we could do, Missus Anne?* His voice sounded playful, like a ten-year-old boy with a secret. *We could light a fire, have some sherry, and I shall read to you all about her.* He turned and motioned to a stack a newspapers. *There are many stories. Would you like that?*

I jus' smiled and ask him, meeker than I meant to, *what does sherry taste like?*

jeremiah

There are moments when I feel the skin on my bones begin to relax, the way it was meant to. For years, I s'ppose the whole of my life, I lived like I was gonna die at any moment. If not die, then maybe wish I had. Havin' spent too many months at the end of a whip, my head in a cage, my face hit with a fist, shovel, board; once stabbed in the face with a fork, three small wounds in my cheek for better part of a year. I never saw 'em, only felt 'em. We didn't have anything like a mirror at the Clarks', so I worried the holes with my finger. *Leave 'em alone, Cracker, lest you make 'em worse*, Momma would say across the room.

I spent all my life, my full mind, skin and bones, scared beyond belief. And now? Now, I have a white layin' his head on my shoulder, our legs wrapped 'round each other, my lips kissin' the top of his head, savin' the most tender kisses for his bald spot just beginning. Sang him a song I knew from years back, had always known it, I s'ppose from Momma:

How I know, this love a' mine.

How my heart, it knows no line...

From me to you, my love be true,

From me to you, my love be true

Jack stirred in my arms. *My only wish is to have this forever, to have you here forever, but...* he breathed in deep, like he was searchin' in the dark for words. *But we need to go someplace where it's safe, Jeremiah. Europe maybe. Philadelphia is safer, but not safe enough. They have catchers up there. I want to find a land where we can walk the streets, holding hands, off color.*

I jumped up then, stood beside the bed, holdin' out my hand. *Would you care to take a stroll down the boulevard, Mister?* Jack got up, both of us naked as the day we was born, barely visible in the moonlight, and, holdin' hands, walked from one end of the room to the other. Me, pretendin' to look in shop windows, wavin' to passersby, imaginin' the sun warmin' my shoulders. We walked back and forth like this for a long while, pretendin' to go in shops, kissin' under the night sky, shakin' hands with the mayor and his wife, pettin' imaginary dogs, gigglin' at each part of the charade. As we walked, Jack's fingertips caressed the small of my back, the gentlest of touches saved for my scars. *Always. I just want always, m'love,* he said.

Then, out of nowhere we heard shoutin'. Out the window there were flames, heard glass breakin'. Jack ran to the dresser, grabbed his things. *Get your mother, sister, and Sylvie, head to the basement. Now!*

I saw him grab for his papers, run to the nightstand, we

were both still naked. I could not stop myself—I peered out the window, saw twenty, maybe thirty folks on horseback, carryin’ torches, ropes, circlin’ round and round, their voices harshly breakin’ the night’s silence. Men, I s’ppose, though it was impossible to tell, except for the sound of their voices. They were cloaked in white, head to toe.

I scrambled into my clothes, took a slip from the pillow, looked around. What to take? None of this was mine. *What do you want?* I yelled. *I want you to go downstairs, get the others.* I didn’t think he understood. *What do you want from the room?* I said, louder. *Nothing! Only you!*

Took the stairs two or three at a time, found everyone in the hall, fear in their eyes. *Jack says everyone in the basement, now! Momma are you OK?* I took her in my arms, looked her over, made sure there were no injuries. They all started to protest about goin’ in the basement, knew it to be a fire trap. I found the pillowslip in my hand, rushed to the kitchen, started openin’ cabinets, grabbin’ food, forks. By the time I turned ‘round, Jack was there; I had a flash of not but a minute ago, the two of us pretendin’ to stroll the boulevard, the caresses on my back. *Get into the basement! No one living knows about it but me.* He stole a look at Sylvie, she shook her head. *There’s a tunnel there, leads clear through to the river, though no saying what we’ll find at the other end, but at least we won’t be sitting in this house. You have something to take, do it now!*

We looked to each other, the fear on our faces was not only of this moment, we had a lifetime of this—hidin’ in shadows, cowerin’ from the whites, bowin’ down, makin’ ourselves small, holdin’ our breath. I did not care much for myself, I had lived a great life these past months, had known

love bigger than the Earth. If I was to die tonight, then be it. But, Momma? To see her, to have her yet again be hunted, barefooted in a nightgown, to have her tunneled?

I'll grab your shoes, Momma, clothes. Where is your inkwell? Your book? We both tore off to her room, grabbed the pillowslip from the bed, started stuffin' it, wrapped the ink in a kerchief. *This?* she asked. I turned around, saw her holdin' a pillow, knew the comfort it brought her. *Yes, of course! Take it!*

And I found myself runnin' for my life, once again. Except this time was different. This time I wasn't alone.

debra

I know a way, just give me three minutes. If I not back, leave on without me, I told 'em. They started fussin' and protestin', but I was already out the back door, believin' the damned whites would all be up in front, not worried yet 'bout the shack. I took off my nightshirt, stole it by the back door, figurin' the whiteness of it would catch the moonlight, give me away.

Ran naked to the shack, knew there to be a board, loose 'nough to fit through. Someone in the past rigged it that way, prob'ly wantin' their comin's and goin's secret. Praised God that my skin was the color of the night, prob'ly darker, found my way to the back, knocked on the board ever so gently, saw it was already pushed aside, they thinkin' what I was thinkin'.

Time to go, forgive my lack of clothin'!

I grabbed up the two girls, Jayden and Kiddle, warned 'em in a hard whisper *the only way we gonna live to see the sun is to be quiet as a mouse. There be a tunnel, and Mister Jack gonna show us the way. Grab shoes if you got 'em, and whatever else you need. Mister Kinnard, his family only been here 'bout a month, looked*

‘round *there ain’t much here*, he said, pickin’ up a blanket. It was dark grey, so I took it, wrapped the kids in it. *Let’s play a game*, I told ‘em real quiet-like. *Count to twenty, quiet in your head, see if we can reach the kitchen by the count a twenty.*

I can’t count that high, said Kiddle. *You no need to worry, girl. I count for both of us. Let’s go!*

We took off ‘cross the field, what a sight we must’a been! Yet, by the grace a God we all made it without bein’ seen, didn’t stop to say a word; knew that for each of us, gettin’ in the tunnel be the only thing.

Grab your bundles, get into the basement, Jack told us, comin’ out from the kitchen into the hall, came back with the painting of the bread and fish, handed it to Jeremiah. *Keep it safe if you can. If not, no need of worrying over it.* Another piece a glass broke somewhere near the front, makin’ a loud, scary sound, with flames climbin’ up the walls.

We all scrambled away like scared kittens, down the creaky stairs, where the air smelled wet and old. I suddenly remembered I was still naked, looked down at m’self and reached for Kinnard’s blanket to cover up, thanked him. *Jeremiah, light the candles, count how many of us to keep track, the door will be open in a minute.* Jack went to the wardrobe, pushed it aside, showin’ the entrance to the tunnel. *Father thought this day would come, the only hope is that no one else knows about it but us. God bless us all.*

He scooted into the dark, brung out heavy sacks, set ‘em aside with some effort. *Missus Anne will go in first, lead us out. No!* Momma said fiercely. *I am the slowest, let me go on last. The rest a you go on, I follow behind.* Jack took her by the shoulders, *you set the pace, Missus Anne, we follow you. If they don’t know about the tunnel,*

then we are not in a hurry. If they do know, then we are all but dead already. Jeremiah will give you a candle, and we will follow. Just put one foot in front of the other, yes?

Jack be pullin' at the leather sacks, one spilled over and a whole bunch a money fell from it, stacks a paper and gold coins. The sound a the coins filled the cellar. We all standin' in the candlelight, each of us seein' what we seein', never been 'round that much money b'fore. *If we're lucky, we can buy our way up North, but we must steal away tonight or tomorrow at the latest*, said Jack, candle light throwin' shadows on the walls.

North, I said, loud 'nough to have it heard, each of us lookin' to the other, noddin' our heads. I reached over to touch his shoulder, kissed him on the cheek. *You alright, Mister Jack. You alright.* Once we was all in and 'counted for, Jack fell to his belly, grabbed hold a the wooden feet, slid the wardrobe back in place to hide the entrance. It grew darker then, but our secret was covered over. *We need a moment*, he said, *before we go on.*

He got to his knees, whispered *let us pray*. Each of us kneeled down. *Heavenly Father, we know that this earth has been moved by our colored brothers and sisters, cleared away in generations past so that we today may have safe passage. We bow our heads to their efforts, their sore backs, their calloused, bloodied hands. We pray that their souls are at peace, and that we find gentle people on the path ahead to guide our journey. God bless us all*, he said again. *Amen.*

We moved slow and sure, quiet as death. Voices upstairs was heard, sure, but didn' feel all that close. I could tell Momma be wishin' she could go faster, an air of apology fallin' off her back. I was s'posed to say nothin' but whispered anyway *you okay, Momma. We right behind you. Sure footed and grace*

hold!

We stayed like that, a tight line watchin' each other's backs, keepin' sight of each other. Momma had no one to watch, but she alright; had seen more trouble than this. *We will stop round the bend,* whispered Jack, and we did. Each of us crouched down, a jug a water passed between us. *Catch your breath, it might be a long night. In a matter of minutes this'll open up down near the river. Sylvie and I are to go out, find a way to secure passage for all of us on the riverboat. I've been thinking... let us gather some time on our side; if we leave now we are sure to be found. Tonight, we stay here and rest, eat your fill. There is nothing to be afraid of.*

He reached to take the hand of Jeremiah, and on the other side, mine. *We have the blessings of our Lord, each other, our bundles, and monies to bribe all that we need to. Take heed.* He slowed his voice, took notice of all of us. *When we are around others, we are to play a game. You will pretend that you are our property, that we are your masters. It is only a game, and you are as free today as you were yesterday. If you have questions, this is the time to ask.*

Where the money come from? You steal it? It was Kiddle who asked, her innocence breakin' the heaviness a the moment caused us a chuckle. Could barely make out her features in the dark, but caught the candlelight on her sweet face, the color a honey.

I do not know. I suppose this money was made on the backs of your kin. I thought to ask Father when he told me of the tunnel, the money, but I never did. Seems fitting that we use it to take you North, to freedom.

Where we goin'? Missus Kennard always be of a few words. I only heard her say small things in the month I knowed her, mostly 'bout the children. And here she be, askin' the most important question, the one none of us had yet asked. *Firstly,*

please know that you need not go anywhere. You and your family are free, Missus Kinnard. But if you like, you are welcome to join us on board a ship, God willing, tomorrow or the day after, if they'll have us. I had thought earlier of going to Wilmington, but our cousin writes it is unsafe. There is still much hatred on the streets and it seems it is not going away any time soon. So we'll venture to Philadelphia. The city is not perfect in her relations, but she does afford a certain acceptance. We will pray for safety.

A hush fell across all of us as Jack said this. We was now in the dark, only one candle left burnin'; thought it best not to light another. Philadelphia seemed big and promisin', least to my ears, and I said it aloud, to see how it felt on my tongue. *Philadelphia.*

Jack continued, *if anyone asks, and they will, I am bringing you North to help with my new business. What is your new business?* This be the first we heard from Jeremiah in a while, his deep voice in a whisper filled the tunnel, bringin' a comfort I didn' know I was yearnin'. *The law, I suppose. I will sit for the bar after a time of studies, but a business where I need help right off? I have not the slightest. Any ideas?* He look down at the Kinnard girls. *Miss Jayden?* Her little voice offered quickly *a flower shop! With lots and lots a pretty flowers!*

Apparently, Jeremiah. I am in the business of flowers. We are all now in the business of flowers. And here, for the second time since we runned, we chuckled. Not a minute passed b'fore Mister Kennard reached for the candle, placed it in front a him. With a bit a showiness, he pretended to open a coat that weren't there, plucked a made-up flower from inside, holdin' it out for all to see. Then, he brung it to his nose, took a big sniff and smiled, could see the whites of his teeth. Next, he passed it to

his wife, who did the same. Then each of us, one by one, smelled the flower b'neath our nose, and smiled.

Not a bad way to begin our escape.

I have a plan, a dream really. It was Miss Sylvie who spoke. Had been so quiet for so long, I near forgot she there. *Not that I have done this before, but I have a plan to set up a room for us when we get to where we are going.* We all listened close. *I know there are at least a few here that have taken to reading, learning. All told, Philadelphia is the home to the finest library in the country, and the books are free! I will venture forth, borrow the books we need, and teach. You suppose we can find a room to do that, Jack?*

Right then Momma started her cryin'. Tears big 'nough to cover her cheeks. We didn' shush her, tell her it be alright. Miss Sylvie took her hand, held it close. There be much we left behind, for years been leavin' behind... things, people, the whole of our lives. We let her cry, simple as that.

To pass the time, I thought to reach in my bundle, pull out the work I been makin' for Mister Hoffman's book, but it was too dark. I closed my eyes, imagined sittin' at a nice oak table in the new house, makin' sketches, fillin' pages with watercolors. I must a fallen asleep soon after.

Most a the next day we sat in the dark, tellin' stories 'bout what we was gonna do in the North, who we was gonna meet. *You might find, Miss Sylvie said, that you are able to walk in stores, the library, restaurants. I am not certain, but we will soon discover.* I remembered my jar, full a dollar bills that I dug up before we runned. We each had ours, least Momma and Jeremiah did. I didn' know of an agreement with the Kinnards, none a my business. I felt for mine in my bundle, smiled to know it was there.

The day go by slow as syrup. Every once in a bit one of us would leave, go back from where we come, relieve ourselves further back in the tunnel. We passed the time with a bit a food, stories, lots a silly rounds of *Who's in the Farmhouse?* and tryin' to rhyme our names with foods we like.

Eventually, Jack said *tomorrow, at daybreak, Sylvie and I are going to the river, where we will buy passage for all of us. If something happens, Jeremiah is in charge. I do not expect trouble, but we are each fugitives and need our wits about us. You will find a safe house with Missus Eileen Russo, in Wilmington, near the Brandywine. I have all this written down.* He pass a paper to Jeremiah and, before releasin' it, said a prayer over it.

You will also be better suited to have these. He got on his knees, holdin' the papers to the candlelight, called out each name of the Kinnards', then passed the papers. *These are your freedom papers. They say that you are not, and should not, be treated as a slave. You are free persons. Not all will abide by this, and many a white will want to ignore this paper, or destroy it. Guard it best you can, with your life if you need to. Missus Anne and Debra, Jeremiah, I trust you have your papers?* We each nodded.

My paper was the first thing I grab before headin' downstairs in a hurry; didn' think to ask Momma 'bout hers, Jeremiah neither. *There is a name written below your papers, a Mister Karl Hinceton. He is an attorney in Savannah and drew these papers. If you are in trouble, best you find him sooner than later.*

Miss Sylvie try to quiet the fears buildin' in the dark. *It is our hope, of course, that we will all be together; this plan is only in the*

event of dire circumstances. Cousin Eileen is not expecting you, necessarily, but she will know each of you by name. Jack has told her...

It was now Miss Sylvie's turn to cry, stoppin' mid-sentence to consider, maybe for the first time, all that she left behind. Friends, perhaps even a suitor. She had, all told, clothin', furnishin's, paintin's, a whole lifetime in Savannah that she be leavin' behind. She could'a stayed, betrayed us at a turn, and didn't. And knew us, but what, five months? Six? I got up on my knees, inched toward her. Brought her into my arms as I seen Momma do my whole life... and now it be my turn.

I didn' expect my first time embracin' someone for comfort be a weepin' white woman. *There, there, you all right, Miss Sylvie. You all right.*

I gots a question. Jayden's little voice was bright as a penny. When we was runnin', I done hear 'em whites screamin' at us from the yard. And, some of 'em was screamin' Molly dis, Molly dat. Who Molly? Ain't no Molly here, far as I know. Missus Kinnard added I hear it too, someone screamin' 'you damn Mollys, come out now or else.'

Just then, a deep sigh come from Jack. *I suppose some might say that I... am Molly.* We didn't understand his answer, so his words just sit there a lil' while, fillin' the air. *Molly is an ugly word that some use to describe a person, a man, who loves another man.* Jayden look confused, like the rest of her family. *But why they say that, then?*

Because—I could tell he be searchin' for just the right

kinda words—they think that I might love a man in ways different than I might love a woman. And, they are correct. Sadly, some find that way of being unnatural. I confess I've felt this way about myself, as well. Until recently. We all let Jack have time for his truth to hang there in the dark. You got a man you love somewheres? Somebody you leave behind, back there? Missus Kinnard asked warmly.

I am right here, said my brother, and everyone turn to face him. I s'ppose that if you are to be runnin' with us, his voice sounded strong and sure, then it be best that you know who you are runnin' with. Jack and I have been holdin' company for many months now. I ain't apologizin' for it, but it seems that some folks told or found out somehow, and now you have lost all—a safe home, your warm bed, all that was familiar to you these past months. For that, I do apologize. And, I pray that you were able to grab somethin' dear to you: clothes, this here blanket, a book or a dollar if you had it. I am sorry for all that was lost to you, to all of us. But I ain't sorry, Molly or not, for lovin' this man.

He locked eyes with Jack just then, and the tunnel be filled up with somethin' so big, it give me chicken skin that made me wanna cry.

I wondered if Momma could feel it, too.

sylvie

We left the tunnel at first light, brought only a small satchel of monies with us. Left the food with the others. Jack and I walked quickly to the river, knew not who was to be looking for us, but knew that we would not be easily forgotten by those that wanted us dead, or worse. There was no one at the barge except for a sleepy negro man that waited near the gate. *When can we secure passage? There is an urgency.* Jack held money out, offered it. I know not how much, hoped it would be enough. *You need wait 'bout two hours 'till the purser arrive, maybe longer,* he said, took the money. Jack asked after the purser's name, thanked the man. We turned to go. There was a small eatery nearby, chairs and tables being set up. *I need to find the privy,* Jack said. *Order for us. I will not be long.*

I waited for the restaurant to open, my stomach gurgled at the aromas coming from within. Kept an eye on the ship, looking for any signs of movement. Knew not who the purser was, but could often tell who was in charge, men in power; especially those who held the purse strings, had an air about them. My eyes nearly burned a hole in that ship, looking at it

as hard as I did.

My attention fell back to the eatery, and wondered after Jack. Ordered our food and my heart quickened with the passing moments. Where had he gone? Was he ill? Had a difficulty befallen him? I went to the alley, found the privy. The door stood open, Jack nowhere in sight. I ran back to the eatery, asked after him. Ran next to the ship, up and down the wharf. Had he returned to the tunnel? Something forgotten? Papers or money or... it was then that I heard his screams. Could see him upon a faraway hill, being carried away by three, perhaps four men. The distance, along with my failing eyes, betrayed me. I called out and ran after, they were moments ahead of me and I could not keep up.

By the time I reached the hill, I saw them drag my beloved Jack into a slave pen on Reynold's Square. I gasped, fell to my knees. My Jack had been kidnapped, imprisoned, likely the only white in a den of torture. *He will not be safe!* I cried out. Those captured inside did not know him, did not know of his heart. Would only see that he was white. That, I suspect, is what his captors wanted. To have those he sympathized with be the same ones who killed him, tearing at his skin. I took note of the square, the streets leading to it, and raced toward the tunnel. Had but one thought in mind, and it gave me strength, feeble though it might be.

I found sight of the tunnel, hidden well, unless you knew what to look for. I cried out, weakened at the knees, my face full of dirt and tears. I must've been a sight, and cared not! With immediacy, I regretted crying out. Did not need to call attention to our fellow travelers, nor our hideaway. It was Jeremiah who came out first, grabbed me by the arm, pulled

me to safety. *I need water*, I cried, then half-bent in the tunnel, I recounted the story.

All were ready to storm the pen, free Jack, risk everything. *Listen, please. I have but a minute. Let me speak. Your skin will draw much wrath in the streets; it is unsafe for any of you to leave right now. I can, by most accounts, walk freely. And that is what I will do. Debra, inside of Jack's bundle I trust there is his beloved Colt. I need it.* The reaction from each was palpable. Jeremiah stammered *do you know how to shoot?* He had a point, of course. *It has been some time, but Father assumed it would be best if I knew. The South is no place for an unguarded woman.* Debra handed over the pistol, I checked to see if it was loaded. *Are there more? There is a box*, she said. I threw my purse to her. *Empty this, fill it with ammunition.*

I turned to all, each with a face full of dread. *Give me an hour. If I am not back, then I send my prayers to each of you. If the plan works, we will stay here another night, or be on our way immediately. I know not which. If it fails, I could be dead by nightfall. Either way, know you are loved. You have provisions, money, each other. Jeremiah, I have no doubt, will lead you.*

I reached for the purse, turned to go. *Are there matches?*

jack

The moment I stepped out from the privy, I sustained a forceful hit on the back of my head. I remember little else, heard myself cry out as I was dragged. Thought immediately of Jeremiah, what would become of him if he too were captured? I worried that all of them would be lynched... drew it from my mind with a concerted force.

While being dragged, I looked for clues as to my whereabouts, hoping to find the kind eyes of a stranger, a friend. There was no one on the streets, save a drunkard, washed on the side of the frontage building; consciousness had seemingly left him.

Within moments I was thrown in a pen that reeked of an overwhelming stench, my eyes burned and had difficulty adjusting to the dark. The dirt floor was slippery beneath my feet, wet with presumed blood, and waste. There was much yelling, a distraught chorus crying out for mercy.

I managed to stay near the door, with hopes of being able to escape when it opened next. I shivered, felt small pangs

of hunger, wrapped in a blanket of sheer terror. My captors, I believed, must've known my history; my freeing of slaves, laying with a man, the reading and writing. I was already lynched, could feel the noose about my neck. I wanted to cry out but knew the fruitlessness of it.

Leaned against a wall, reached with my right hand and guided myself to the floor, found a dry spot to rest my body. I had been beaten, found blood leaking from my head. In the dark, I bumped the man beside me *I'm sorry, sir*, I said. There was no reply, no movement. My eyes adjusted over time, and found my new friend on the ground, with a belt around his neck. I reached to remove it. Did not want his kin, if there were ever to see him again, to have this be their final memory of their brother, son, father. Thought, too, that while this belt had caused his death, it might serve to save mine. I fastened it around my waist, reached to close his eyes, and made the sign of the cross upon his forehead, whispered a prayer. *Go in peace, you will suffer no more.*

I sat, listening to the sounds of others, their moans and cries of desperation. I was apt to join in their chorus, yet relieved at the anonymity darkness brought. I remained in prayer; prayed for those around me, and mostly, for those left in the tunnel.

There was a jingle of keys, the creak of metal and wood. *You will not get away with this*, I heard, as the space was flooded with blinding light. Perhaps I knew his voice—was he one of my captors? The man walked with a start, arms bent at the elbows, hands raised near his face. I scrambled to my feet, thought this might be my chance to run. Instead, heard the sweetest sound I'd heard in the longest of times. Sylvie's voice.

Unchain everyone here. If you cause a ruckus or send alerts, I swear it will be your last act on Earth.

The posse's comin' back. I ain't workin' alone, they find you here, you be raped for sure, he said. Sylvie pushed him from behind. Eyes now adjusting, I saw the gun in her hand. I raised my own arms in surrender, a reflex I didn't know I had. *Your posse is nowhere near here. Their fried eggs, perhaps their last meal, was being served as I passed. They left you here, alone. Now get!*

Sylvie pushed him again and he tripped, keys falling to the ground. Reaching for them, he must have found piles of human waste—his cursing told of it. *Free them all. Now!* Perhaps the man's eyes were used to the dark, for he worked quickly, unlocking the chains, and bodies came spilling forth out of the crevices.

I was on my feet now, when Sylvie spoke firmly and quickly. *Those who wish to run, now would be the time. It is past daybreak, but there are places to hide just to the North.* She pointed the way, likely knowing that this imprisoned lot might be both disoriented and illiterate of the four directions. Dozens of bodies poured onto the street. *You alright, Jack?* All I could do was nod, squeeze her hand.

That's when we saw her. A young girl, perhaps ten, fifteen. Impossible to tell. Her frailty betrayed her. *Are you here with your kin?* Sylvie asked. She shook her head. *Do you know where they are?* Again, no. *Can you carry her, Jack?* No, I said. *Carrying a negro girl on my back would cause too much alarm. We shall walk out of here, together, the three of us.*

Our captor was hiding in a corner, hoping to go undiscovered, forgotten. *We need to lock him up,* Sylvie commanded, *take his keys.* She bent down to the girl *we are going*

to buy you a nice, new dress, with socks and slippers. For now, I need part of what you are wearing. Without hesitation, she tore a swath of fabric from the girl's ragged clothing, rushed to the corner, locked chains around his wrists. Upon smelling his breath asked *where is the whiskey?* He spit in her face, at once her knee found his privates with force. *I won't ask again.* Bent over in pain, he spat his answer. Then she gagged him with the cloth.

Before we left, we found three more dead bodies, quickly prayed over each. Hurried from the pen, closed and locked the door. Found the whiskey behind crates, just as he had told. *What is your name?* I asked the girl. *Carla*, she said, eyes blinking against the brightness of the day. *You are to walk behind us, Carla. Please keep up. Do not let us out of your sight. We are leading you to safety.*

Sylvie held the pistol in one hand, a bottle of whiskey in the other, and hid both in the folds of her dress. Across the yard, she drained the liquid in the tall, dry grasses. Gave the bottle and cork to Carla. *Hold on to this. We'll fill it with water, soon enough. Now, you two go, quickly! I'll follow right behind.*

She reached for a box of matches. The field was engulfed in a matter of minutes.

missus anne

When they finally come back, we cried and cried. The sight of 'em made us wanna shout *hallelujah!* from the mountain tops, but 'stead we jus' allowed tears a joy to be 'nough. It was Miss Sylvie who tell us to quiet down, makin' her proposals be known.

We have two notions, as I see it. We can hide out here for a bit, two, three days. Wait for things to calm down. Or, we make a go of it, now.

Then, Debra spoke up. *There be two people here who should be decidin'. They's both mothers and have children with 'em. Let it be them who decides.* They all look to me and Missus Kinnard. I said *I been hidin', one way or 'nother all my life. I's tired! This ground has never been kind to me, 'til lately. I ain't gonna kiss the Savannah soil, nor mourn her neither. I wanna go... now!* I's surprised at my directness, but sure-willed, too! *You, Missus Kinnard? What you wanna do?*

Missus Kinnard at first say nothin', rose to half-standin', took hold a her girls' hands and say, *I ain't kissin' this ground neither, but I will... I will kiss the ground of Philadelphia. Let us be off!*

It didn' take but a minute to bundle all of us up, gather everythin' we had, checkin' and recheckin' the tunnel. Nothin' remained. Jack said *the fire may have created a diversion, but it also cuts off our most direct path. We may need to walk blocks out of our way before coming around to the harbor. We do not have that luxury. The ship will sail before long. And we are a large group, sure to catch attention.*

I can stay here, no matter. It be then we remember the new child among us, Carla! And all at once we start protestin' *you's comin' with us, girl. Don't be talkin' such foolishness! Here, eat this! Here's some water! There's no leavin' you! You part of us now!*

Again, it be Miss Sylvie who save us. *I have a plan, desperate though it may be. There is only one of us that is not an outright fugitive. But they will be on the lookout for me, too. If you allow it, it needs to happen now.* She told us her plan. There be no time for disagreement; though we sho' tried, none of us able to come up with a better idea a how to get ten folks, nine of 'em sought after, to run safely 'cross the field (a field she set aflame!) in daylight, and board a ship. We agreed, with lotsa hesitatin', to her crazy plan.

We all sat starin' as Miss Sylvie pull off her clothin', and dress in Mister Kinnard's britches, shirt, boots. It was then that Mister Jack come up with an idea of his own. *Grab some ash from the field, smudge your face, and pick up the first fire bucket you see. Play as a poor white man, here to help with the fire. Speak to no one.* His eyes were moist, as if sendin' his only kin off to war, which in some way, seem like exactly what he be doin'.

Not waitin' for goodbyes, she take two steps toward the openin' and the britches fall right to her knees! Lord Almighty! We began fussin' over her. *Do not worry! I can hold up the pants*

with one hand, and pretend to fight a fire with the other. Another step and Mister Jack stopped her. *I knew this could come in handy...* and he pull a belt from his waist. Sylvie took it, and started runnin'.

We spent the next minutes tendin' to Carla, fussin' on her, feedin' her nearly stale dinner rolls, apples, a jug a water, wrappin' the Kinnard's blanket around her shoulders. Mostly we stay quiet, Mister Jack wantin' for our prayers, *ask the Lord to watch over our Sylvie, please.*

It was soon we heard the neighin' of a horse, Miss Sylvie callin' out *be quick!* And what a sight it be! If I didn' know, I could'a swearsed there be a poor white man sittin' at the front of a carriage, beside a negro holdin' the reigns, lookin' at us sharply. *Please, grab my dress and shoes. Quickly now!* Mister Kinnard ask Carla for the blanket to wrap hisself, and we all piled into the carriage. Miss Sylvie ordered *take us to the docks, lickety spit!* And we was racin' like the devil. I could see a field on fire to the left, dozen or so negroes tryin' to put it out. I prayed for 'em, too.

We be at the docks in a matter a minutes, big noises fillin' every part a the place. Men shoutin', carriages goin' quickly here and there, a loud noise from the boat jolted all of us, come to find out it be some sorta horn. Mister Jack jump from the carriage right away, we hear him talkin' to the driver. *I shall secure passage for all of us. Give me not but a minute, perhaps two. Cousin, find room in the back. You will be more comfortable there.* He come back, grabbed his satchel, and left.

If you'll allow it, Mister Kinnard, Sylvie said, I will need your clothes a bit longer. Bounty hunters will not be looking for two white men. This disguise might allow me to secure a cabin.

It be my honor, Miss Sylvie. You the first white to ever ask my

*permission for anythin'. Keep 'em long as you need. It seem like forever that we waited, but as I said 'fore, we get used to waitin'. With a start, there was a knock on the side a the carriage *be quick!* I saw Mister Jack when I step out, found him talkin' to the driver again, mostly whisperin' but I heard it jus' the same. *I will pay you handsomely, all I ask is two things. Tell no one of us. If they ask, tell them we went running the other way. And second, head North. When you see negroes running, hiding on the side of the road, offer them passage. It is a dangerous request, but if you have any memories of your own bondage, you will offer them help. Get them water if you can. Godspeed.**

The rest a what come to pass over the next minutes was heavy with confusion. We was herded to walk this way, and that. Up a steep ramp, wait over there, then down to the belly a the boat. It smelled somethin' awful, but I sensed that we was now safely tucked away from those that, jus' a few nights ago, was throwin' fire at our front door.

I looked round from right to left, back again. Miss Sylvie and Mister Jack separated from us! *They are not here, Momma.* Jeremiah told me then of steerage. *This here part be for the slaves,* he told me. *They be up above with the whites, we down here with the livestock.* I could see his tears in the dark, hear 'em in his voice. *What if I don' ever see him again, Momma?* His shoulders started shakin' then; he was too far for me to reach out. It was Mister Kinnard that took him, wrapped him in his arms. *There, there boy. You keep the faith, now, ya hear?* Where I was sittin', I seen Mister Kinnard kiss Jeremiah on the head, rub his back. Hold him tight. I told m'self to remember to thank Mister Kinnard, comfortin' my Jeremiah like that.

I closed my eyes, whispered my prayers that we be safe.

‘Course, they could still find us here, walk up the ramp and demand to see the group of negroes huddlin’ together. But somethin’ told me they was already lookin’ for their next group a runaways. Besides, there be no bounty on our heads, far as I could figure. Who would be payin’? Who want us back? The only thing folks may be wantin’ was to see us hang, and there be no money in that, only sport. Best to leave us alone. That be my prayer.

Squintin’ my eyes, I looked out at the bunch of us, all huddled together. Jeremiah, now asleep. Debra shiverin’ with the cold. The Kinnards in a tight bundle, with the girls sleepin’ on their parent’s laps. *Carla, come and sit by me, child. Philadelphia perhaps be a long ways away. Best to pass the time together, yes, honey child?* Carla come and sit right beside me. *Tell me somethin’, dear, you like readin’?* I pulled *Anne* from my bundle, began showin’ Carla my letters. Took hold of her hand, had her trace what was on the page.

This be how we spent the days, huddled, ignorin’ our hunger, wanderin’ ‘bout *what we gonna eat when we get there?* I was certain I gonna find me a short rib, covered in sauce. Told ‘em all how it gonna taste. And, swear to my maker, I could feel the juice runnin’ down my chin.

When the door creaked open days later, the fresh air hit me like a board. Wasn’ expectin’ it. ‘Course, I known we stopped, heard the raucous a the men outside, but never thought air, sunlight, and freedom come pourin’ in like that, all at once. Stood on feeble legs, my pinny soiled beyond repair. All of us nearly drowned in the muck of our own makin’.

Carla, you stay with me, girl. This here be what we call a new beginnin’.

jack

After we arrived in Philadelphia, there was, of course, an air of relief, each of us sighed a glorious collective breath. The house where we stayed was heavy with people, the Kinnards and their two girls, Missus Anne, Debra, Sylvie, lil' Carla, Jeremiah and me. We managed well, though it was noisy! Every day we spoke of cholera, consumption, how best to avoid illness. We talked to no one, outside of ourselves, knew not whom to trust, who was looking for us, who was alerted to us as fugitives. We stayed inside, best we could.

One day, after being holed up for too long, we heard from the kitchen *I know where I'm goin'*. *Settin' out first thing, and my family be goin' too. There are prayers to be said!*

And so it was, at daybreak, Missus Kinnard was up early, a bundle of food packed for the four of them. *Anyone want to come, can come*, she said to all of us, standing in the kitchen singing *Praise Be* for all to hear, whistling the parts between the chorus. *We be better off decidin' if we know where you was headed*, offered Debra, less of a question and more of a tease. *We goin'*

the only place worthy of goin', and you best be ready soon, if you wanna go, too!

And so it followed, that all ten of us headed down Walnut Street, away from the city proper, looking over our shoulder all the way. Not stopping to admire the buildings, the hospital, the schools, the paved brick walks. *No time!* shouted Missus Kinnard, her head and back erect, her face determined. Oh, how we whispered behind her, guessing where it was that was so God-awful important.

We could smell it long before we saw it; the river dirtied with waste, human, animal and otherwise. At once, Missus Kinnard stepped out of her shoes, her outer clothes, the children giggled at their mother, half-naked along the riverbanks. She faced us, her newly formed congregants, her back to the brackish water, a small loaf of bread in her hand, a jug of water appeared at her feet.

We fell silent.

The enormity of being here was all around us, without knowing the why. She began by saying *our people was kidnapped, forced on ships, demanded into the bottoms of boats. Many thousands, as the story goes, jumped to their deaths, drowned at sea. Nameless, faceless thousands. We come here today, gathered on the shore of the Delaware, offerin' what little we have, to their now remembered souls.* She broke the bread into pieces, passed it around.

This ain't for us, children, we got plenty. Our bellies be full in a bit. This is for them. She turned, stepped in the water, wading up to her waist, dusted the water with bread. *May you eat.* She came out of the water, picked up the jug, returned, poured some into the river, *may you drink.* Found the shore once again, picked up her dress, took a coin from the folds, *may you have*

wealth, she said, as she tossed the money into the soft current. *Who be next?* She had spoken more in these last minutes than in all the months I had known her. Her divine vernacular had been brought forth, well worth the wait. I smiled at her with all the love I could muster.

Each of us, one by one, came to the shore, said our prayers, tossed in bread. Sprinkled water. *God be with you*, was heard, *bless your souls*, and *rest in peace*. Kiddle said *I hope you can swim good!* which allowed for a levity we all needed.

Missus Kinnard began to sing, softly at first...

Praise be, the Lord above. Praise be thy name!

Praise be the Lord, we shall never be the same!

Shine your light on souls far and near,

Let your love be chosen here.

Yes, let your love be chosen here.

Lead us in prayer, she said, her eyes finding mine. I waited for her to dry herself, best she could, re-dress. We were gathered in a circle, hands clasped, heads bowed, an elegiac gesture. I said nothing for the longest while, allowed for the sound of the water lapping nearby to soothe us.

Had, until now, easily found words of prayer, but was struck dumb. Had not known of those taking their lives off the side of ships, yet could feel the truth of it. My heart was heavy with it.

The silence broke suddenly. *Lord, we bow our heads,*

knowing that as one person does harm, we all participate, and we ask forgiveness for our participation. And as one loves, we all love, and we ask guidance as we venture forth, longing to bridge connections. And there is much to forgive. Let it begin with me, us. I am ready and willing.

We each looked to Sylvie, smiled, let her words come in, filling the circle. *Now this be for us*, said Missus Kinnard, *and please, call me Ivy*. Pulling our picnic from her bundle, we grabbed hold of the ragged purple cloth she'd brought and spread it under the shade of a willow tree. More bread, carrots, pies, cider and apples. Linen napkins from the second-hand store on Sansom Street, bought during a rare venture outside for supplies.

This time, this be for us, she said through wet eyes, her throat heavy with grief, and gave hugs all around. I noticed she hugged me twice.

Looking around the circle, I noticed, not for the first time, that these gentle souls had become my family.

jeremiah

Jack helped me with the tie, let me know that we were to leave in an hour. I spent the better part of the next minutes pacin' from one end of the hall to the next.

You could pick up a book and read, m'love. To help pass the time? he said.

I found myself on the back porch, the morning dew still fallin' from the wisteria. The book in hand could not hold my attention, so I worked again on my speech: a tribute to Momma and all she had been through in her years. She had left us earlier in the Spring, but was 'round long enough to see the plans, visit the building, shed tears in the classrooms.

Never in my life, she said again and again. *Never in my life!*

A carriage was hired to take all of us that September mornin', and we jumbled in, nearly sittin' on each other's laps. Debra was there, of course, with her Robert, their young ones, Robert, Jr. and Lil' Anne. Sylvie and Jack. Carla was, by the grace of God, at school in Salem, had sent word, a card with monies in it *for the students—and new dresses!* she wrote.

Missus Hoffman came up from Augusta for the dedication, which brought tears to all of our eyes. We discovered her on the front porch first thing in the mornin', an overnight bag in hand. *Wouldn't miss it for the world*, she said, *not for the world!*

She stood on the porch, where she told us of the wrath brought about by the war—the land had been scorched, hundreds of thousands of men perished. *I've never witnessed such inhumanity*, she said though choked tears. Looking down, she was reminded of the youngins, changed the subject with a breath. She then held out a wrapped gift for Debra and at once offered her apologies. *I am dearly sorry this has taken so long to find its way into your hands. It was a dreadful time to find someone who would take on the project. Searched far and wide until we found a willing soul in London, of all places.*

Debra unwrapped it with tremblin' hands, held the book for all to see: *On the Back of a Negro* by Charles Hoffman and Elijah Brown. Illustrated by Debra Free-Klein. *I have brought other copies for the school's library. I trust that is alright?*

We stood 'round the dining room table, admirin' the drawings. *Would you read to us, Missus Hoffman? Please, please*, we pleaded, with sing-songy voices. She took her place at the table, had us gathered 'round and, as a school teacher is apt to do, read a short passage, then turned the book to show us the drawings; images, a perfect likeness of Mister Hoffman, bein' carried about tenderly by Elijah.

We applauded each drawing, gave out hoots and hollers for Debra's artistry. Elijah had his say in the book, too. A powerful chapter of him tellin' his tale, how he had found his way to the house that first mornin', and later, when Mister

Hoffman had trouble walkin', he was quick to offer *you have taken care of me all these years, allow me now to take care of you, Sir.* Then, doin' her best to take on the quality of her dead husband's voice, she continued, *that is fine by me, but only if you remember to call me Charles.*

The book ended happily: Elijah proudly walked out of the house a free man. *All royalties of the book sales have been passed to Elijah and to you, Debra, as per Charles' and my wishes.* Missus Hoffman wept through the tellin' of this. *And, Elijah is, all told, a happy man these days. He writes to tell me of his charity work in Mississippi. In October, he was abroad in London. Seems he delivered a handwritten note of thanks to the publisher, in person. Can you imagine it?*

In her earlier letters, she had told of her lessons with Elijah, what a good, faithful student he was. They had come to an understandin', the two of them, she wrote.

Later, the carriage brought us to the front of the building, took our breath away to see the words *Missus Anne's School for Colored Children* above the main entrance. Hard to take it all in, there were so many people runnin' about: children, parents, teachers, folks charged with managin' the school. More than once, I was bumped by a child scurryin', a quick *sorry!* shouted from the young ones, excited, I'd say, by their first day of school.

We walked in reverently, the enclosed foyer brought about a quiet we had not known outside. To our right we found a small glass case framed with wood, varnished to high gloss.

Beside it, a plaque tellin' of Momma's life, her love for learnin', her struggles as an enslaved person. Spoke, too, of her many years of dedication to free others; by all accounts, her work with the railroad had helped to save dozens.

Both the case and the plaque were attached low to the wall, so the children could read it. I kneeled down, read first the words on the plaque and, even though Momma and I had arranged all of this months before her passin', it took me by surprise, and I choked on my tears—for inside the case was Momma's beloved *Anne*, opened to show her writing; fine, sometimes shaky letters in deep black ink, spelling Momma's first words.

Anne

Freedom

Possible

My niece and nephew were standin' beside me. *Your Granny wrote that, and this fine lady here taught her how.* Missus Hoffman wiped her tears on her sleeve. *You should be mighty proud, children, mighty proud. This entire school, she said, is named after your grandmother.* Her sleeve again found her cheeks.

I stood, turned to Jack and took his hand in mine. Knew I had 'bout a thousand words I wanted to say, to thank him for gettin' us out, for givin' Momma a life where she didn't have to hide a stolen book under her pallet; instead, she lived a life of leisure in her final years—readin', learnin' sippin' lemonade on the back porch, mindin' after her grandchildren. A life of laughter, just like she wanted.

Jack, this gentle, blue-eyed white man, without plan nor reason, had changed the course for our family for generations to come. I choked back tears again, still. *This school should have your name on it, Jack Tadler. Thank you. Thank you for honoring our family this way.*

Then, my sleeve found its way to my own cheek, and I soaked the fabric all the way through. *Tears big as pancakes*, as Momma used to say.

epilogue

Looking back at the landscape of my life, I wonder now, as I sit in the shadows of my final days, allowing myself all honesties, I ask myself: why did I raise my hand all those years ago? Why was I compelled that day to holler my bid over the crowd? I search my mind for answers and the only one I can find is... God. He must have wanted me to not be alone, and had, dare I say, predestined us to be together, off color, tender in our love.

Before Jeremiah, I had long been by myself, years of awkward attempts at avoiding the gaggle of young Savannah ladies pursuing me as an available bachelor; always at the ready with an excuse about why I had not yet asked for their hand. I blamed it on my grief, begging for their forgiveness, yet, knowing full well that my heart could not be shared with another.

Until, Jeremiah.

As my pen falls to the page, I question, as well, the hand Mother and Father may have had in this. Had they somehow

guided this courtship from the other side, if that was possible? Their heavenly prayers propelling my arm upward that fateful day at auction, bidding for a man nearly starved, ragged and weary of life? Did Mother and Father, long gone, have a notion of my life, and portend the love that was forthcoming?

Ultimately, I will never know the answer. Yet, I am grateful for it.

My last will and testament has now been written. I have allowed for my monies and property to be passed to each of my family—Cousin Sylvie, Debra and her kin, the Kinnards, Carla, of course. And, to Jeremiah Free? I have left everything else, including enough funds for a continued endowment of his *Colored Museum*, sitting high on the hill near Swarthmore College. Seven rooms, at last count, with lofted ceilings and pristine walls, dedicated solely to the exhibition of arts and crafts made by negroes. Jeremiah was one of many talented artists who work in her studios, as well as handyman, chief curator and cheerful custodian. *A labor of love*, he tells me when he arrives home, past dark.

He and I have spent these many years sharing a bed, building a home and a life together. Yet, sadly, a need remains to pull the drapes closed, and when neighbors come to call, we painfully keep up pretenses: Jeremiah must pose as the devoted butler to Sylvie and me. We tell little of our lives to others outside of family; secrets are still at the ready. We do

what we can, trusting few.

Yet, our private lives are rich, and full, managing to find solace each evening, as we pray together before sharing a bath.

My final act, completed last Saturday, was to purchase a plot for him beside mine. Instructions for the headstone are spelled out with my name and dates, yet the epitaph that I fear may cause desecration in years to come, remains unfinished:

Here lies Jack Tadler, _____ to Jeremiah Free.

The blank has yet to be filled in. *What are we to each other?* How does one describe the enduring love we've discovered in one another? The word that rises in my heart and wishes to be engraved, yet, I still cannot bring myself to it: *beloved.*

I find myself at once in our library upstairs, searched and found the definition; my heart skipped, my throat utterly parched at the thought of it.

Greatly loved, dear to the heart. I must tell him at once, ask of his permission.

Here lies Jack Tadler, Beloved to Jeremiah Free.

These words, spoken softly to myself, vibrate on my tongue, tinged—like the taste of ancient citrus.

notes on the text, and image

The cover image is of William Headly, who escaped slavery from Raleigh, North Carolina. Written on the back of the photo is “Civil War Contraband”. A note sold with the photo from a Union Army Chaplain Horace James reads

“William Headly, a contraband from a plantation near Raleigh N.C. arrived at Newberne N.C. on the 20th May 1864 having been six weeks on the road, neither sleeping or eating in a house during the time. Two others left with him but were caught by the slave holders Bloodhounds and either killed or taken back. He was weak and nearly famished when he arrived.

His clothes were of many colors and qualities. His cloak consisted of an old cotton grain bag, slit open on one side and raveled. He appeared perfectly happy and satisfied upon reaching the Union lines and is now one of the best hands working on Fort Chase N.C. June 11, 1864.”

—Library of Congress, photo circa 1864

Off color is an invented phrase, used to signify interracial relationships which were illegal in the US until 1967, when Mildred Loving, a woman of color, and her white husband, Richard Loving, were sentenced to a year in prison in Virginia for their relationship. They appealed their conviction to the Supreme Court, and won.

—npr.org

Leaning, another invented phrase, is used here as slang for a homosexual or gay man.

Molly was an 18th and 19th century slur, mostly British, for “an effeminate fellow, a sodomite”. The term was eventually adopted to describe the inns, taverns and coffeehouses where gay men would gather in secret.

—Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue

First known use of *reparation* was in 1919 in the Treaty of Versailles, years after the setting of this book. Although the word was not yet part of the English language, I adopted it with poetic license.

Slave collars made of iron were used to discipline and identify slaves who were considered risks of running away. These collars had three prongs (often with bells attached to them). Abolitionist Theodore Weld in his provocative treatise *American Slavery As It Is* described the use of a similar collar on a girl near Charleston, South Carolina, who served her mistress as a seamstress: “*A handsome mulatto woman, about eighteen or twenty years of age, whose independent spirit could not brook the degradation of slavery, was in the habit of running away.*” For this offence, she was repeatedly and severely whipped, and a “*heavy iron collar, with three long prongs projecting from it, was placed round her neck, and a strong and sound front tooth was extracted, to serve as a mark to describe her, in case of escape.*” —civilwartalk.com

The Great Slave Auction (also called *the Weeping Time* because of the constant rain ‘even God is crying’) was an

auction of enslaved Americans of African descent held at Ten Broeck Race Course, near Savannah, Georgia. It was held on March 2 & 3, 1859. Slaveholder and plantation owner Pierce Mease Butler authorized the sale of approx. 436 men, women, and children (including thirty infants) to be sold over two days. The sale's proceeds went to satisfy Butler's significant debt, much from gambling. The slaves were brought to the race track four days before the auction started, where potential buyers poked, pinched, and fondled the slaves, opening their mouths to inspect their teeth. Slaves were also examined for ruptures or defects on their bodies that might affect their productivity. The auction was considered the largest single sale of slaves in U.S. history until the 2022 discovery of an even larger auction of 600 slaves in Charleston, SC. Butler made an appearance towards the end of the sale to give some families a single dollar, as thanks for their generations of enslaved work.

—adapted from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Slave_Auction
and [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)

Missus Ivy Kinnard spoke of the thousands (actual numbers are unknown) who had taken their lives, jumped overboard, rather than be enslaved. Not all went of their own volition: One example is known as the Zong Massacre: *“Heading for Jamaica in 1781, the ship Zong was nearing the end of its voyage. It had been twelve weeks since it had sailed from the west African coast with its cargo of 417 slaves. Water was running out... there was an outbreak of disease. The ship's captain, reasoning that the slaves were going to die anyway, made a decision. In order to reduce the owner's losses he would throw overboard the slaves thought to be too sick to recover. The voyage was insured, but the insurance would not pay for sick slaves*

or even those killed by illness. However, it would cover slaves lost through drowning.

The captain gave the order; 54 Africans were chained together, then thrown overboard. Another 78 were drowned over the next two days. By the time the ship had reached the Caribbean, 132 persons had been murdered.

When the ship returned to England the owners made their claim—they wished to be compensated the full value for each slave lost. The claim might have been honored had it had not been for former slave Equiano, then living in England, who learned of the tragedy and alerted an abolitionist friend of his. The case went to court. At first the jury ruled in favor of the ship's owners. Since it was permissible to kill animals for the safety of the ship, they decided, it was permissible to kill slaves for the same reason. The insurance company appealed, and the case was retried. This time the court decided that the Africans on board the ship were people. It was a landmark decision.

On the ship La Rodeur in 1812, there was an outbreak of ophthalmia, a disease that causes temporary blindness. Both slaves and crew were afflicted. The captain sent 39 slaves over the rails to their watery death.”

—PBS.org

The practice of painting red dots on cups and utensils was based on research as well. Historically, kitchen utensils were marked with red dots, (and other colors?) for use by those who were enslaved. These housewares were kept separately.

More recent history and research points to Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome “a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma

resulting from centuries of slavery and continues the experience of oppression and institutionalized racism today. Added to this condition is a belief (real or imagined) that the benefits of the society in which they live are not accessible to them.”

—Dr Joy DeGruy, as cited in iris.unimore.it

about the type

This book is set in *Caslon*, a typeface designed in 1722 by William Caslon. The typeface is considered to have an open, pleasant appearance; it's *italic* decorative. Caslon's types became so popular that the expression about typeface choice, "when in doubt, use Caslon," came about. His typefaces were immediately popular and used for many important works, including the first printed version of the Declaration of Independence.(1) William Classon died in London 23 January 1766.

—typewolf.com

what I was reading while writing Jeremiah

Small Things Like These by Claire Keegan. This book gave me the permission I needed to write a shorter novel. The storytelling is gorgeous, and made me a better writer; made me want to be a better writer.

When The Heart Says Go by Judy Reeves. Judy was my first, and most important, writing teacher, and her memoir reminds me of what great writing can do—take the reader with you on the journey. She describes the world in ways I've never seen, and will never be able to see in ordinary ways again. Judy also taught me how to read my work aloud; a priceless gift.

A Land More Kind Than Home by Wiley Cash. Powerful writing about the South, strained relationships, and abuse. Wiley's writing informed me more than I could've imagined.

Horse by Geraldine Brooks. My friend and fellow writer Jean Gerber gave me this book, saying *I know you're writing about slavery. Read this. It'll help you.* It did.

Housekeeping by Marilynne Robinson. A difficult story about family, neglect, loneliness and struggles, told in a way that keeps you wanting more—all while gloriously rooting for the main character. Months later I realized I unintentionally borrowed the name *Sylvie* from this book.

Mama Flora's Family by Alex Haley and David Stevens. From the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Roots*, this novel is set in the Reconstruction era and beautifully tells the multigenerational story of a family in the South post-slavery.

Washington Black by Esi Edugyan. A stunningly beautiful yet harrowing account of the slave trade in Barbados, and elsewhere. A sharp coincidence that the story follows a young african boy freed by a white abolitionist, and that Washington learned to read and write!

Master Slave Husband Wife by Ilyon Woo is the true story of two enslaved people, the married couple Ellen and William Craft from Macon, Georgia, who posed as a white, infirmed man (Ellen) and 'his' male slave. After escaping to Philadelphia by steamboat, coach and train, they became contemporaries of Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and others, joining the lecture circuit as abolitionists. An inspiring and compelling story of magnificent bravery, and self-emancipation.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman by Ernest J. Gaines tells the distressing, historical fiction story of the title character, enslaved, emancipated, and lived her entire 90 years on a plantation. I learned dialect, vocabulary and character studies from Gaines' generous writing. My deepest gratitude to him, and to the Miss Jane Pittmans of the world.

All Over but the Shoutin' by Rick Bragg is a memoir about the south, written so powerfully that it made me want to crawl into the pages and lay down, not to live there necessarily (it's a painful piece) but to wrap myself in his words. Despite the pain, there's immense comfort there. The pencil that I use to make notations inside of books was worn to the nub as I dove into Bragg's writing.

The Sweetness of Water by Nathan Harris, Harris' debut novel tells of two brothers, recently emancipated in the Reconstructionist South. The story is one of the most beautiful I've found. I read it twice, so far.

James by Percival Everett was a powerful inspiration for me, and I'm grateful for the day my friend Kim Malcolm (*Burden of Truth*) learned I was writing about slavery; took *James* off the shelf of her bookstore, and said *you need to read this*. My life, and insight into the black experience, hasn't been the same since.

Up From Slavery, the autobiography of Booker T. Washington, tells of his years as an enslaved person and then, through his audacity and love of knowledge, became the first President and Development Director of the all black Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University. His success through severe adversity motivates me to become a better human.

where I was traveling while writing Jeremiah

Montgomery, Alabama to explore the Rosa Parks Museum, the Lynching Memorial, the Freedom Rides Museum, Selma, and walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, a historically significant bridge that continues to be named after the Alabama leader of the KKK. Later, we visited the tent city campground for displaced African Americans and picked cotton from a nearby plantation. I was lucky to be on the journey with dear friends, Ellen and Edith, and many tears were shed during our time together as we bore witness to the trauma of slavery in the South.

Memphis, Tennessee where I visited the Slave Haven Underground Railroad Museum, the Memphis Quaker Meeting, and the Lorraine Motel, now the site of the Civil Rights Museum, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. It was here that I first saw photos of enslaved persons (I learned during this trip to not call people slaves, they were persons, first and foremost, who were enslaved) with their hands cut off, to prevent them from writing. Learning this led to a seminal assemblage of mine entitled *you will be killed if they find you with a pencil*. Choosing to have Jeremiah threatened with double amputation because of his literacy was based on historical facts.

Savannah, Georgia where one of the most active slave trading ports in America was located. Approximately 23,000 people were trafficked into Savannah during an estimated 300 voyages. In 1767, city officials were so committed to the lucrative practice of enslaved people, Savannah officials approved a nine-story quarantine facility. This site would detain enslaved women, men and children. At one period of time, 35% of its residents were enslaved.

While in Savannah, I visited River Street, (the site of Savannah's slave trade) the Georgia Historical Society, the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum, and a historical marker memorializing the site of *The Weeping Time*.

—Equal Justice Initiative, eji.org

—georgiaencyclopedia.org

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where the early seeds of this story were planted. Her streets are rich in history, one can readily sense it as you walk down her brick sidewalks, toward the river. I knew I wanted these characters to find refuge in this city, pay homage to those lost in the water. I grew up not far from here, in Wilmington, Delaware.

acknowledgments

Writing *Jeremiah* has been a journey of love, growth, and heaps of emotional, heartfelt learning! This story would not have been possible without the support, encouragement, and inspiration of so many people in my life.

To Eli Hans, m'beloved. Thank you for always believing in me. Your unwavering support has been the foundation carrying me through every chapter, both in life and on the page. In the writing of *Jeremiah*, you were there to dot each i and question each part of his story, making it ring truer. If this work is any good, I owe it to you.

To my early readers, your thoughtful feedback and enthusiasm for this story gave me the courage to bring *Jeremiah* and his world to life. My heart is overflowing with gratitude to Carla Hines, Ivy Del Pozzo, Stephanie Rudy, Krystal McCulloch, and James Cox for your invaluable insights and dedication to helping shape this story.

To my beloved cheerleading team: George Fleming, Debra Poneman, Cathy DeForest, Jean Gerber, Tanya Peters, Joey Merrifield, Stan Alan, Anne Grady, and Anne Temple Campbell. Gratitude goes to Catherine Doliente-Ramos as well for helping format, and refine this manuscript.

And finally, to you, the reader, thank you for stepping into *Jeremiah's* world and taking this journey with him. It is my greatest hope that his story touches your heart and reminds you of the enduring power of love.

With immense love,

Joseph



Joseph Bennett lives in San Miguel de Allende, México with his husband, Eli Hans. Bennett's most fervent prayer in this lifetime is that he was an abolitionist in a former one. This is his first novel. josephbennett.org