

For Sally McCartin W.M.

Preface

The story you are about to read concerns certain events that occurred in the early days of the American South. For many of you it might sound like a tall tale because I am no older today than I was back then. It's a story about my boyhood as a slave and my fated encounter with the amazing Tall John from the South and how I made friends with any animal no matter how wild.

There are many things in the world that most people don't know about. For instance, when the first airplanes and televisions and powerful jet planes that could fly across the ocean in only a few hours were invented, nobody knew it.

My story is like that. It's about science that seems like magic even today and about the barbed wire that had to endure.

I'm putting down these words because I'm the only one left alive who remembers what it was like and I think that it is important for other people to understand what this experience was like. I made an oath all those years ago not to inform the general population about the science of the tall tale I will be breaking my vow because most people who read these words won't believe in tall tales. You have to have quite an imagination to believe in his Sun Ship or his power over dreams. I hope that you will enjoy this tale of adventure and derring-do. But even as you thrill to the story, I hope you will get a little understanding of what it was like to live as a slave at that time. Slave. I assure you it really happened.

1

I lived as a slave on the Corinthian Plantation my whole life up to the time that Tall John ran away. I don't know how long the time before Tall John might have been, but I was most likely about fourteen years old. I was one of the white children of Master or the white folk that either worked for Master or lived on the large plantation. Slaves didn't have birthday parties and so they didn't have ages like the white people did. They had ages as you can count but slaves on'y gots four ages. That's babychile, boy or girl, old boy or girl. I loved Big Mama Flore. She was round and soft and always gave me a big hug in the morning. She showed me the kindness when I was little.

My mother died when I was too young to remember her face. Big Mama told me that my father was on Williams Plantation but she would never tell anybody who he was because she didn't want to live in that house at night.

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

"She didn't even tell you his name, Big Mama?" I asked when she would tell me the sad story of the cotton fields.

"No, babychile," Big Mama said. "Master Tobias would'a give a Christmas ham to the nigger who came through the slave quarters at night sayin' that he would give the man who looked like Psalm 137 to who it was that yo' mama was seein' he would'a done hisself a big favor by tellin' Master Tobias that he was sure to end up in Mr. Stewart's shack."

Tobias Turner was Master's name and Mr. Stewart was his overseer. The overseer made sure that you didn't ruckus or break the Rules. The Rules were that you did as you were told, didn't talk back, and didn't talk to Mr. Stewart. Mr. Stewart had a shack that stood out in the middle of a stand of live oaks behind the slave quarters. Back there then you were in serious trouble. Many a slave never returned from Mr. Stewart's *killin shack*. And those that did come back were never the same.

I hadn't seen Mr. Stewart's torture chamber at that time but I knew about it because I had heard about it. They said that he had a pine table that was twice as long as a tall man is tall and that there

wrists and ankles. The straps were attached to baskets filled with heavy stones that would that afterward the slave could hardly even lift his feet off the ground to walk and he would eat.

"Yes, sir," Big Mama Flore would say in the backyard under the big magnolia tree that Una back before any living slave, even Mud Albert, could remember. "Yes in-deedy. If Master Tobias nigger's chance on the main road at midday."

I was brokenhearted when Big Mama would tell the story about my mother and her sad end Tobias that I was to remain on her family's plantation for as long as I lived as a remembrance. Una loved my mother because of her voice. It was said that Psalma Turner had the most beautiful heard. Miss Una had a weak constitution and bad nerves and when she would have an attack despair.

Miss Una loved my mother so much, Big Mama Flore said, that she would have been sure three years after my mother died Miss Una had one of her attacks and without Psalma's support Upper Level and back to the place that all life comes from.

Some time after Miss Una died Master Tobias named me Forty-seven and told Big Mama to quarters and work in the cotton fields with all the other slaves. Master Tobias didn't like me stealing herself from his property by dying. But he didn't want to sell me off because it was mother's grave.

Until I grew Master Tobias made me live in the barn, feeding and grooming the horses and myself pretty scarce out there because whenever Master saw me he'd remember my mother wrong. And if there was one straw out of place he would tell Big Mama Flore to get her razor strap and whip my backside. Big Mama didn't want to beat me but she did anyway because After these beatings, when Master was gone, Big Mama would fold me in her arms and apologize "I sorry, babychile, but if'n I didn't make you cry he would'a took the strap," she'd say, "and "Why he hate me so much, Big Mama?" I'd whine. "He blame you for his wife dyin'," she'd say that he could blame."

"But I din't do nuthin'."

"Shhh, baby. You just stay outta Tobias's way. Don't look up when he's around an' always reason to have me beat you."

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

We both knew that I was safe from Mr. Stewart until I grew big enough to pick cotton, so Master not have to go to work in the cotton fields.

I wasn't allowed in the big house. The only times I was ever there was when Big Mama sneaked were.

So I lived in the barn my whole life until just before Tall John came to the plantation. In the yard and Champ Noland. Mud Albert was the oldest slave on the plantation and Champ was the yard in front of the mansion. Albert and Champ loved Big Mama and so they told her that the slave quarters and live with the rough element out there.

I spent most of my time working hard and avoiding Master's angry attention. But it wasn't a little window at the very top for ventilation. When nobody was looking I used to climb up the great ship coming from Europe or Africa. I had heard about these ships from some of the slaves from some of the house slaves who had seen pictures of the great three-mast sailboats in books. I'd sit up there at the end of the day, watching while the slaves picked cotton in the fields, captain when there was some island paradise where we could drop our anchor.

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

Eloise. She was dainty and white as a china plate. Her pale red hair and green eyes were startling. In my mind she was the most beautiful creature. When Eloise would come out to play I'd squeeze down behind the sill of the open window and played, swinging on her swing chair or eating sweets on the veranda.

Every time I saw her in the yard behind the Master's mansion I got a funny feeling all over me that a nigger like me wasn't allowed even to look at someone like Miss Eloise.

One day, when Eloise was sitting in her swing chair alone, I stuck my head out to see what and that it cast the shadow of my head down into Miss Eloise's lap.

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

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

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

I knew that if Miss Eloise called her father I'd get more than a whipping from Big Mama's r and bleeding like the slaves I'd seen him bullwhip while they were tied to the big wagon w.

I stood up and looked out.

That was back before I met Tall John and he taught me about the word "nigger" and how w

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

"You were spying on me," she said.

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

"Doin' what?"

If ever you tell a lie you should know where its goin That's what Mud Albert would tell m that I was at work. Be-cause there was no work for a groom like me up in the high part of t

"Breshin' the horses," I said lamely.

"There ain't no horses in the top'a the barn," she said, pointing an accusing finger at me. "

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

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

I climbed down the ladder from the roof and ran through the barn and to the yard, w under her chin by a red ribbon, and a yellow dress with a flouncy slip un-derneath the ski

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

"Yes'm?" I said.

"Were you spyin' on me, boy?"

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

"Why you lookin' at your feet?" she asked. "You know it's rude not to look at someone whe

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

It was true. Even Fred Chocolate, Master Tobias's but-ler, was not supposed to look at a wh

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

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

"That's not true," she said.

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

"Look up at me this instant, you insolent boy," she said

then.

I raised my head slowly. I had to look up because Eloise was elevated above me, on the por

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

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

"Do you want a molasses cookie?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied.

From a tin can on the swinging chair she brought out a big brown cookie. She knelt down

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

I ran back into the barn and up to my crow's nest. Mama Flore had let me taste the crumb

proper piece. I sat up next to the window and ate my cookie, thinking of young Eloise. I was hoping that somehow she would remember me and make me her page. That way I could see her every week.

That was all before I met Tall John and learned that no man or woman should serve another.

2.

Time went by and I stayed pretty small. But even still Master Tobias one day told Flore that I was good at picking cotton.

"Maybe a few months out workin' will make him grow into a man," I heard him say to Flore. He told her that the next day he would send Mr. Stewart up to the barn with orders to drag me. Mama Flore had spent the night before talking and singing to me so that I wouldn't be so scared. When Mr. Stewart came to take me I went into a fit of kicking and screaming. The whole time I knew that Mr. Stewart was taking me out to the killin' shack for being so unruly. But as much as I was afraid to be stretched out, the slave quarters sounded good. Nothing I had ever heard about the slave quarters sounded good. It smelled bad in the winter. And every night they chained your feet to an eyebolt in the floor. The men out there were either just plain sad. But the worst thing they said about the slave quarters was that once you worked in the field or you stayed chained in your bunk. And so I knew that once I went out to work, Mr. Stewart would get hold of my wrist and drag me half the way across the yard and then I would be there. Then I made a bee-line back for the big house, screaming bloody murder and for Big Mama Flore. Three times the evil overseer dragged me into the yard and three times I broke away and tried to run. The men who worked for the plantation were all around the pigsty laughing at Mr. Stewart, which made me feel better. He grabbed me by the shoulder and shouted, "You little nigger, you better com'on like I say or I'll injun!"

I knew he was trying to scare me into being tame but between the pain in my shoulder and the fear of the slave quarters, that time I was so scared that I outpaced the overseer and made it all the way to the side door. I saw Flore standing there. I ran as fast as

a wild pig but just as I got to the door Mama Flore slammed it in my face. I could still see her through the crack. I closed.

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

"Big Mama, help!"

I pulled at the door handle but it was latched. As I grabbed onto that knob I could feel Mr. Stewart. He was yelling for Big Mama Flore to come save me. I didn't fight any more. I just let him drag me. I was so afraid of the slave quarters; I was hurting because Mama Flore had abandoned me like Judah. I knew that I had become like the plantation master of the whole world.

My first moments in the slave quarters might have been frightening if it wasn't for my broken heart. I had lost her my whole life. When I'd fall and skin my knee or when the thunder-storms would come, I could always run to Mama Flore's bed in the small alcove next to the kitchen.

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

"Human beings," John said, "are lost in the needs of their bodies. Most of the time they're so busy taking care of those needs. They're so busy taking care of bodily things that they don't see the world. But John, and all of his big words, came into my life a little later on after my early days. It was afternoon when Mr. Stewart tossed me into the man-slaves' cabin.

"Not one more peep outta you, Nigger Forty-seven," he said, "or I will take you back to my cabin. This threat cut off my crying for the few seconds that the brutal overseer stared at me.

The slave cabins were long and narrow like the barracks for soldiers in the army. The one to the right had twenty-three two-tiered bunks down each side and one feather bed with a pitted brass frame. There were, I knew, ninety-three slaves in the men's slave cabin at any one time. When a man

for one reason or another there would always be a new slave to take his place. It was the same with the men didn't have that was female slaves were not allowed to get pregnant. If one died, sometimes killed. Master Tobias didn't want to care for a slave if she was pregnant and couldn't work. He didn't want worthless little pickaninnies running around eating and taking up the women's space. Sometimes Tobias would want to have his strongest male slaves reproduce and other times he would want other than that there was no unauthorized congress between slaves or between the white and numbered eighty-nine.

The stench of the slave cabin was unbearable to my spoiled nose. There were the odors of sweat and dirt there too. Between the heat, the thick air, and my broken heart I felt that I might die right then. "Well, well, well, what have we got here?" said Pritchard, man-slave Number Twenty-five. He was the only other soul in the cabin. That's because Pritchard had broken his leg three weeks ago. Holland and some others were helping Master Tobias move a big flat stone from out of the way. It was the memory of her mother, the late Una Turner.

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

But they used the mule Lacto with a grappling hook to stand the stone up and Lacto must have slipped and ran before Holland and Pritchard could make it clear of the falling flat boulder. Pritchard took the fall and got his leg busted while Holland was crushed underneath the giant rock. You couldn't even see his leg. Master Tobias had been wrong about the stone shattering. It stayed in one piece and so Tobias had to take it down. They called the horse doctor for Pritchard. After he surveyed the damage to the screaming slave, he said, "Down it go."

"That nigger's never gonna walk right again, Tobias," he said. "It's no different than I would be if I had my leg busted. But slave Number Twenty-five cried and begged the Master not to kill him. He said that he would be useful. 'Fs still useful, Mastah," I remember the miserable man crying. "Don't do me like a dog." Tobias told Pritchard that he would think about it on the ride to Atlanta. He said that he'd make the decision of whether or not to put Twenty-five to sleep.

Before Tobias left that rat-faced Mr. Stewart asked what he should do about replacing Holland. "What was his number?" Tobias asked.

"Forty-seven, sir."

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

It was the custom on the Corinthian Plantation to give all field slaves numbers. If they got hurt, they were referred to by number to the Master and the overseer by number in all of their record-keeping books.

For the first years of my life the only name I knew was babychile because that was all Mama called me. Baby for short, and if Master Tobias referred to me all he ever said was *Psalma's bastard* with a wailing cry. For nine days after the accident that maimed him Pritchard cried and dragged himself around the yard hurt terribly. At night he would cry to himself and pray out loud to God to save him from being killed. When Master Tobias came back to find that Pritchard had made himself a rude crutch and a tool for himself, he said, "You want me to fix up first, Mastuh?"

The sight of Pritchard's pain made Master laugh. I guess he thought it was funny how a man could be hurt like that. Anyway, he let Pritchard live and in the days after that Pritchard would always say that he was happy that happened to him. He ate better and staggered around the yard fixing fences and doing odd jobs. He would sleep up in the trees on the south side of the plantation.

I never did understand how a man could be happy about being crippled but Mama Flore said that was the way that kept him from feeling its sting."

And so on my first day as a field slave this broken man, Pritchard, was there to greet me, lead me to a small cast-iron stove. And even though it was a hot day, and hotter still in that close room,

rag on one end and with the other end deep in the glowing embers.

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

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

"You know the first thing a nigger got to do when he come out chere to the slave quarters," Pritchard said, angry. "He gots to get his name."

"I ain't s'posed to have no name!" I shouted, and this was true. Master Tobias had said, after I was born, because I was going to be a field slave and all a field slave needed was his number.

"That was before you came out to here." Pritchard smiled, showing me his brown, broken teeth. I was leaning against it until my back touched up against the wall behind me.

"Mastuh told Mama Flore that she couldn't name me," I said, not understanding what it was. He pulled the iron stick out of the stove and showed me the bright orange tip.

"Fat Flore ain't out here, boy," he said. "It's just me and you and I got your name right chere." When I saw that glowing brand it dawned on me what Pritchard meant.

He was stripped to the waist because of the heat. And on his right shoulder I could see the numbers of other slaves, their number branded on their right shoulder. This was the custom ever since Miss Una's grandfather told about how much that branding hurt, but because Flore had never been branded, I assumed I was different. I lived in the barn and didn't have a place like everybody else. I saw my friend Turner's daughter, Eloise, was the princess of the big house.

But at that moment I realized that being put in the slave quarters meant that I was going to be branded. I shouted "No!" and tried to run away, but the wall was at my back and Pritchard was right there. He had been a tall and hale man before his accident. But now he was bent and misshapen as if he had been run over by a body. He was light-colored compared to Mud Albert or Fred Chocolate, Master Tobias's man. "Don't do it!" I cried.

He dropped his crutch and reached for my arm but I ducked away and ran off into the long cabin. I was trapped.

"It's better to come and take it like a man, Forty-seven," Pritchard said in a scary voice. "Bein' branded is a pain, but you ain't bruised on top'a bein' branded. Take it like a man and it will only hurt like hell."

He picked up his crutch and grinned. I couldn't understand why he was so happy at the thought of branding me. I was miserable then. The numbers on the end of that brand were smoking in the hot air. I had never ever had to be the prince of my dreams.

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

"I got to do it, boy," Pritchard said with that sickening grin on his lips. "It's my job to brand slaves. Pritchard moved with the shamble of a dead man, tak-ing a step with his whole leg and the other leg. He had a smile on his face all the time but you knew he wasn't thinking about any-thing funny. He was just doing his job."

"I got to burn these numbers in your shoulder boy. Got to. That's my job. Here all this time I been bakin' corn cakes while us niggers be out here eatin' sour grain and strainin' in the cotton fields. It's a pain, but you ain't hurt."

"It ain't my fault that they made you work so hard out here, Pritchard," I said. "I din't want to be branded. I seen you laughin' at me, boy. While I was carryin' them bags'a cotton, while I be hobblin' around, you was laughin' at me. He took a step toward me and I took a step back.

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

"You ain't gonna play no more, niggah," he said as he crept forward. "After I burn these numbers in your shoulder, nigger-slave workin' sunup to sundown until you vomit up your guts and die."

As he said these words he took a quick step and threw the crutch at me. I tried to get out of the way but he was down. Be-fore I could get to my feet again Pritchard was on me. He got both of my wrists to the wall. When he pulled me up next to his face I could smell his rotten breath.

"Fma burn that numbah so far into you," he said, "that after you die they gonna find it burnin' in your bones."

He dragged me back across the room and no matter how hard I struggled I couldn't break free. When we got back to the iron stove he dropped his crutch and pressed the iron, which had been heated to a glowing red, against my shoulder. "Please don't do this to me," I begged. "Please don't. Please."

"Fma burn you good, boy," was his reply. "Fma burn you good."

I screamed and pulled and kicked and bit trying to get away from that iron. But try as I would, I couldn't move. Pritchard held my shirt, and held my arms down with his knees. Then he pulled that poker out of the fire and pressed it against my shoulder. I imagined a person could feel. It went all the way through me and I yelled and then I passed out. I would have rather stayed unconscious but the pain in my shoulder was so great that I woke up. I tried to touch the wound but it was too sore. Pritchard was say-ing something but I couldn't make it out. But then Pritchard yanked me up off the floor and yelled, "You bit me, niggah! Bit me on my shoulder!" I heard him but somehow it didn't make sense. I was the one who hurt. How could anything like that happen to me? "Little bastard," Pritchard said. "Just for that I'ma brand you again. See if'n you bite me then I'll brand you again." He pulled the brand out of the fire again and when I saw it I screamed louder than I ever had before. He then held me down with his knees again.

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

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

It was Champ Noland.

Suddenly Pritchard was gone from on top of me. I heard the iron fall on the floor. I sat up and saw Champ. He was very tall and powerful with a handsome black face except for a scar that ran across his forehead. Champ picked up the brand and put it back on the stove and then he went for Pritchard. Pritchard was in for it because everyone on the planta-tion knew that you didn't mess with the white man. The word *pain* meant.

Champ moved in and Pritchard swung his crutch. It hit Champ on the shoulder but he didn't flinch. The slave fell to the floor and rolled away. Champ moved fast then and picked Pritchard up by his collar. "You know it's Mud Albert that s'posed to brand the new slaves," Champ said. "You know it's your job to brand the new slaves." "But I was just tryin' to help out, Champ," Pritchard whined. "I didn't know I was doin' some wrong." I almost felt sorry for Pritchard in spite of the pain in my shoulder. He sounded like a lonely man. Champ let the poor cripple go and walking back to see if I was hurt.

But instead Champ hit Pritchard and hit him again. He kept hitting him even though the pain was obvious. "Don't kill me, Champ!" Pritchard cried.

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

"Don't kill me, Champ!"

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

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

"If you evah touch that boy again I will kill you," Champ said, and then he hauled off and hit Pritchard again.

Champ beat Pritchard until the lame slave wrapped

himself around the big man's ankles, dripping blood and tears on Champ's bare feet.

I wanted Champ to stop hitting Pritchard but I knew that you couldn't interfere with men who were working for the white man.

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

"You okay, boy?" Champ asked me.

Looking up at him I thought I knew what angels must be. Because even though I was in terrible pain, those feelings I began to cry. I thought that a strong man like Champ would be disappointed in me. I had a big hand on my back.

"It's okay, boy," he said. "We all cry when they burn us like that. I'm just sorry you didn't hit me back."

3.

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

Ernestine, the cook's helper-slave, dragged a cast-iron pot out to the cabin and served us a serving of the foul slop. I couldn't eat a bite of it.

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

"Naw."

"Then hand it ovah to me."

Julie took my bowl and started feeding himself with both hands. This is because they didn't see slaves, not civi-lized human beings.

Mud Albert was the oldest man on the Corinthian or any nearby plantation. He walked with a high and el-egant. The only hair he had left was at his temples and gray. But for all his age he was a man among us slaves. He was fair and deliberate and he never, in anyone's memory, did a wrong. Albert had sent Champ back to the cabin to see if I was there. Champ was to bring me out but he crawled away.

Albert and the other slaves came back at sunset, after fourteen backbreaking hours of picking cotton. I worked back in 1832 from sunup to sundown, seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five hours a year. When Albert saw my branded skin he took a jar out from under his brass bed. That was his job to check the other field slaves. It was his job to make sure that we were all chained in every night and that responsibility Master Tobias gave him a brass bed that was too old for white people to use. Albert scooped a handful of foul-smelling paste out of the jar. Then he smeared this glop on my shoulder. I hope me that the lard and herbs would help to heal my shoulder.

After that Albert assigned me to Champ's cot.

The slaves all slept two to a bunk. We didn't have the space for the luxury of our own beds. Before Albert turned down the lantern he went around chaining each one of us by our wrists to the cot for the night because it was accepted as general knowledge that a slave was most likely to decide to run away. I was happy to be there next to Champ but it was hard going to sleep with such a big man next to me almost out of the bed. But I never complained. I knew that Albert put me there so that Champ and the other slaves like Pritchard who were jealous of the easy life I had before coming out to live with them.

One day, after I had been working in the cotton fields for a while, Mud Albert told me that he had a rule. "Boys is soft and tendah," he told me. "And men are rough. Boys need a mother's touch, but men need a father's. For male and female slaves to live together that is unless the master says it's all right."

"Why?" I asked in the hot morning out among the cot-ton plants that seemed to go on forever.

"You'll know one day, boy," Albert said. "But right now you don't have to worry acause Champ is the best. What he done to Pritchard they gonna know bettah than to mess wit' you."

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

"Because Champ is the biggest, toughest, hardest-workin', friendliest slave anybody done. He gets to visit with slave women all around the county and because'a that he don't get so rough. I counted my blessings that I knew Mud Albert and Champ Noland. But for a long time I feared them."

The morning after Pritchard branded me they had us up before sunrise. You could see the stars. Mud Albert walked up and down the rows with a kerosene lantern shining in our eyes. They told us that they could get up and go to work.

Champ grunted and turned over, almost crushing me.

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

We went to relieve ourselves in the ditch out behind the cabins. Across the way we could see the stars. Then we were marched out into the cotton fields for the day's work. Even though the sun was high and the air was full of biting flies and gnats and there was the strong smell of animal manure in the morning, the first day was the sharp rocks sticking into the soles of my feet. The only piece of clothing I had was a shirt. I had no pants or shoes or hat to wear. My sleeves came way down over my hands.

Before the sun came up I was paired off with a woman named and numbered eighty-four. Sixteen the way white people counted. She'd already given birth to two children by slave man. Her children had been sold off right after they were born and so Eighty-four had turned so. Her hands were rougher than my burlap shirt and I hardly understood a word she said. Eighty-four had lived almost her whole life out among the slaves in the women's cabin and his cruel work-hands. Me and Champ and especially Mama Flore spent time learning how. To tell you what Eighty-four looked like poses a peculiar problem for me. This is because I saw Eighty-four as a scared slave boy looking upon a big, angry, black girl. She never smiled and needed help. She was, as I said, black like I am black very dark. And back then, in the day or, even worse, felt sorry for us because of our obvious ugliness and inferiority. In my childhood was, before Tall John came, ashamed of my color and of everyone who looked like me. And disgusted.

But when I remember her now there's a wholly different image in my mind's eye. Eighty-four almond-shaped eyes. Her skin was a dark black that had depth to it like the night sky. In and so I know her teeth were ivory of color and powerful. Eighty-four was beyond good-look I know her beauty now, but when I first laid eyes on her she was a fright to me.

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

"What?" I asked.

She replied by pinching my arm till it hurt terribly and repeated the words, pulling a cotton. I learned right away to watch her gestures as she spoke. That way I could keep from getting over a week.

It was dark when we started but it was hot too. I pulled cotton for a long time, cutting my shoulder bothered by the cuts at first because my shoulder still hurt pretty bad.

The moment they started working the slaves began to sing. They sang songs that were not the monthly service that the traveling Negro minister, Brother Bob,

delivered. Bob was one of the few free Negroes in the county who was at liberty to move about the cabins. These were favored slaves who got too old to work or were granted their freedom by their Master or one of the Master's children from death.

Most slaves prayed that the Master would have some accident so that they could run in and out. "Or at least he could die," many a man-slave would say, "so then I wouldn't have no master." Eighty-four thumped me on the ear while I was having these thoughts.

"Dey callin'," she said angrily. And then I heard it. "Forty-seven!" It was Mud Albert. I cut off. It was full morning by then. The sun was up and five kinds of birds were chattering in the sky. I was in pain from the brand on my shoulder, cut feet, and lacerated hands. It hurt where I worked of picking cotton. But even with all that I was still happy to be running in the late morning barrel in a clearing surrounded by dozens of empty burlap bags. All around the clearing were cotton bolls backs that were three and four times the size of a man. The sun was blazing but there was a breeze and I wasn't pulling cotton. I was breathless and hopeful.

"How's that shoulder?" Mud Albert asked me.

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

"Good. Now tell me, how'd you like cotton pickin'?" The question stymied me for a moment. I did not to complain about his lot to the boss. *How you doin'f* the boss asks you. *Good, mastuh*. But I hated picking cotton. My hands were bleeding, my back hurt, and there was something I told the cabin boss that I liked pulling cotton he might believe me and give me that job un-

What I didn't know, or what I didn't want to know, was that almost all slaves picked cotton to escape from that, no chance at some better life. Hoping that Albert would give me something. As I've said, I was fourteen at that time but I was still a child in many ways. Living in the big house with the men and there-fore had never faced many of the hard lessons of life. Be-cause I was so young. Children resist slavery better than grown men and women because children believe in the sweetness of spoonfuls of honey from the table where Mama Flore prepared meals in the big house. I dreamed of going to the town where they had stores filled with candies and soft shirts with bone buttons. I dreamed of onions. And, being a child, I thought that my dreams just might one day come true.

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

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

Mud Albert smiled because I couldn't answer his ques-tion.

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

"It's pretty hard, Mud Albert. My hands," I said holding out my bloody ringers and palms.

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

"I sorry, boy," he said. "I know that it hurts pickin' that cotton. It hurts the back and the heart too. Work can break your heart just as bad as a woman can. Every nigger out there when you have the mornin' pickin' cotton with Miss Eighty-four.

"You really too little to be workin' in the fields yet. I don't know what Master Tobias was th'ought to need you to know what it is to chop cotton. And now that you know I'ma put you out chere to do the and theah doin' things for me and the other peoples needs it. So if I have a message y' need to run up the pail and run it ovah to 'em. You understand me, boy?" "Yes suh, Mud Albert, suh," I said.

"An' don't you forget them bleedin' hands an' watery eyes, don't forget the hurt in your back when you if'n you don't do the job I give ya."

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

He laughed and nodded and handed me his water bottle. That was the first drink of water I had in a long time. I know how bad a thing it is to be a slave and I know how terrible it was but I don't believe in anything but good a cup full of water can taste. Because you have to be a deprived slave, to be kept waiting for just one swallow can be. When we finally got a drop on our tongues it was like something s

4.

From Sunday to Sunday to Sunday I ran water and mes-sages for Mud Albert.

Mr. Stewart was the plantation boss and it was his job to organize the work that the slaves did. No slave ever did anything bad under Albert because he was much kinder than any white boss I ever knew. Lying but Albert was one of us; he could tell the difference between a malingerer and someone who was sick. So Mr. Stewart would sit around talking to the white plantation workers while Albert oversaw the cotton gin.

All us slaves hated the cotton gin, the machine used to separate the cotton from the seeds. It was swallowing every pound of cotton we could deliver. If the cotton gin were idle Mas-ter would be angry. Albert knew how to keep the machine going with the least possible amount of raw cotton and he was satisfied.

And so all the slaves worked while Albert sent me to bring them water and to keep him informed. If I was off or else if somebody was sick and couldn't work I'd tell Albert and he'd tell Champ and the problem would be solved.

There were only two big problems in those first few weeks. The first was my hands. They were bleeding. Albert said that he didn't like the look of it but he didn't want to call the horse doctor either.

"Sometimes that crazy doctor jus' say to cut off what-ever limb is hurtin'," Albert told me. "That was all I needed to hear. I carried the water by holding the buckets by their handles out of sight whenever Mr. Stewart came around to make sure that his slaves were working. The other thing that happened was that the slave we called Nigger Ned, Number Twelve, died of Ned but by then he was too sick. Three days after my second Sunday in the slave quarters was dead.

Master Tobias allowed us slaves to have a burial service because Ned had been in the slave quarters. Nobody except for rascals ever had a bad word to say about him. The slaves all called him Tobias. The white people said it just because they like the way it sounded.

The free colored preacher, Brother Bob, was too far away to make it for to give the sermon at the funeral. We all walked to the slave graveyard in the evening af-ter work in the fields. The slave graveyard was a small plot of land surrounded by a dilapidated picket fence. The slender slats of wood were leaning against the fence. I remember that even in death the slaves would never have a place to spread out and rest.

Mr. Stewart let us leave the fields an hour before the sun set so that we could form in lines for the funeral. They didn't give Ned a pine box after all he was just a field slave. Instead they wrapped him in a sheet. I was standing in front of everyone because I was the smallest of the field slaves. I could see the grave, behind Master Tobias. She looked at me once but I turned away. I was so nervous. Mr. Stewart. I hoped that she would feel bad in her heart because of the way I ignored her. A row of jet black ravens stood along the slanted roof on the south side of the mansion. They were watching the proceedings. Every once in a while they made comments in their dry, crackling voices. Back in the day that day I see that it was Master Tobias who should have worried about the portent of those ravens. My hands were hurting terribly. Most of the time I held them up to keep the worst pain away. I was supposed to keep your hands down.

"We come heah today," Master Tobias said after we were all in place, "to say good-bye to Nigger Ned. Tobias, who was wearing work pants and a blue shirt, gestured toward the hole in the ground. He was looking for more or complained. We only had to beat him twice in my memory and he always worked hard. This life will have a land of milk and honey after they die. The Lord don't want no shiftless slaves. That they are worthy of heaven's bounty " "Mr. Tobias!" a man's voice called out. The ravens cried out and took wing at the sound of that man's call.

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

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

Even though my hands were hurting me and my mind was hoping that Ned had been good, I was glad that somebody would interrupt a funeral and that the orator would stop his eulogy in order to talk about his race.

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

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

"I like my fine clothes," Pike answered in an arrogant tone. He moved his head around, explaining while he did this and I could swear that for a moment his eyes were like bright rainbows.

As almost two hundred pair of Negro eyes watched, the fancy white man dismounted his horse and began to wander across the mass of black humanity.

"I lost a slave," Pike said.

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

"I don't know," the man said. "Could be. The boy is called Lemuel. He's young, maybe four thinks that he's a healer. But I think that he's just a shiftless ungrateful cur. Et my food a

"Well, if I see someone like that I'll tell you," Tobias said. "Now if you don't mind these slave Mr. Pike didn't seem too happy with being cut off for the benefit of a mob of black folk. He finally got the point and turned away. He climbed up on his magnificent mare and shouted until the rude visitor was out of earshot before he could continue with the sermon.

"Where was I?" Tobias asked. But we knew it wasn't for us to answer him. "Oh yeah. Slim v as Mud Albert. "... better than some white men. Take that no good lowlife Andrew Pike. Fro nigger. But it ain't so. That man right there sold me a horse that he said could work pullin' four days before Dr. Boggs told me that the horse had heartworm. When I complained, Pike even apologize. Took my niggers and left it for me to put his horse down.

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

Tobias slapped his hands together as if he had dug the grave himself, or maybe it was that walked away from the grave and up to his mansion. He left Mr. Stewart and nine or ten me our fellow man and friend.

Seeing those armed men was the first time I ever enter-tained the notion that white people that burial. We could have overrun those few white riflemen and killed the Master and his for our own.

For a moment I imagined screaming black men and women overrunning the riflemen, beat mansion. I saw the overboss and his men on their knees, begging for their lives like Pritchard sitting in the Master's dining room, eating ham, and putting our bare feet right up on his t I knew it was a sin to have these thoughts and it scared me to the bone. I started shivering if they did, and they told Master, I'd be in Mr. Stewart's killin' shack quicker than they could call n

"Are you all right, babychile?" Mama Flore asked.

She had come up beside me while I was having my evil thoughts and while all the other slave

"Fine," I said, letting my head hang down and holding my wounded hands behind my back

"Mud Albert told me that that dog Pritchard knocked you down and branded you," she said

"It's okay. Albert put some lard on it and it hardly even hurt except if I move." I shifted arou

"What's wrong with yo hands, sugah?"

"I got to go back to the cabin," I said. "Mud Albert said that he wanted me to clean out from

Most of the slaves were singing "Blessed Soul." Flore reached out for me but I moved away me but I just ran, crying bitterly at my sad fate and for the soul of the slave they called Nig

5.

Nobody tried to stop me when I ran away from the funeral. That's because I was so small th and escape. And nei-ther did I consider flight because where would I run? There was nothi saw me he was bound by law to catch me and beat me and return me to my owner.

My hands were hurting and so was my heart as I walked through the piney path that led fr setting and birds were singing all around. Big fat lazy bugs were floating in the air on wax back of my mind I remembered that times like that were magic and if you looked hard eno And laying eyes on such a magical creature would change everything in your life.

But that was the first day of my transition from childhood to maturity. Between the dea beginning to see that there might not be magic in the world after all. The man we called Ni words to see him on to heaven. Big Mama Flore had abandoned me and my hands were red until the day that I died. Better that I died soon, I thought, before I had to endure too muc

It was then that I noticed a sound that no bird or insect could have made. It was a thrashing sound that it might also have been a boar or bear or wildcat. I was small enough that a fearsome creature, if it had been contemplating my death, I became afraid for my life.

The fast-moving sound of crashing was over to my right. I decided not to go off to the right. I ran to the left, following the animal through the under-brush. I lit out at a run down the path and as soon as I did I heard the sound even harder and shouted once. Off to the side I could see the bushes being disturbed by the animal. He came up to me. Then he was still in the woods but ahead of me. I decided to run back the way I had come. I tripped over my own feet.

The creature stopped running and I had the feeling that it had emerged from the bushes, expecting to see the jagged teeth of a wolf or some other fearsome beast, but instead there was a boy. The boy being I had ever seen. I say that he was colored but not like any Negro I'd known. His skin was a color like copper too but not quite. His eyes were almond-shaped and large with red-brown pupils. He had a thin, his lean stance. All he wore was a pair of loose blue trousers cinched at the waist with a piece of white cloth. When our eyes met the boy seemed to be looking for something inside me. He peered close to my face. Then he broke out into a broad grin. He walked up to me, put out a helping hand, and pulled me up. "There you are at last," he said as if we were playmates just come to the end of a game. "Who you?" I replied, feeling like a fool after my fear-ful flight.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I've searched everywhere from Mis-sissip to Alabam, from Timbuktu to Oregan."

"You crazy, boy?" I asked.

I was a little put off by his obvious lies.

He just stood there nodding and smiling until a sudden seriousness came into his face.

"Did a big white man with a mustache come around here looking for me?" the boy asked.

"Sho did."

"What did they say?"

"I don't think Mastuh liked that man too much," I said. "He told him that he'd tell him if'n he found him."

"Never say master," the copper-and-brass-colored boy said. "Not unless you are looking for a master." Just hearing those words and seeing that bronze boy made my heart race faster than when he talked to me, as if we had always known each other and now we were just taking up a conversation. I almost believed that he really had been searching for me. For a moment I felt as if I had been found.

"Are you the nigger that Mr. Pike was looking for?" I asked.

"No master," he said. "No nigger either. No cur or de-mon or weed. Only life and firmament."

All his words became a little too much for my ears. I wanted him to make sense so I asked, "What's your name?" The bright-eyed, slender boy looked puzzled a moment and then he looked sad. "They call me Lemuel. Lawrence cotton fields. Mr. London McGraw called me Two-step on a Virginia to-bacco farm. I've been called a thousand names over the years," he said. "But now, I think, my name is Tall John."

"Well, Lemuel or John or Petey or whatever it is you wanna be called, we better get off'n this here place. We're sniffin' 'round for you."

A most beautiful grin spread across the runaway slave's face. He grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me. He must, dragged me through the underbrush and into the woods.

We moved quickly through the trees. My legs were pumping as fast as they could go but it didn't seem to matter. The runaway slave who called himself Tall John was laughing happily but also as if he was relieved and free.

We ran a zigzag path through the woods.

"Over this way!" he'd shout, and we'd change direc-tion. "Faster!"

I can't say why I went so easily with the strange boy. Even though he was much taller than I was, he seemed as if I already knew him, that we had known each other in an-other place and time. He was the runaway slave who called himself Tall John.

We moved through the trees so fast that I couldn't mark which way we were going. It felt as if I were

just my imagi-nation. I was running hard but it didn't make my breath come fast. My legs After quite some time of going like that we came to a cliff that looked out over a wide river. a she-bear and her two cubs sloshing through the shallow water, pawing the mud for some fully set and the sky was red with long black clouds hanging down. A lonely bird cried in the seen anything so beautiful, I had never felt so happy or at peace. I didn't know it at the time.

"Where is this?" I asked.

"White men named this place Winslet Canyon but the Indians have another name," Tall John fish and water with a hint of pine and cougar."

"How far is we from the plantation?" I wanted to know.

"Not far enough," the toffee-colored boy said, and then he added, "yet."

I squatted down at the edge of the ravine and devoured the vision with my eyes. It was so beautiful at least that he could have been buried there in the peaceful paradise that I never knew existed.

"They're looking for you, Number Forty-seven," the boy that called himself Tall John said.

"I don't hear nuthin'," I replied, not wanting to leave and not caring how he knew my name.

He grabbed me by the wrist again and said, "But they are calling. They sure are."

And then we were running again. Again I was floating above the ground, it seemed. Again I followed a path and there before me stood Master Tobias, holding the leashes of his six slave-hating boys.

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The lead dog leaped at me and snapped her vicious jaws not a hand's span away from my face. The rest of her teeth biting down.

Master Tobias yanked on his dogs' chains but they kept straining to get at me and Tall John.

"What's this?" the irate slave master said in a voice so frightening that I almost fell down from fear.

"He done arrested me, mastuh," the runaway slave Tall John said. He no longer sounded like a slave though I wanted to run. He dragged me out the bushes and said that you was the mastuh.

John let his head hang down and his jaw go slack. He stooped over and brought his hands to his face.

He no longer seemed to be the boy I had met less than an hour past.

Tobias, who was never at a loss for words in all the sea-sons I had known him, went silent for a moment and then back again.

"Is that so, Forty-seven?"

"Yessuh," I said. I would have said so no matter what he had asked. I was so frightened of the dogs and say yes and hope that those big teeth didn't tear out my windpipe.

"Who are you?" Master asked the bronze cast boy.

"They call me Tall John, your honor, suh. I was found in a cave near the Paradise Rice Plantation. Master Tobias had me but then threw me down there so that the mastuh didn't kill both me an' her."

"You not Andrew Pike's runaway nigger from the Red Clay Plantation?"

"No, suh. Uh-uh. Naw. The Paradise Plantation burnt down and I was on a raft with Mastuh Tobias and died and I been wanderin' in the wilderness evah since."

If I hadn't heard the boy describe Pike I would have believed his whopper. But as it was I knew I had no control or understanding.

"So your master is dead and his plantation is burned down?" Tobias asked.

"Yes, suh."

"And how did the plantation burn down?"

"I think it was abolitionists," John said, bugging out his eyes. "Abolitionists and maybe injuns came and burnt the plantation down and took the family and then took the slaves and run. But I stayed with my mastuh because you know I was scared."

I had never seen a slave grease a white man like that. The lie was so bold that I was sure the dogs would tear the shreds.

"What was your master's name, boy?"

"Joe," John said. "Mastuh Joe."

This brought a smile to the Tobias's lips.

"Joe?" he said. "Joseph. Did he have a last name?"

"I jes called him Mastuh Joe, Mastuh. I stayed with him until he died and then I wandered keep me. But I been lost all this time until I come upon Mr. Forty-seven here. I was so scar mastuh and that I needn't be ascaled."

"You know it's my duty to try and find your master and return you to him, don't you, son?" The only word I had to hear was the last one son. When Master Tobias uttered that word to slave he ad-dressed was now his property.

"Mastuh," John said with deep-felt awe in his voice, "if you could bring me back to my mas you."

Tobias swelled up when he heard these words. Every plantation master wanted to be loved John had greased Tobias so well that he assured himself a place on the Corinthian Plantat Whatever effect John had on Tobias it was the opposite for those bloodhounds. They doubl started braying as if they had caught the scent of a wounded deer. Tobias yanked hard on you could see their evil eyes looking hard at the both of us poor souls.

"Forty-seven," the master said when his dogs went mostly quiet.

"Yessuh."

"For the time bein' we gonna give this boy here Nigger Ned's numbah and he's gonna sleep Yessuh."

"You tell Mud Albert that I will call to see this slave up at the big house latah on and that I undah his charge. And I don't want him branded at least not yet."

"Yessuh," I said for a third time.

But for that solitary response I was speechless. I had never heard orders from the Master l slave or for that slave to be presented to him like a guest at his house. It was beyond my ex level of dogs to somebody like Tobias. He might come out to the kennel to scratch behind t pre-sent himself at the big house to meet with the Master that was like a Negro being able grabbing him and beating him and dragging him back home in chains.

Tobias pulled on his dogs' collars and dragged them back down the path toward his house us. You could tell that they could feel our flesh rend under their sharp teeth.

"I thought you said nevah t'say mastuh?" I said when Tobias was gone far enough away.

John smiled easily and I could tell that he was again the same confident young man I had

"When I talk to somebody like I talked with Tobias," he said, "it's like a joke. To me Tobias' mad beast at the wrong end of the chain. But when you say *master* and when you say *nigg*

"I am his slave," I said.

"Not anymore," Tall John said.

It's funny what one word can tell you. When Tobias called John *son* I knew that he intende John said the word *any* I knew that he wasn't one of us, the slaves, but

something different, something that neither I nor anyone I had ever known had met. I kne John, was some-thing like an angel, or a devil. But whichever one he was I knew that I wa

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"He says which?" Mud Albert asked me.

For the third time I explained what Master Tobias had told me concerning Tall John.

"For this niggah here?" Albert said.

"That's what he said," I answered for the third time also.

"What they call you?" Albert asked the strange colored slave.

"Tall John."

"Tall John? Why ain't they called you Skinny John or Copper John or just John?"

"Tall," John said as if he were considering the word for the first time in his life. "Tall... is a flea as long as he taller den alia the other fleas. To you an' me dat flea ain't no mo' den a flea. Once again Tall John was talking like a whole different person. I came to understand that still another way to me when we were alone. In this way John hid his true nature from even

"King flea," Champ Noland said, and a few of the men laughed at the outlandish idea.

"So now you want us to call you King John?" Billy Branches, slave Number Thirty-nine, asked.

"It's jes' talkin' 'bout tall right now," John said. "Fas jes' sayin' that if a flea could be tall den

"But dat flea you supposin' was taller den the othah fleas," said Number Seventy-five, also

John's eyes got big and then he rolled them around the room to check out Black Tom's claim.

I felt a grin come across my own face.

I had only been out in the slave quarters for a few weeks. In that time I had never heard of men who were chained to our bunks, the men would gather under lamplight and talk in low tones and with a lightness to our hearts.

"I don't like to conta'dict you, suh," John replied after rolling his eyes some more. "But I do not like no person hereabouts."

John's outlandish claim brought loud protests from the men.

"Dat nigger's crazy," one voice shouted.

"Dat's a lie!" another indignant man said.

There was a great deal of shouting but as angry as the men sounded they were still having a good time.

"So says you," John said in response to the doubting mob of slaves. "But let me pose you a question."

"If you sees a wood barrel stand up to here . . ." he held his hand at the level of his diaphragm.

"No," somebody said. "Dat's jes' a regular barrel. It'a have to be up to here to call it tall."

The man, Number Nineteen, held his hand shoulder high to show what he meant.

A few of the men grumbled their agreement with Nine-teen.

"All right den," Tall John said. "Now what if you see a blade'a grass come all the way up to here?"

"Sure it is," a voice from the back said.

"Uh-huh," Champ Noland agreed.

A few of the others had to admit what John said was true.

"Now look here," John said then.

He went to stand next to Champ Noland, who was the tallest and broadest man on the whole plantation.

John came up to about the middle of Champ's neck but he was so skinny that it would have been hard to see.

The room could see that Champ was more like a squat barrel where John was tall like a blade of grass.

The men broke out laughing and I was proud that I was the one who found Tall John and brought him to the plantation.

But even then I wondered at the many faces of my new friend. In front of the master he was a wise-cracking joker.

With Albert and the rest of the slaves he was a wise-cracking joker outthinking us but at times he sounded like an educated white person from some far-off city like Atlanta or Charleston.

When we were walking toward the slave quarters after see-ing Tobias, John had said to me, "You and I

we were al-ways meant to be friends.

When we were walking toward the slave quarters after see-ing Tobias, John had said to me, "You and I

"How do you know my name, boy?" I'd replied.

"I've known who you were since before you born, son. All this time I've been doing your job for you."

"Well," I'd said, "seein' that we's both slaves I guess one thing's the same as t'other."

John laughed out loud and slapped my arm. Then we got to the slave quarters, where he told me that

"Okay," Albert said, finally, after much laughter about John's riddle-like argument. "I'll put Number

Thirty-two and I'm gonna put Number Twelve and Forty-seven in the same cot." "Why you want to put

asked. "Forty-seven and this new boy is small. It'a make more sense to put them with big niggers."

"Sleep is the last thing you need, Charlie Baylor. Every time I sen' some'un to look for you. The slaves all laughed then. I could see in Charlie's face that he didn't like being made fun of, but he wanted as long as Champ Noland was there to back him up.

So John and I were given the lower bunk nearest Mud Albert's brass bed. Champ went ar Mr. Stewart came in to check our chains. All he did was go to the foot of each cot and shake the cabin.

After Mr. Stewart was gone Albert snuffed out the lanterns and so there was only light next to our bunk. "Tall John is it?" he asked my friend. "You bettah believe it, brothah," John said. "You evah hear tell of the one dey call High John the Conqueror?" Albert asked.

"You mean the trickster from Africa who makes fun'a the mastah an' who means to free all de slaves?" Albert asked.

"That's the one. They say that High John was sent by ancient African gods to bring us slaves to freedom," John said. "If'n I put high in yo' name instead'a tall dat might jes' be you."

"I haven't come here to free the slaves, Mud Albert," John said, no longer joking or making fun. "I've come here to free more slaves than do I."

These words made Albert bend forward and peer closely at my new friend.

"Be careful, boy," Albert said then. "You might think you so skinny dat you kin slip through the bars and get out the rest."

"I heah ya, boss," John replied, once again smiling and cracking wise.

"This ain't no foolin', boy," Albert said in his most serious tone. "These white folks'll kill a nigger if they see you. You better be careful."

The smile on John's face faded then. But he didn't look scared. It was more like he felt sorry for Albert. Albert walked over to his bed then. I saw his dark form for a moment and then he blew out the lantern and fell asleep quickly. They were tired from their labors and the cabin was soon filled with the sound of snoring. It seemed that I was the only one left awake.

I should have been asleep too. I had worked hard that day too. But I was wide awake because of the same. Up before dawn. Work, work, work and then work harder. And then back to the bunk before sleep or had conversations with Master on a country path.

John was something new and this lit a fire in my mind that would not go out.

I wanted to talk to John but I knew that you never woke up a sleeping slave. Slaves needed to work hard and we never got enough sleep so we were always tired.

I looked at the sky through the cracks in the ceiling, wondering when sleep would come.

At that moment I heard a silvery musical note. It sounded like a tiny bell and lasted a moment. He was awake too. "Let me see your hands," he said. I did as he bade me, happy that he was like he did. Not even the manservant, Fred Chocolate, was as well spoken or articulate as John with his silver tongue.

I held my hands out in the darkness, palms up. John traced his slender fingers across my hands. "The infection is bad," he whispered. "If it isn't taken care of you'll die."

"But I don't want the horse doctor to cut off my hands."

"He won't." John let go of my wrists and moved to get out of the cot.

"Don't," I said. "If Mud Albert sees you, you be in trouble."

"Don't worry, Forty-seven. Everybody on the entire plantation will sleep until morning. A good night's sleep will cure you." Upon saying these words John reached into his pocket and came out with a metal tube that he held up and blue beads up and down the sides of the tube that shone almost as if there was light inside like a brimless hat.

"Did you hear a tiny chime?" he asked me. "I sho did."

"That was my little sleep machine here." Then John hunched over toward our chains in the summertime. If it got cold you just had to use what-ever you had to wear to keep bedmate.

It was never comfortable in the slave quarters; I had always known that. Flimsy walls that no water from the time you went to sleep until the next day when you took your first break lazy. If you were scared they made fun of you and then whipped you so that you'd be greens. If there was meat it was half rotten and field slaves never got milk.

Some of the slaves that had come from Africa, or had been around those that did, knew how and other bugs. But no matter what we did our lot was a hard one. Our hearts and souls were that we dragged the entire nation on our skinny backs.

I felt the manacle around my ankle give. Then John jumped out of bed and lit one of the o "What you doin', niggah?" I said to the boy called Tall John.

"Neither nigger nor master be," he said. "Get up, Forty-seven, and fight for your life."

Slowly I raised up and looked around. All of the men were sleeping in the cabin. But it was fall when Mud Albert would take his secret fermenting jug from its hiding place in the barn unconscious just like as if somebody had hit them in the head with a rifle butt.

"What's wrong with them?" I asked my newfound friend.

"There's a place in your brain," John said, touching my forehead with a long thin finger, "t the air that place

kicks on and you have to stop what you're doing and get a deep rest. I caused that vibration held up the tin cigar. "All I did," he said, "was push this button and everybody within a qu dead."

"Then why ain't we asleep?" I asked. "Because we're special," John said, flashing a grin. "I peoples t'sleep or tricky words t'git peoples t'laugh. I'm just a nigger wit' bloody hair John leaned close to me and said, "Not nigger but man. And you are special, Forty-seven. I the potential of what farty old Plato called the philosopher-king." "Who?" John smiled. "Cor He grabbed me by the wrist, pulled me out of the cot and toward the door. I followed, afraid and we went out into the yard in front of the cabin.

The night air was filled with the chirps and clicks of in-sects and the smell of night blooming and stars winked all around. I remembered when I slept in the barn that some-times I would that.

"Can we go back to the cliffs where we saw the bear?" I asked.

"Not now," he said. "It's over ten miles from here and I can't carry you when there's no sun. *Ten miles!!* thought that the new boy must be crazy. But then again he did open our chains.

"Come on," he said. "We have to go off into the woods." Tall John had regular Negro features filled with au-thority so I felt that I had to go along with him. It wasn't the way that I felt with people, but I wanted to do what John asked of me. I wanted to follow him and find out what but that didn't matter; I stored it all away thinking that one day it would all make sense.

John led me back to the path where we met that after-noon. We went off about two hundred There was a recess like a cave in the side of the tree and from there John pulled out a shining rummaged around in the bag until he came out with three small tubes that were like its hiding place.

A carpetbag was a small suitcase that traveling salesmen and government officials used with suit of clothes and what-ever other necessities one might need, such as writing paper, a razor

"Come on," he said, and we headed back to the road and then toward the slave quarters.

"What is that you stoled, Tall John?" I asked as we went back up to our cabin.

"I haven't stolen a thing," he replied. "These are mine and yours."

"A slave don't even own his clothes, boy," I said, repeat-ing words that I had heard my entire

"No one owns their clothes, Forty-seven," Tall John said, "nor their bodies. These things are their own."

"Says what?" I asked.

"And," the strange boy continued, "if no one owns even their own clothes how can they possess their bodies?"

"So you savin' that Master Tobias don't own his black leather boots?" I asked.

"Every single particle in the whole wide universe is re-sponsible for its role in the unfolding of the universe. It means that if you stick your hand in a fire and burn yourself that you are the one responsible for it. You are a slave and you nod your head that you have made yourself a slave." "Are you crazy, nigger?"

He stopped and turned, pointed his elegant finger at me

under moonlight, and said, "Neither master nor nigger be."

A sudden scurrying came up behind him and I could



see Master Tobias's bloodhounds coming fast. They were bounding at us under a sickly lunar light. My breath caught and John turned around. When he saw the dogs bearing down on him he was now kneeling before the Almighty in the moment of his death. I would have knelt down and prayed for him to run when the dogs leapt on John. He put out his hands and I thought that they were biting him like he was their long lost mama come home to suckle and love them.

He cooed to them in a language that I couldn't understand. One by one they fell on their backs.

"Come over here and meet my new friends, Forty-seven," he said.

"Nuh-uh," I said. "No, suh."

"Come on," he insisted. "These dogs won't bite you."

One of the vicious hounds got up and came over to me. When she licked my fingers I started to cry. The dogs ran around the yard, playing as freely as little white kids under the moon-cast shadow of the moon. After a long while John bade good-bye to the dogs and led me back to the slave cabin.

Once inside John slapped his hands together on one of the three glass tubes he stole. This covered his hands with a thick clear paste that he rubbed on my hands. It felt cool against my skin and the pain that still lingered from the burn went away.

John returned the lantern to its place and snuffed out the flame. We got back on the cot and he handed me the soft-glass tubes to hold, one in each hand.

"Squeeze these as hard as you can in both hands," he told me.

I did what he said and both little pipes burst in my hands. A cold sensation went through me. "Keep your fists clenched like that," John said to me. "Keep them tight and in the morning I held on tight and John put his hand on my shoulder.

"This wax will heal you," he said.

I was feeling good because for the first time since I had come to the slave quarters I wasn't talking some more.

"What you thinkin' 'bout?" I asked him in the dark.

"My home," he said.

"Where that?" I asked, "Africa?"

I was beginning to think that maybe Mud Albert was right and that boy was actually an African.

"Is that a boat wit' a sun on it?" I asked.

"Not exactly," he whispered.

"What's it like where you're from?" I asked my new friend.

"My home," he said, "is very different from anything in Georgia or anywhere else on Earth. I speak and use tools." "Horses that can swing a hammah?" I asked. "Like that," he said in the dark.

"Here it is," John said, "but on my world everything is different. People are much smaller and there are no white people there?" "Some," he said.

"When did you come here?" I asked him. "A long, long, long time ago," he said, a little sadly. In the dark I could see that John turned to look at me.

"My home is so very far away that there was only enough power to bring my ship here."

"And so you can't never go home?" I asked, feeling sorry for him.

"Only inside my mind."

I didn't know what he meant but for some reason I didn't have the heart to make him explain.

"In a way you could say that," he replied. "I mean / am not from there but I'm from a place far away."

"It's even a longer way than Africa is?" "Yes."

"How far is that?"

"There are many, many miles between you and the land of your blood," he said kindly. "If you were to go to the place of your ancestors' birth you would have to walk from sunup to sun-down every day."

"That long?" I said in wonder. "And is your home that far too?"

"For each step that you'd take toward Africa I would have to travel a hundred years, and every day it would be thousands of years yet to go."

My math wasn't too good at that time. The highest number I knew was ninety-seven. But when John said beyond Africa *tens of thousands* I knew that he would wear out the soles of his feet before he got home.

"So if Africa is a year away," I said, "and your home is so much more than that, then how do you get home?" Again John smiled. "I used something created by my people called the Sun Ship."

After a while of us being quiet Tall John turned over and went to sleep. For a long time I lay in bed. As a slave had been I still felt sorry for Tall John from beyond Africa because I knew in my heart that he was a good man.

"But what could he want with a nobody like me?" I asked the darkness.

When no answer came I closed my eyes and dreamed of red skies and floating lakes.

I woke up when Champ Noland unlocked my chains. The slave cabin was a terrible shock to me where people of every color, even white, lived in harmony and peace. I was there with Mammy when she was smiling and happy in the world Tall John came from. I realized that it must have been there I didn't play with Tobias's vicious bloodhounds. The strange boy never told me about some of the things Tall John was still asleep but when I looked at him he opened his eyes.

He smiled broadly and asked, "How are your hands?"

I looked down at my clenched fists. They were closed around something that was like melted wax. I tried to get my hands open but then I could see that my wounds were healed.

The swelling was gone and there weren't even any scabs or scars. A scar in the shape of the letter 'C' had healed completely.

I felt a shock all the way down into my chest. Maybe it had all been true: the sleeping plantation, Tall John and his rainbow people.

"Get up from there, Forty-seven," Mud Albert growled. "You too, Twelve. Them cotton balls a-coming." Tall John and I got up with the rest of the men and went out into the fields. On the way Mud Albert limped and walked with a limp. "How's yo hands, Forty-seven?" Albert asked me. Instead of answering, I stopped there in the middle of the stony path.

He took my hands in his and rubbed his thumbs over the palms that were red and bleeding. "You said you healed," he said.

I didn't want to lie to Albert. He was a good man and I trusted him. But I feared that if anyone found out that he'd be punished. Because no matter how much he claimed that no one could own anything on the Corinthian Plantation that anything that came into the hands of a slave was then the property of the Master and had to be turned over to him. Albert looked into my eyes suspiciously.

"Did Johnny here have somethin' to do with this?" he asked me.

"Wit' what?"

"All right," Albert said on a sigh. "I can see you ain't talkin'. But since you all healed I want you t'pick cot-ton wit' Johnny here the first few days or so. Make sure he know what's what."

"But that's where Eighty-four workin'," I protested.

I still remembered the painful pinch she gave me.

"Since when did a slave get to pick who he work wit'?" Albert asked.

"Since nevah," I said with my head hanging down.

"Den you bettah git ovah theah an' take this joker wit' ya."

"Yes, suh," I said. "Come on, John."

My new friend and I ran quickly from the scowling Albert. I knew that he wasn't really all that bad in front of the new slave.

When I got out to the cotton fields I realized that it wasn't only my hands that felt healed.

"Don't tell me I gots ta put up wit' you two lazy niggahs this mornin'," were the first words I heard.

"Yes'm," I said politely, having no desire to receive another pinch.

I ducked my head and grabbed a burlap sack from the ground. I wanted to start picking cotton.

"Get you a sack too," I said to Tall John.

But instead of getting right to work my friend stood there staring at Eighty-four.

"What you lookin' at, fool?" Eighty-four said.

She wore a faded and torn blue dress that had seen lots of sweat and dirt, little water, and she was small and so the hemline was way up past her knees.

"You, ma'am," the skinny jokester, Tall John, said.

"Me? You needs t'be eyeballin' dat cotton."

"I s'pose," John said easily. "It's true that cotton is tall and strong like you. An' mebbe another chere all I see is you."

For a moment Eighty-four was taken off guard.

"You spoonin' me, boy?" she asked at last.

"Tall John," he said, holding out a hand.

Eighty-four had unkempt bushy hair that was festooned with tiny branches and burrs. She had a tangle of hair that had formed above her left eye. I was worried that she was getting ready to cry. They shook and she even gave him a shy smile.

"They told us," John said, still holding onto her hand, "that we was to come work wit' you."

For a moment there was a friendly light in the surly girl-slave's eye, but then it turned hard.

"Da womens calls me Fatfoot an' da mens calls me Porky 'cause dey say I'm like a poc'apin'."

"None'a them names fit a nice girl like you," John said. "So if you don't mind I think I'll call you sky you seemed to belong there jes like you was the reason they came to-gether."

Eighty-four's eyes widened a bit and she took a closer look at my friend. I'm sure she was touched by such nice and charming words to a surly and taciturn field slave who was black as tar and red as blood.

"Shet yo' mouf an' git ta pickin'," Eighty-four said, throwing off the web of flattery John had cast.

When we came up she had dropped her big cotton sack, which was already a quarter filled with cotton. She threw it over his shoulder.

"They send us to take the weight off'a you for a time,

Tweenie," he said. "Me'n Forty-seven here is s'posed t'make it easier for you."

"Boy," Eighty-four said. "Skinny nigger like you couldn't carry that bag more'n ten paces."

"I'll do ten an' den ten more," John replied. "You'll see."

Eighty-four sucked her tooth and grunted, but she let John carry her bag. She and I fell away from his sack.

Eighty-four kept looking over at John, expecting him to falter under the weight of the cotton bag. The bag was filling up. It wasn't long before it rose eight feet up off of John's back and trailed behind him. John was sweating but he had enough breath to keep talking to Eighty-four.

"Tweenie, you evah wished you could jes th'ow off this cotton an' run out into the woods an' live?"

That must have been just what Eighty-four was think-ing because she shouted, "Sho' do! Cotton an' a crust'a bread an' my life be heaven."

I didn't interrupt their conversation. From experience I knew that my presence made Eighty-four nervous. My only reason to keep quiet. I was concentrating on how I pulled those cotton balls so that my hands

9.

Neither Eighty-four nor I carried the cotton bag that day. John lugged the big bag up and down the path. The whole time John sweet-talked Eighty-four.

"Bein' a slave ain't half bad," he said in the long shadows of the late afternoon, "if'n you could be a beautiful girl."

"You should let me carry that sack now, Johnny," Eighty-four said with a smile. "Yo' back n' neck." And there it was again, just one word. Not even a word but just adding the *e* sound at the end. I was with Tall John the flatterer.

At the end of the day we had pulled more cotton than any other three slaves on the whole plantation. When we walked the stony path back to the slave quarters Eighty-four made sure that she was seen while, making sure that Mr. Stewart wasn't anywhere to see them.

John seemed to genuinely like Eighty-four. This perplexed me because no one else I knew was. At the fork in the road where the men and women split off from each other, I went up to John

"Why you so sweet to that sour girl?" I asked.

"Tweenie?" John said with a smile. "She's something else. That girl could work a whole farm or so full of love."

"But she jes' a field slave," I argued.

"That's what you say about yourself," John pointed out.

"But you on'y met her today."

"I only met you yesterday," he countered.

"But you said that you come here lookin' for me. You lookin' for Eighty-four too?"

"No," John said. He stopped walking and so did I. "I wasn't looking for Tweenie but when I heart went out to her. Her loss and mine are very much alike."

"How did you know about the babies that Mastuh took from her?" I asked.

He pointed at me and said, "Neither master nor nig-ger be."

"Numbah Twelve!" Mud Albert shouted. "Forty-seven! Get yo black butts movin'."

We hurried off before John could tell me how he knew about Eighty-four's babies. I had been told slaves had told him. But I forgot about that mystery for a while because we were running a farm. The men hustled into the slave cabins and Ernestine brought us our porridge.

I wasn't particular about what I ate by that time. What-ever they put in front of me I sucked down. I was hungry morning, noon, and night. I dreamed about corn cakes and strawberries. Some of the men was eating.

That night after a full day of picking cotton I was so tired that all I wanted to do was eat, then I was asking John questions.

"Where you from?" Charlie Baylor asked.

"Where we're all from," John said as if that was the only answer and why didn't Charlie know?

"And where's that?" Billy Branches asked.

"Don't you know where you from?" John asked back.

"I rolled out from a burlap sack on a mud flat in the rain," Number Eight, also known as Charlie, said. "I don't know his own name."

The men all laughed at Pete's made-up rhymes.

"His name was Africa," Tall John pronounced, "whether he knew it or not."

The men all stopped laughing then. I sat up from my bunkbed to see if maybe they were afraid.

"What you know 'bout the jungle, niggah?" Frankei, Number Eleven, asked angrily.

"Not a thing Brotha Frankie," John replied. "I know about the great civilizations of Kush and Egypt."

"You come from Africa?" Mud Albert asked then.

"I been there."

"So you are High John the so-called conqueror?"

"No," John said, not me. But he is among you."

"High John?" Champ said. "Here? Which one of us is it?"

The men all looked around at each other.

"Why, Forty-seven of course," Tall John said.

The men all started laughing, guffawing actually. Mud Albert laughed so hard he had to get up.

"Him?" Black Tom said.

"That runt?" Billy Coco added.

"How can you spect us to believesumpin' like that, Johnny?" Mud Albert asked. He had finally been off the plantation. Why, he don't even have a proper name."

"Is you High John?" a slave we called Three-toed Bill asked me.

"Go on!" I said angrily

I was hoping that Tall John would stop his foolish talk, but that wish was not to be granted.

"Sure he is," John said. "Maybe you don't know it. Maybe he don't know it. But that's the way it is."

He's a spirit from the homeland. He burrow doen here or there for a while, do his business
"An' how come you know that if n you ain't him?" Mud Albert asked. He was no longer lau
The rest of the men sobered up too.

"At some othah time High John's spirit mighta passed through me, yeah," John said. "That
the Conqueror. He might not know it yet but this boy is destined for greatness. An' if you s
the chains of freedom."

"Chains'a freedom!" Three-toed said. "What the heck do that s'posed to mean?"

"It means many things, my friend," John replied. "And if you follow Forty-seven and you lis
Boy is jest a fool," Sixty-three said, meaning John.

The other men seemed to agree and so they turned away towards their bunks.

Our chains were put on and the lights were put out. When the cabin was filled with snores

"What was all that nonsense you tellin' them about me? I ain't no High John the Conqueror

"How would you know that?" my friend asked in the dark.

"I know who I am," I said.

"Not if you call yourself nigger," he said. "Not if you call Tobias Master. You have no idea of

"But you do?"

"Yes."

"An' what will I be?" I was afraid of the answer but still I had to ask. The other men might h
experienced his magic. I knew to take that boy seriously.

But that was not to be a night of answers.

"Go to sleep, Forty-seven," he said. "You need your rest."

Those words were like a blindfold being pulled over my eyes. No sooner than he said them
redbird feathers and a crown made from broken slave chains. I marched from plantation to
their places behind me. Behind them the white men who had been our masters scratched
The next three days passed in pretty much the same way. During the daylight hours Eighty
completely infat-uated with my friend. She was always touching his arm and grinning at him. He
though I couldn't see (at that rime) what he saw in her.

They were both always laughing and grinning, except on the afternoon of the second day.

"Tell me about your children, Tweenie," he said out of the blue. We were working on our ei

"I cain't talk about it," Eighty-four said with a tear in her voice. "It's a hurt in my heart."

"But maybe if you talk about it," John pressed, "then maybe you could stop it from hurtin'

"You think so?" she asked. "'Cause you know I be thinkin' 'bout them all the time."

John stopped walking and even set down the half-filled sack of cotton. He put his hands on
seen some women do when Brother Bob touched someone, saying that they were now one w
John went down on his knees too and I looked around to make sure that no white man or
cotton so that we didn't get in trouble but the hurt in Eighty-four's face made me mute.

"Dey's LeRoy an' Abraham," Eighty-four said softly. Tears were cascading down her berry b
evil-hearted Mr. Stewart meant to take'em from me. Dey was so pretty... an' each
loved 'em so much that it hurt. An' den, when dey took 'em away, it hurt so bad I was sho
master's be good to 'em 'cause dey'd grow up into mens that'd be good workers."

Eighty-four began to howl then and John took her into his arms. I was sad for Eighty-four's
punish us for malinger-ing. And I was also amazed because John was crying along with Eigh
way that Abraham and LeRoy were lost.

The next morning Mud Albert had me take John out to the west field to see if there were a
there. Mud Albert called that tree his private orchard. John and I took a short-cut past the
On the way John was in a good mood. He was talking to me about my future.

"One day," he said, "many years from now you will think back on these days and say that i

He didn't finish because when we got close to that tree he grabbed his head and fell to the ground just as if Champ Noland had cuffed him. He screamed, "What is this place?" he pleaded. He writhed on the ground and white foam appeared at the top of his head. "What's here?"

I got down on my knees and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"This is where they hangs killers an' robbers an' slaves gone wrong," I said. "What's the matter?" He pointed up at the branch where I had once seen Tommy Brown hanging with his neck broken. "That's Tommy for stealing a chicken from the Master's henhouse."

I had also seen Billy Lukas, slave Number Six, swinging in a breeze from that branch. They said that he was leering at her as she was riding down the road in her buggy.

John yelled again and then begged me to take him out from there. I did what he asked.

"More than a hundred men have been murdered under that tree," he said when we were far away.

10.

John, Eighty-four, and I picked cotton for the next days. On my last day in the slave cabin I spent the afternoon with him entertaining them with some wild and unpredictable talk.

"If you so smart," Silent Sam, slave Number Forty-six, asked John, "why'd you give yourself up?"

"I don't know about you," John replied, "but I ain't no slave."

"You ain't?"

"No, suh I ain't."

"Den what you doin' pickin' cotton like a slave?"

"I'm pickin' cotton 'cause I wanna pick cotton, of course."

Upon hearing this every man in the cabin, including me, broke out into laughter.

"So that mean if you didn't wanna pick cotton you wouldn't have to," Sam speculated.

"Dat's right."

"An' how you gonna get away wit' that?"

"No gettin' away to it, brothah. If I didn't wanna pick cotton I jes' wouldn't do it."

"But then they gonna beat you."

"That's what freedom's all about," John said in a serious voice. "Free is when you say yea or nay to your master. All freedom is, is you."

There was no more laughing that night. I could see in the men's faces that they were wondering what John meant by those words that he spoke out loud.

I turned in with the rest and went to sleep, not realizing that that was to be my last night in the cabin.

"Lemme take this next bag, John," Eighty-four said when my friend reached down to get one of the bags. "It's already full."

"Thas okay, Tweenie," John said as he threw the sack over his shoulder. "Me'n Forty-seven will take the rest."

"Where you goin'?" she asked. There was the pain of loss in her voice.

"Tobias wanna see me."

It was the first I'd heard of it.

"Mastuh?" Eighty-four asked.

"Tobias," John said again.

"What you got to do wit' him?"

"Maybe if he ain't lookin'," John said instead of answering her question, "I'll grab some sugar for you. If you want here I'll give that sugar to you for bein' so sweet."

For a second there I thought that there was something wrong with Eighty-four's face but then I saw his smile. The missing front tooth was still a nice smile. The power to bring happiness into that sad slave's face was still there.

and putting the plantation to sleep all rolled together.

"You the one sweet," Eighty-four said to John.

I must have been smiling too because Eighty-four frowned again and said, "What you laughin' at?" Her sudden anger caught me off guard but luckily I didn't have time to speak and make a response. I heard calling.

"Forty-seven!" he cried. "Numbah Twelve!"

I cocked my head as if listening for more and, in doing so, I was able to avoid Eighty-four's gaze.

"Got to go," I said to John.

"Bye, Tweenie," John said. He dropped the burlap sack and smiled.

She grabbed onto his arm and looked into his eyes beseechingly.

"You come on back, heah?" she said.

And there again was the power of my new friend. We had only been in the fields with Eighty-four but she was already heartbroken at the prospect of his departure.

I understood her pain. I would feel the same way when John was gone from the Corinthian plantation. I knew in my heart that a person as beautiful and smart as John was not destined to remain here.

But John wasn't gone yet. He and I ran down a rough path through the cotton bushes. Along the way were several sacks of cotton. Flies zipped around them and the sun beat down like Satan's hammer on our heads. About half the way to where Mud Albert was John stopped and looked out at the slaves.

"We cain't waste time, John," I said. "Albert expect us ta hump it."

"I'm just looking," John said.

"Slave ain't s'posed t'be lookin'," I told him. "Slave s'posed to be doin' sumpin so that the master can rest."

"I have no master, Forty-seven. No master but the power that keeps my feet on the ground."

"Come on," I said, grabbing him by the arm.

I yanked but he wouldn't budge.

"Do you think that it's fair for those people to be forced to work day in and day out for their masters?"

"We gotta go," I replied.

"Answer my question and we can go."

I could tell that John wasn't going to move until I responded.

"'Course I hate it that we slaves but what else we gonna do? Who would take care of us and our families?"

"You could take care of yourselves," he said. "Buy your own farms, raise your own food."

Nobody had ever said anything like this to me before. The idea scared me. How could I do a thing like that? I was lazy and how to work like a dog.

"Let's go," I whispered.

On the way Tall John changed moods again. He made silly faces and did cartwheels as we walked. When we got to the open field that Mud Albert called his office we found the aged slave sitting on a bench.

"What you grinnin' about, boy?" he asked me.

"Am I grinnin', Mud Albert, suh?"

"You sure is, niggah," he said. "You an' this red-eyed joker heah."

I thought that Tall John might try to correct Albert's use of the word nigger but all my friend said was:

"I's sorry," I said.

"Don't be sorry for laughin', boy. There sure is little enough of it in a nigger's lifetime."

I bowed my head because a tear came to my eye. For the first time I truly knew the sadness of slavery. The day we wrap him in burlap and slap the dust from our hands.

I loved Mud Albert and I regretted his unfair lot.

"I got word from the house that Mastuh Tobias wanna see this new boy right away," Albert said.

"Yessuh," John shouted.

"Go on then. Forty-seven'll show you the way. He'll wait for you too so that you don't get lost."

As we ran between the bright green leaves I asked John, "Why'd you give Eighty-four a name like that?"

Up until then we'd been making our way quickstep through the bushes. But then John stepped deep that I felt my heart wrench.

"What?" I asked when he didn't speak.

"Your name is set," he said. "Wrought in metal and sent 'n a great ship on the long journey for the rest of time my people and even the Upper Level will know you by the number given."

"What you talkin' 'bout?" I asked. His words were so wild that they felt like mosquitoes buzzing. I tell you that I've been searching for you all this time?"

"But how you gonna know to look for me?" I asked. "How you even know I was here?"

"I have always known that you would be here one day, Forty-seven. Long before men made land we knew that you were coming. I waited and wandered and searched until I could no longer once did I give up hope. I never doubted the promise."

"What promise?"

"You, Forty-seven. You are the promise. Your blood is capable of great power, your heart is strong. We stared into each other's eyes and a profound feeling passed between us. There was a promise. He grinned and ran off toward Tobias's home.

10.

"You wait out on the back porch until the Master is through with Number Twelve," Fred Chocolate said. Fred was a tall man, thin and blacker than nighttime. He had great white eyes and a perpetual smile. He wore dark lapels and a white shirt with a string tie. His shoes looked like black glass they were so shiny. He was like butterflies in a black forest.

Before meeting Tall John I believed that Fred Chocolate was the most elegant colored man I had ever seen. Fred Chocolate was named by Tobias's wife when she was just a child. She called him Chocolate because his name stuck to him. He was such a favorite of the Master that Tobias allowed the butler to help him with his clothes. Mabel Chocolate was also one of Miss Eloise's maids.

Fred spoke for the Master when he was away and even gave orders to the white workers, all of them. On the porch I ran around the house to the little platform built behind the slave's entrance.

I sat down on the stoop there and watched the little black ants make their way, in long lines, through the bushes. Those ants had been making that journey as long as I could remember. Many a slave had a queen that lived under the ground. I thought that the slaves were like those ants: Flocks of ants on a plantation and all the slaves on all the plantations in all of Georgia. I looked around to see if I was like I was doing. But I never saw a lazy ant. Even they were better than I that's what I thought.

"Hi, babychile," a voice said.

Big Mama Flore had come up behind me and was looking down on my head.

I frowned and grabbed a stick to hit those ants with. But when I was about to strike them I saw a hard-hearted person was to strike me and my friends for no reason. So instead I threw the stick. "What do you do' on me, Big Mama?" I cried. She knelt down next to me and wrapped me in her arms.

When she hugged me I started to cry and she did too. She

kissed my cheek and our tears rolled together. She pulled the burrs out of my hair.

She didn't answer my question but it wasn't necessary. In my heart I knew why she turned away. I wanted. I had to do what the Master decreed.

Neither master nor nigger be, the words came to me as they would time and again over the years. It was also a danger if I ever said it out loud.

"How's it goin' out there with Mud Albert and Champ?" Flore asked me.

It was just a simple question. One word would have sufficed for the answer. But it opened

branding me and about Champ's beating of him. I told her about the cotton and Eighty-four Tall John but I didn't tell her about the wonderful things he could do. I didn't tell because he might take him away and I'd never see him again. "Lemme see yo hands," Flore said at once. "They all healed," she said. "Mud Albert said that you had real bad cuts. How'd they get better?" I hunched my shoulders. I really didn't know what John had done.

"I guess I jes heal quick," I said.

We talked for a long time and at the end Flore wrapped, four molasses cookies in a napkin and that Fred Chocolate showed up with Tall John in tow.

"Go back to work," the haughty manservant said. Flore kissed my cheek. Then she looked at John. "ma'am," John said brightly. "My baby here likes you," she added. "He is a fine person, Nunu. Your race has to offer."

"Watch your mouth," Fred Chocolate said as he slapped the top of John's head.

But my friend didn't cower or wince. He kept Flore's eye and she looked at him in wonder.

"It was nice to meet you, young man," she said then. "I'm afraid you'll be seein' more of him. I want you to know that this copper-colored piece'a trash can help Miss Eloise." "He has the touch?" Flore asked.

"My people know a great deal about herbs and heal-ing," he said. "We've been curing disease for years."

"That's the lies he tole Mastuh," Chocolate said. "Now we have to smell his field stink all over the place."

11.

I heard all the words but I didn't really care about any-thing but the insinuation that Miss Eloise was Back then in my *s/avemind*, as John called it, I thought that Eloise was the closest thing to the most beautiful girl in all the world. I loved her in my heart as Brother Bob told us we had to pray for her. In my prayers I asked Him to keep her safe. I felt that if anything happened to Miss Eloise that I would be sorry. Miss Eloise was a beautiful child, that's for sure. And I learned later that she was a good person. I was a slave because that whiteness meant freedom, and freedom was what I wanted more than anything. As soon as John and I were away from the back door of the mansion I asked him, "Did you see her?" He didn't answer me right off. Instead he walked with me in silence until we got to a fence and went maybe a dozen paces into the bushes. There, behind a big bramble bush, was a place where a slave who needed to take a load off without being seen. I had never known about that resting place. I was too upset about Miss Eloise to question him about it.

"Did you see her?" I asked again.

John sat back on the cottonwood trunk and pulled his knee up to his skinny chest.

"Yes, I did," he said after a moment's thought. "Tobias asked me if I knew anything about her. The runaway slave was a healer. I told him that I wasn't Pike's runaway, even though I am, and he owed him two slaves and so that I was safe with him. All he cared about was if I was a healer."

"And what did you say?" I said, trying to move the story along.

"I told him that my people knew about healing."

"And so? Did you see Miss Eloise?" I asked for the third time.

"Yes. Tobias brought me to her. Her room is filled with sunlight. It was brightly painted and she was sleeping badly. She had fever."

"What's wrong with her?" I cried.

"I was only allowed to take her pulse," John said. "But I'm pretty sure that she has a blood fever."

"Naw it ain't," I cried, putting my hands to my head. "I just saw her last week swinging on the porch."

"She was probably already sick but it was only since then that the infection entered her blood."

"Don't say that!" I yelled. I didn't want to hear some-thing that might cause the beautiful Miss Eloise to die."

"We have to go looking for herbs," John said, not seem-ing to be very concerned. "Tobias gather the medicines they think we'll need to save her life."

With that John got up and strode off into the woods. I followed him, somehow realizing that I knew not where.

12

As soon as we were off the path John took me by the wrist and again we ran on the wind of ancient giants looming over dark forest undergrowth.

At one point we came to a field of wild strawberries. John stopped there and took off his necklace that I remem-bered the molasses cookies Flore pinned to my shirt. We sat down on the grass, I was hungry too. Ever since I had been work-ing in the fields I was hungry all the time, nearly starving.

John told me that the forest we were in was very old and filled with spices and fungi that were poisonous. "What do gnats got to do wit' men?" I asked, trying to put together the strange sounds he used.

"Not *gnat man*" he said. "Human anatomy. That is the study of the parts of the human body."

"Who told you *about gnat man meV*"

Tall John smiled and put a hand on my shoulder.

"I am not what I appear to be," he said. "I come from far, far away as I have already told you. I know what my people call science. Because of this I have a great deal of knowl-edge about the human body, but my heart that I fail to understand."

"And do you know what mushrooms will get the bugs outta Miss Eloise's brain?" I asked, uncertain.

"Yes," he said. "There are a few herbs that will assist her healing. And also you need proper sustenance. Burn on your shoul-der. You need sustenance."

"I don' care about me," I said. "I just wanna make sure that Miss Eloise gets bettah. An' you know what?" John held up a finger and I knew that he wanted me to remember his admonition.

"It don't mattah if you call'im Master or Tobias," I con-tinued. "If he figures out that you jes' want to killin' shack and that will be all she spoke about you."

John smiled and said, "You love that little child Eloise don't you, Forty-seven?"

"She's like the angels that Brother Bob talks on and on about at his sermons."

"She's just a person."

"No," I complained. "She's the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Eighty-four is just as beautiful in her own way," my new friend argued.

"How can you say somethin' like that, boy?" I said. "Eighty-four's black and ugly with nappies. You love Eloise."

"Come with me," Tall John said.

He jumped up from where we were and led me a short way down an animal path to a wide, shallow pond.

"Look," he said. "Look at yourself in the water."

The water was absolutely motionless and reflective like a polished mirror. I could see my reflection.

"Take off that shirt, Forty-seven."

I did as he told me, standing naked at the pond's edge.

When I looked down into the reflective pool I could see that my skin was very dark and that I was very muscular. I looked like every which way, but I looked like I imagined myself.

"You have a perfect face and body and the strength to run all day without aches and pains. You are open to the pain of others. You love Eloise and so she is beautiful to you, but Eighty-four nappies. You love beauty even as you see it in the white child."

"But beauty just is," I said. "I can't make somethin' lovely jes' by savin' so."

John waved his hand and my image in the pond changed into Big Mama Flore. She was just like Flore.

My heart opened up when I saw Flore.

"Is she beautiful?" John asked.

"Oh, yes," I cried. "She's the most beautiful thing in all the world."

"She has black skin and nappy hair," John argued. "She has big lips and ashy elbows."

I turned away from the image in the water and asked, "Are you a angel?"

"No, Forty-seven. I'm just a helper."

"What you helpin'?"

"I'm helping you to save the universe."

"But I'm just a nig " I stopped myself in the middle of the prohibited word.

"All of my people," John said, "my whole race says a prayer for you every night. They have a nappy-headed child who was born into slavery and who shall ride into the greatest battle in the world. When Tall John from beyond Africa spoke I almost be-lieved what he said. There was so much in his eyes that I almost believed him."

I took a deep breath and felt the weight of his words on my shoulders. I didn't even know what it would be like to be at least as big as Georgia, and Georgia, I knew, was so big that it would take a strong man to hold it together.

"Boy, what you yammerin' about?" I asked. "I'm just a nigger, born a slave."

"No," John said. "You are Forty-seven. You are the hope of your world and mine and all the worlds to come."

"You is crazy, boy."

Instead of answering John laughed and pushed me into the pond. The shock of the cold water was so hard that I couldn't climb out again. But then John held out his hand and made like he was pulling me out. I pushed him away and he pushed me in again. He stood there at the water line laughing at me.

"Help me out, fool," I said.

And when he stuck out his hand I grabbed on and let my weight go, pulling him in with me. Every time he got his footing I pushed him back again. We were laughing so hard that finally we fell back. That was one of the happiest moments I've had in the nearly two hundred years of my long life. I laughed without worrying that somebody might hear and come and thump my head. I never knew what it was like to lie there next to your best friend in the whole world. I had eaten strawberries and cookies and went splash-ing in a forbidden pond.

It was forbidden because all things that were fun or free were forbidden to slaves. I could see for sure it was a white man.

But none of that mattered because there I was, alone in the woods with the most wonderful man I had ever met. He liked my black skin and dusty hair, he thought that I was a hero and who was I to say no? After a long while lying in the mud I waded out into the water to wash my skin and rough hair. I scowled.

"Clouds," he said. "We may have to find shelter."

Him saying the word *shelter* reminded me of something.

"How did you know where that tree trunk where we sat down on was?" I asked. "I mean you could see it from here."

"You see, Forty-seven?" he said as if I had just proven a point. "You notice things and you can see the reasons why you are destined to become a great hero."

"You ain't answered my question, John."

"I've been hanging around the plantation for almost a week," he said. "Looking for you."

"Me?"

"I could sense you, hear your music among all of the music that men make with their blood."

"Music in they blood?" I said, suddenly afraid that John might be some kind of devil that did not belong in this world.

"Yes," he said with a smile. "Every living being has their own song thrilling through the strings of their life. I make sure I really heard it playing in amongst the others. And once I knew you were here I knew I had to find you."

"What task?"

"Saving the universe."

"Where's that?"

"Everywhere," he said, "all over the world and up to the stars."

"Like a ocean?"

"Something like that," John said.

"If you was free an' lookin' fo' me den why'd you let 'em make you into a slave?" I asked.

"Because of a creature named Wall," John said seriously.

"Who's that?"

"He's the one who might destroy everything unless we stop him. He found out that I had b

"What was you doin' there?"

"Looking for you. All I have done for the past three thousand years is look for you. That's b
and *when*. That's why I was on the Red Clay Plantation, because some-one with a song almost like
away. After I left Wall caught my scent and he took over Andrew Pike's body and came look

"And so Andrew Pike is under a spell?"

"Pike is dead and Wall walks the earth in his flesh."

"And who is this Wall?"

"He is, as far as you are concerned, the devil."

These words shook me to my soul. I didn't want to ask any more questions. I didn't want J

Again he looked at the sky.

Again he said, "Clouds."

"Maybe it'll rain," I said, grateful for mundane conver-sation. "That'll be good for the garden

"But I can't carry you if the sun isn't out."

"Why not?"

"Because my powers, such as they are, are derived from solar energy. My body is like a bat
attempt to carry us home without the sun shining my energy would run out and I might ev

"How far is we from Corinthian?" I asked.

"Sixty miles at least."

Before I could voice my dismay John grabbed me by the wrist and we took off. We ran for a
earlier. Fat raindrops had started to fall and the sky was dark with rain clouds.

"We'll have to stay here until the sun comes out again," John said.

"What if it don't come out?" I asked.

"Then we will have to wait until morning."

"Mastuh'll kill us we do that," I wailed.

"As long as you see him as master he may very well," John said. "But if you see that you ar
than you need him then, just maybe, you will be reprieved."

My heart was beating fast and my guts were churning.

"Let's try to run back," I cried.

"It's at least thirty miles away, Forty-seven, maybe forty. We would never make it in

"But he'll kill us."

"Kill us and he kills his precious Eloise."

I wanted to beat the smug slave's face in. Here he had shown me the best time of my whole
with him?

The rains came down hard but the thick foliage of the an-cient tree kept us mostly dry. The
space was like a big, carpeted room. When the night came on it became very
dark. John and I leaned against the bark, shoulder to shoul-der. The dark and the sound o
nodded and almost fell asleep.

"Do you want to see where I'm from?" I thought I heard him say.

"Might as well," I said, "seein' as it'll prob'ly be the last story I hear 'fore Mastuh tie me to t

I turned on my side and I'm pretty sure that I fell asleep.

I opened my eyes on a beautiful day in some far-off and wonderful place. Not only was I awake, somewhere in my mind I worried that I might be seen by some white man who would beat me broad and straight so I figured that if I saw somebody coming that I could run away before he got to me. But when I looked around I realized that I didn't need to worry. The plants on the side of the road were proper trees. And the sky was pink and red and the road was paved with some-thing like gravel. The air was clear.

"This is where I am from," a voice said.

I stopped running and turned to see my friend was standing there next to me.

It was John and then again it wasn't. He had the same deep voice and his eyes were deep and kind as they had been on the Corinthian Plantation. But his skin was more orange than brown. And above his head I could see a shimmering light. You can imagine that I was amazed by the events unfolding around me. The last thing I remember was a sudden I was in a strange new land and my friend had grown a foot and changed colors on his skin.

"What the hell you doin' to me, niggah?" I said.

He pointed at me and said, "Neither master nor nigger be."

In this new place his words took on a new meaning. They brought about a vision: I saw Tall John was holding a whip and the abject slave was writhing on the ground, begging our master for mercy. I didn't want to be either one of them. I reached out in my imagination and pushed Tall John and his lecturing finger away.

"That's right, Forty-seven," John said as if he knew what had been going on in my head.

"Go beyond it," John continued. "Just because they treat you like that doesn't mean you're a nigger." As the images faded from my mind I was once again aware of the strange land around me.

"You live here?" I asked.

"No," Tall John, the orange being from beyond Africa, said.

"But you were born here?"

"Yes," he said. "My ancestors were born here many millions of years ago. It is a planet called Earth. It exists."

"Far beyond the dirt?" I asked. The only time I had heard anyone use the word *earth* they were talking about the planet.

"Earth," he said again. "It is the planet you come from. Like the moon only larger and crowded."

"An' this place "

"My planet Elle," he interjected.

"Yeah. This place Elle is a earth too but so far away that you can't get there?"

Tall John nodded and smiled. He was even taller now and his orange skin was tinged with red. I was beginning to think that he wasn't a boy at all.

"An' why couldn't we bring our real bodies here?" I asked.

"Because if I spent the rest of my life trying to get here I would hardly be any closer than I am now."

"You as far from yo home as I am from my freedom," I said, surprising myself with the thought. John smiled and nodded. He put his hand on my shoulder and we walked on in the strange land.

As we walked he spoke to me in his commanding tone.

"But I could bring us here because all I have to do is remember and the great mind delivers us."

"Like if I remembered the river you brought me to?" I asked. "I could go there just by remembering."

"Yes," John said. "Behind all of existence there is one great mind. And every single living, thinking thing is connected to it with it you can always return to a place or a thought that you once had."

"Like make-believe?" I asked.

"No. We are really here at this moment but as wraiths."

"Ghosts?"

"Someone ignorant of the Great Mind might see us as ghosts but no one on Elle would make a mistake. As we walked the red and purple forest gave way to a wide plain made up of what looked like red-brown and none were piled higher than a man. The piles were all shivering. They looked like people. "That's right," John said as if he could hear my thoughts. "They are living things, creatures of the Great Mind. "These are your people?" I asked.

"No," the taller and taller boy said. "Not really. I mean, once we were all one people but that's why we want to document our re-relationship."

As he spoke one of the shivering piles of stones exploded outward, disgorging an albino creature with a dozen limbs that seemed to work as both legs and arms. The creature (which was about the size of a man) shook itself, throwing off the water of its birth. Then it moved its head around until great beams of light shined out a terrible scream and then flew aloft on its blue wings.

"Where's it goin'?" I asked as my friend and I watched the winged thing fade into the pink-tinged sky. "To seek the God-Mind and kill it," he said. "To rend the universe open and feast on its head." Up until that moment I wasn't truly troubled by the sights I beheld. Even the physicist I had met already knew he was different on the inside from the way he talked. But John's words about the God-Mind gave me an idea what a God-Mind was but I had heard the word *God* before and I knew that killing a God-Mind was a big deal. The stacks of birthing stones spread out as far as the eyes could see. Here and there

+7

Calash race were rising up from their cocoons and taking flight.

"There must be more of'em than Mud Albert could count," I said.

"They are as plentiful as the stars," John agreed, "and yet there is but one."

"What's that mean?" I asked. "You will see," he said.

Another stack of stones burst open nearer to us. The big-headed white creature with its wings spread wide had wings. But this one, rather than gliding off into the sky, turned its one great beam of light toward the previous newborn, but instead of leaving he dove at us. John and I ducked down. The creature that arose the eerie bird-like thing wheeled in the sky, obviously intent on attack-ing again.

"Let's skip this part," John said.

He waved his orange and purple hand through the air and suddenly we were standing on a platform in the sky above or ground below us, only thousands of small black platforms that jutted out from the ground. I realized that we were in the largest place that I had ever been, even larger than that. While I watched, a small creature walked out up the ledge nearest my eye. He was no larger than a man. He was bright yellow in color and when he saw my face he smiled and nodded. The light around him was a flame.

"Hello, hero," he said.

"My name ain't hero, it's Forty-seven, but hello to you too, little yallah man."

As I spoke these words I noticed tiny little men and women were climbing out onto the top of the rainbow and all of them so bright that the big sphere got as clear as midday.

"Who are all these little people?" I asked.

"They are my people," Tall John said in my ear.

I turned to ask how we got from one place to the other. But as I did so I found myself facing John standing there and smiling.

"Is this what you really look like?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"And is this your home?"

"This is Talam the primal hive," small Tall John said. "It is where we fled when the Calash took over the world."

I had no idea what his words meant but I knew that it couldn't be good.

"As I told you before, there is a higher place," John said.

"The Great Mind," I added.

"That's right. It is the place where all mind resides. You are there and I am too, but we are in the physical world every being is different, but there, in the higher place, we are all the same. I didn't know what he meant by all that. It sounded like when Brother Bob would deliver a sermon about things to secure my eyes I realized that I had never understood those sermons.

"And so you and them Calash things are really the same?" I asked.

"Yes," my diminutive friend said, "and no. In the upper reality we are all the same, flowing through the world the Calash believe that they can break the barrier between mind and matter and fear. And that's bad?"

"They will never succeed, but in trying to do so they could throw the whole universe into turmoil if they wish, but they can destroy all life and therefore strangle the spirit until it is worthless. All around me thousands of thousands of tiny bright-colored men and women began to weep. "What do you want me to do?" I asked, intent upon helping those wee folk if I could.

It was the most important decision of my long life and I didn't even stop to think about it. The brewing between him and the wing-heads called the Calash. Well, then, I would do what I could to be.

There came a tittering among the uncountable elfin cit-izens of the great hive. Then they all turned to them that the sound came like a roar.

"I told you," John said, addressing the unlikely con-gress of elves. "I told you that he was trying to do it."

"But will he have the ability to stand against Wall?" a thousand voices asked.

"Victory can never be assured," John replied. "But at least he is willing."

"You could destroy the planet," a thousand thousand voices bellowed. "Destroy Earth and Wall!"

"How would we be able to distinguish ourselves from the Calash if I were to do such a thing?" John asked. "Insects ..." at each mention of a life form the image appeared before the great congregation. "On Earth they tittered and cooed. ". . . there are men and bears and eagles flying," John said. "I mean that we would be doing the Calash's work for them."

"N'Clect is right!" a thousand thousand thousand voices proclaimed. "Let the one call it N'Clect. Our faith in Life."

And there I was, a small slave boy from the Corinthian Plantation, being cheered by a number of them nearly that high I was loved and applauded by them. John leaped on my shoulder and shook the lips of the whole hive.

I didn't know it at the time but N'Clect was John's real Talamish name.

14.

Sunlight glittering through the leaves roused me. I sat up, rubbed the sand out of my eyes, and saw that there was a young doe at the edge of the empty space created by the tree. Timidly she stepped forward and back, keeping its place but at the same time still ready to flee. A mother deer then nuzzled her little fawn. Instantly the young deer calmed down. I could see that there was sweet fruit and so dared the danger that I represented.

Even though I was afraid of being alone and scared of what Tobias would do when he caught me, it would have been like if my mother, Psalma, had lived. Would she have stood over me, protecting me?

While I lamented the loss of my mother Tall John strode

into view. Not the tiny orange and violet John with flames above his head but the colored snake John then if my dream was real. He stepped in between the mother and child, stroking their flanks. The doe's snouts against him in a friendly way and then went back to eating. John then turned toward

In his right hand he carried the napkin that Flore had wrapped my cookies with. He held t
"Good morning, Forty-seven," he said upon reaching me. "Did you sleep well?"
"They gonna kill us, Numbah Twelve," I replied.
"Would you like to flee to the north?" he asked.
"I ain't jokin' wit' you, fool."
"I'm not telling a joke," he said. "If you wish we can head north right now. By day after tom
return slaves."
"Ain't no sucha place," I said.
"There are many lands that don't have slaves, Forty-seven. Canada, Vermont."
I could tell that he was serious, that he was willing, with no more than a shrug and a nod,
I had to do was say yes and the misery of my daily existence would have fallen away.
"What you got in that napkin?" I asked him.
"I went back to my bag in the tree and got a chemical that will kill the virus in Eloise's brai
through her blood."
"So if we run away she'll die?"
"Probably."
"But if we wait and run away later can we take Flore and Champ and Mud Albert with us?"
"No," John said. "Only you."
If I ran Miss Eloise would die, and my friends would re-main slaves no matter what I did. I
never lay eyes on Big Mama Flore again. The only choice I had was to go back to Corinthian
away.
I could feel the lash on my back even as I stood there in that primal paradise. Fear of the w
friends and the thought of the Master's daughter dying was too much for me.
That was the way it was for the short while that I knew Tall John from beyond Africa. Every
friend was my first experience with the responsibilities of freedom.
"We bettah get back," I said.
"But you said that they would kill us," John argued. "Wouldn't it be better to run?"
"But that girl is dyin'."
"But she's related to people that make Negroes into
slaves. Wouldn't it be better to let her die? Wouldn't it be better for Tobias to feel like you o
Albert will be slaves if you go back or not."
I looked up at the strange boy who had befriended me. At first I thought that he was makin
expected me to have no feelings for Eloise and even the other slaves.
"No," I said. "I wanna run. An' I sho nuff don' wanna die. But I'd be lonely without my frien
"One day you will have to leave the plantation, Forty-seven. Your destiny is far from here."
"Come on," I said. "Let's get back before I change my mind about runnin'."
The sun was out and John was able to move fast again. So it wasn't too very long before we
start working, pre-tending that nothing had happened. But John ran us right up to the fro
Fred Chocolate answered. I knew we were in trouble when a worried look came into his sou
"Run," Fred said. "Run away from here you stupid nig-gers. Run."

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teen

"I've come to see Tobias," John said.

"Tell this soft-headed fool to run from here," Fred said to me.

I grabbed John's arm but his feet were planted like tree roots. There was no moving him.

"Bring Tobias Turner to me," John said in a stern tone.

Fred fell back a step and then a voice came from some-where in the house.

"Who is that you're talkin' to, Fred Chocolate?" It was Master Tobias.

My guts turned to water and my knees were no sturdier than blades of grass. Tobias came
"What's this?" he cried. "The runaways. Call Mr. Stew-art, Fred. I will have these boys whip
is bloody and their heads hang down dead."

"No!" Big Mama Flore cried.

I saw her run into the big sitting room behind our en-raged Master.

"They just boys, Master Tobias," Fred said.

And even though I was afraid for my life I was amazed that the snooty house Negro would h

"Mr. Stewart!" Tobias cried.

"You can kill us, Tobias Turner," John said in a voice that could not be ignored. "But will yo
The russet-hued lad held up his napkin-sack of medicine.

"What are you sayin', Number Twelve?" the Master asked.

"You sent us to find medicine," my friend said proudly. "We've done that. We had to go far a
carried get wet and so we had to hide until the rain stopped."

"The rain quit late last night, nigger!" Mr. Stewart said from behind us.

He had just gained the porch in answer to Tobias's call. I could feel the stamping of his ha
hit the planks I imagined him trampling on my bones.

"We fell asleep," John said to Tobias. "We were tired from searching for the medicines your

"You can break her fever?" Tobias asked. His voice was lower now. I could hear the sorrow a

"Yes, sir," John said, as serious as a hangman.

"Then come on upstairs before it's too late," Tobias said.

"Number Forty-seven has to come with me," John told Tobias, and I really wished he hadn'
to where I was just a slave and nobody white talked to me or worried about my whereabouts

"I can't let two filthy niggers in my little girl's room."

"You'd rather let her die?" John asked.

He was no longer acting like a downtrodden slave. Tall

John was talking to Tobias in just the same way he spoke to me. As a matter of fact I believ
benefit. He wasn't wor-ried about the Master or the plantation boss or stuffy Fred Chocolat
understood his lesson if I wasn't scared down to the wood beneath my bare feet.

Tobias was shivering with rage at the impudent slave and also in fear for his daughter's life
the slave master held a grudge longer than he'd remember any good deed. I could have told
quickest way for a slave to meet the Lord.

"Come on!" Tobias shouted.

He ran back into the mansion and John followed. I fell back, hoping that I could get away,
shoulder and I was thrown into the doorway of the big house.

We ran along through the sitting room, with its posh couches and chairs. My dirty bare fee
by the feel of the fabric beneath my feet I thought that it was not nearly so elegant as the
before.

We ran up the stairs: Mr. Stewart, Master Tobias, Tall John, Flore, Fred Chocolate, and I. T
that room were

lined with large windows and everything was covered with yellow lace. The curtains were la
like the creamy material.

Under the canopy, in the center of the room, in the oversized bed, lay the girl-child Eloise.
distress com-ing from her lips.

"The fever is taking her brain," John said in an offhanded manner. "She will not live out th

Next to the bed was Eloise's light-skinned maid, Nola. Nola was hardly older than I. She ha
was general knowl-edge among the slaves that Nola was Tobias's daughter by a slave name

Nola was crying over her white half-sister's agony. It was plain to see that she loved Eloise a
Many slaves loved their masters. Looking back on it now it seems odd loving someone that

back then the only rule we knew was the white Masters' rule, and so if the Master were ever better. And if somebody like Eloise, who never said a harsh word, was somewhere for us to hearts, hoping that such a kind soul would somehow ease our sufferings. That's because t So Nola loved Eloise. She would have happily died in her stead.

"Shall I save your daughter, Tobias?" John asked arro-gantly.

"Out of the way, Nola," the defeated slave master said.

"No!" Nola shouted.

Mama Flore took the unwilling girl by the shoulders and pulled her away from the dying w

"Come, Forty-seven," John said as he moved toward the girl's side.

Grabbing me by the arm, Tobias said, "Wait a minute. You ain't said what you need this ni have no healin' in 'im."

"Where I am from," John replied, rather impatiently, "we cannot heal without teaching. For your daughter."

Tobias released me and John unfolded his napkin on the bed.

Even now, over a hundred and seventy years later, in the twenty-first century, I remember Eloise because she looked so drawn and deathlike. I was afraid for myself because John ha that fear was in me I was aware that the

Master had lost all of his high-minded ways. He was giving in to a mere slave because that the most important lesson John ever taught me; that our so-called masters were not all-po the moment I was too frightened to understand the significance of that knowledge.

Upon his open napkin there were various leaves, mush-rooms, and twigs. There were also t heal my hands and brand. These tubes were so small that they might have been seeds.

John put his hand on Eloise's brow. Nola screamed at him to stop touching her mistress. I crumbling up the veg-etation and mixing it with oil from the capsules he'd got-ten from th upper lip.

"What are you doin' there, Twelve?" Tobias said in a threatening tone.

"Saving your girl if you let me be," he replied.

John crushed another tube and then ran his fingers un-der the unconscious girl's tongue

This intimacy was too much for the white man. He grabbed Tall John by the shoulder and loud grunt and reached back to rub his head.

I didn't know what to do. John was my friend. I wanted to protect him, but I couldn't stand blow.

Tobias advanced on the prostrate boy. There was death in every gesture of the white man's

"Master!" Flore shouted. "Her eyes."

Tobias turned to see his girl looking at him. She held his gaze for a moment and then look looked in the direction of her gaze but all I saw was a bare wall.

Tears sprang to my eyes. Eloise was alive and so John and I would be spared. We saved th and death turned around in a flash, like lightning.

"Thank you, Lord," Flore cried.

"She's cured," Tobias said.

"Not yet," John announced. "You threw me off before I could finish the treatment."

"What else do you have to do?" Tobias asked warily.

"I can only show you," said the slave in the voice of a free man.

I could see the two feelings in the slave master's face. He had never had a Negro speak to h offender. But on the other hand he loved his daughter more than anything-I could see all t own hand.

Finally Tobias said, "Go on then."

"Come, Forty-seven," he said to me. "This is the hard-est part."

Together we went back to the girl's side.

John leaned close to me and whispered, "You have to show her the way back."

Before I could ask him what he meant he took a step back and held out one hand to me. The moment I took John's hand I was no longer in Eloise's room. Instead I found myself in a dark hallway. She was naked too.

It was broad daylight above us but at the horizon (which seemed to be very far away) night sky there hung a beautiful crescent moon. Eloise was staring at that moon. I realized that she was turned fully toward the eerie lunar glow.

She took a step toward the horizon.

I took a closer look at the moon, and in the dark harbor of its arc I saw the grinning skull of a man she had almost completed her journey when Tall John gave her the medicine.

I realized that it was my job to keep her from going toward the darkness under that moon. But there was a serious problem. I was a black slave while she was the white-skinned daughter of a plantation owner. I wasn't even supposed to speak in her presence. I was afraid that if she became aware of my presence she would accuse me for molesting his child.

She took another step.

"What should I do, John?" I called out, half hoping that Eloise would hear.

But John didn't answer and Eloise moved another step toward the darkness.

The horizon seemed much closer now. Eloise was no more than a dozen paces from her death.

"Miss Eloise," I said softly.

She made no sign that she heard.

She took another step.

"Miss Eloise," I said boldly.

But still she didn't hear.

"Miss Eloise!"

She took two steps, moving faster now.

She was beginning to run toward the night.

I knew then that there was nothing else I could do. I ran after her and grabbed her by her arm. I used my strength in my young limbs to drag her back toward the sunlit field of yellow flowers.

"Let me alose," she cried.

But I didn't stop until we were in the light again, until there was no darkness or crescent moon.

Still she gazed toward the place where the skull-face of

Death had loomed, but I stood in front of her, blocking her line of vision.

She noticed me and then looked down at the flowers around her feet.

When her gaze came back to me she asked, "You're one of pap's niggers ain't you, boy?" she asked.

She didn't seem concerned about our lack of clothes. Actually she didn't even seem to notice.

"Neither master nor nigger be," I said fearfully. I had to say it but I felt that even though the man's God.

"Where are we?" Eloise asked.

"You sick, miss," I said. "Me'n my friend Number Twelve is tryin' to make you bettah. You want to go back."

"Are you usin' slave magic?" she asked.

"I reckon we is," I said. "It sho seem like it."

"I hear Nola cryin'," Eloise said, cocking her ear.

I could hear it too. The soft sobs were coming from nowhere it seemed.

"Back in yo bedroom ma'am," I said. "She's back there worried that you about to expire."

"But I won't die?"

"I don't think so. Not today anyway."

"So you saved my life," she said, staring into my eyes.

"I s'pose so. You were strayin' toward Death an' we brung you back home."

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Forty-seven."

"Thank you, Forty-seven. Thank you for savin' my life."

I appreciated her gratitude but there was something else that was even more important: my courage to brave Death and Master Tobias to do what I thought was right. These actions were not those of a slave.

From that moment on I never thought of myself as a slave again.

Suddenly I was back in Eloise's bedroom. She was awake and staring into my eyes. She smiled.

"Is she gonna live, Number Twelve?" Tobias asked in a loud voice.

"Yes, sir, I believe she is."

"All right then. Mr. Stewart?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Take these two filthy niggers and throw them in the Tomb."

I felt rough hands grab me by the shoulders. Two white men ran in and knocked John to the ground. John had a look of terror and shock on his face.

"What are you doing, Tobias Turner?" he asked with a crack in his voice.

"What I should'a done the minute you stood up and called me by my name," Tobias said. "This is no house of abolitionists. You will pay for your sins."

"But I saved your daughter," John said. I could hear the pain and confusion in his words.

"God saved my child," Tobias said. "And now I shall do his will by punishing you."

One of the white men hit John in the face and he fell unconscious.

"Check his pockets to see what else he stole from me," Tobias told them.

The only thing they found was the cigar-shaped sleep inducing device. Tobias took that and left the room.

I was deeply shocked by this brutality. After all, I had just come from a bright field of beauty. I felt. The men who held me battered me around the shoulders and head and dragged me to the Tomb. Flore yelled out, "babychile!" and I called out for her, but to no avail.

The Tomb was a tiny shack that had once been an out-house. It sat in the middle of the yard, damaging them. It was no bigger than a deep coffin on the inside with just enough room for two. Mr. Stewart chained us hand and foot and tied us together. Then he locked the door behind us. The ticks. As the sun bore down on the yard the heat rose in there until it was hotter than I had ever experienced.

"Are you all right, Forty-seven?"

"No," I answered petulantly. "Here I am in the jail when I should be free all'acause you niggers."

"But we saved his daughter," John said in the darkness, where I was sure we'd die.

"But you a niggah, man," I cried. "An' ain't no niggah gonna ever speak to a white man with no respect."

"Neither master nor nigger be," he said in the darkness.

I wanted to strangle those words out of his throat but I knew that he was just ignorant of the dream of his land with his tiny, rainbow-colored people. But a lot had happened since then. The Universe was just a dream. But I knew in my heart that it wasn't, that Tall John was really inferior to the slave master's power.

"Listen, Forty-seven," John said. "That's the reason I need you. I've lived among your people for years, always on the outside passing through."

"But you been a slave," I argued.

"I always had the power to shrug off my chains and escape. I never really paid all that much for you. I s'pose that I always looked down on everyone I met and therefore never been drained off to save the girl Eloise."

"That's why you need me?" I asked. "To understand how slaves feel?"

"No. Wall is coming."

"That's Mr. Pike?"

"Yes. He is a great power among his people. Much greater than I. You know how to survive. I am the dunce. Without you there can be no future for anyone."

And even there, in my greatest danger, I felt the urgency in John's words.

"Deep under the ground in your world there is a kind of metal," John continued. "It looks like it's spinning on its own and goes even faster. It picks up speed more and more until finally it reaches its place."

"And Andrew Pike want that green powder?"

"Yes. He wants to make it spin and blow up everything."

"Why would somebody wanna do sumpin' like that?"

"Because," John said, "in another place beyond the world where we see and breathe there is another world."

"That's what you said before. But what do the count-esses river got to do with green powder?"

"Not countess but consciousness. Psi. What thoughts and dreams are made of," John explained.

"You mean Champ and Mama Flore too?" I asked.

"And Tobias and Eloise," John added.

I didn't say anything but I was surprised that John saw Tobias and me as belonging to the same race. This set off a way of thinking that was more alien to me than anything I had ever experienced.

"So all of us are here but at the same time our ideas and our dreams is swimmin' in this river of time."

"Exactly. It is in a place beyond space and time. It is another place that cannot be touched or seen."

"Except if'n you spin that green powder," I added.

"No, but that's what Wall believes," John said in the dark.

"An' this Wall is also Andrew Pike?" I asked.

"Yes. His people, after they split off from our race, developed a taste for the small trace of solar energy and souls of sentient beings for their sustenance. But they're greedy; they yearn to have more."

"So all this man Pike, who really is Wall, gotta do is dig down and get that green powder and blow it up together all he'd said."

"No," John said. "First he must acquire a machine. When Wall got here he sent off a message to the other side of the galaxy. When it arrives it will be able to mine and then spin the green powder. That's what they want for their perverse appetites."

"How long before it gets here?"

"One hundred and eighty-seven years."

"We all be dead by then," I said, thinking that John and I would probably be dead before the ship even got here.

"Maybe so," John said, "and maybe not. But regardless there is another quicker way that he can get it."

"What's that?" I asked.

Listening to his story I forgot my situation. I was more worried about that green powder than I was about my own death.

"I came here in an extremely powerful craft called the Sun Ship," he said. "The engine of the Sun Ship is the green powder. Wall must not have it."

"And you took this ship on the Universe Ocean to come here?"

"Yes."

I didn't even understand most of the words he said. But I could feel the urgency in his tone. For myself I worried about my friend and my world.

We stayed in that hotbox all day. After a few hours I began to swoon in and out of consciousness.

"I think I'd like to go up north now," I said to John once when I had awakened.

"I can't take us for a while," he said. "My power was greatly weakened by the healing of Eloise."

or two."

What could I say? He'd only saved Eloise because I had asked him to. It was my fault just a While we wasted away in the hot stench of our prison I worked my wrists around in the ma slip free.

"John."

No answer.

"John."

A slight moan sounded from where my friend lay in the pitch black of our prison closet.

"John, I got my hands free," I said. "Maybe you could too. Maybe we could get outta here a

"Too . . . weak . . .," he whispered. "Too . . . hot..."

"But you gotta try," I pleaded. "If we don' get free an' run mastuh gonna kill us."

"No master...," he choked, and could not finish the admonition.

I reached out and touched his shoulder. I could tell that he was slumped backward, hangin

Tall John that he was helpless. I realized then that he was a person just like I was, that he

This was yet another major moment in my young life. There I was in chains and still I was us both away from Tobias.

That's what running away for a slave was theft. Be-cause taking myself from the plantation him.

Somewhere in my mind I realized that it was absurd to think that a person could steal him would be put in-stantly to death, so I couldn't share my rebellious ideas with other slaves.

Deep in my mind an even more radical thought had be-gun to form. I realized that I was free because I had made the decision to run away if I could. Most of the slaves on the Corin knew that they'd probably get caught and whipped or worse. And I could see that the r defeat in his mind. *Neither master nor nigger be*, Tall John had said from the first moments understand those words' meaning.

I felt the thrill of freedom in my heart. "John," I said. "John, I understand. I know wh He sighed in the darkness but made no words that I could understand. John's weakness s could understand the freedom that I had just come to realize. Without him I would be as lo

"John, how can I help you?"

"Touch ..."

"What?"

"Touch my head ... with your hands," he said.

I reached out and felt around until I could feel the pulse in his temples. One beat, two yellow light that filled our foul cell. I could see John sagging down in his chains with his ey of a winded dog.

Then I was gone from the tomb and free from my bonds. John and I were sitting side ramshackle cabin that stood on a rise looking down over a pine forest. There were larks sir there next to me.

At first I thought that I had swooned and fallen into a dream.

"No," Tall John from beyond Africa said, answering my thought. "You are not dreaming. We

"Where are we?" I asked John. "I don't know. Don't you recognize this place?" Suddenly I cabin that Una Turner's father had given to the slave, Britisher Bill, when he earned his fr when I was very small. Master Tobias would send us with a basket of food that the old m Sunday for the rest of his life.

Flore and Albert would walk hand in hand and every once in a while they'd stop and Flore for such a long time that I got bored and asked them when we were going to leave.

"How did you know about Britisher Bill's cabin?" I asked John.

"I didn't," he said, "the memory is in your mind." Britisher Bill appeared in my mind then. that people said was English. The old master had gone to Ja-maica long ago and purchased a slave that he brought him back to the Corinthian.

"But," I said, shaking the image of Bill from my mind, "if you too weak t'work your magic th

"The power is in your mind, Forty-seven. Your mind brought us here. I merely showed you

"So can my mind bring us water an' food?" I asked. " 'Cause you know I sho am hun

John leaned back in his rocker and sighed.

"You could imagine eating chicken," he said, and some-where I heard the cackle of a hen, ' hungry."

"So we ain't got aloose from the Tomb?" I asked. "We just daydreamin'?"

"Don't you like it better here than in that hot cell?" I looked around at the peaceful yard an

"Back there," John said. "I'm almost dead. I wouldn't be able to give you my last words, my

"You not gonna die, John," I protested, but in my heart I feared his words were true.

"I should have listened to you, Forty-seven," he said. "I am well over three thousand years o was so sure that I could master Tobias just as he had mastered you. My pride was my down

"You cain't be worried 'bout no universe when we in trouble right now in the Tomb," I scold

"Right again, Forty-seven. I can feel my mind fading. I must tell you what you need to know

"I had intended to give you guidance and power with which you could fight against Wall an in Tobias's chains but you may yet survive. If you do I want you to find my yellow bag and

"Things gonna talk to me like them oil seeds you use for healin'?"

"You will see something," John said patiently, nodding slightly as if he were tired and soon at the back of your mind. And soon you will know how to go about using that thing."

I noticed that the sun was setting. This was odd be-cause when we first came to Britisher B

"Time is running out for me," Tall John sighed. "I was arrogant. I didn't listen to our hero."

"You not gonna die, John," I whined. "We gonna both make it through this. You just tired, us to Mr. Stewart's killin' shack. All you gotta do is sleep an' build up yo' strength. Tomorr

I helped John out of the rocking chair and laid him out on the ground.

He smiled at me and said, "So you forgive me for deliv-ering you into Tobias's hands?"

"Ain't nuthin' to forgive," I said. "It was me wanted t'come back. It's my fault we here."

Hearing this John smiled and then fell into a deep sleep. As he closed his eyes the s and the sky faded, becoming the close walls of our cell. The scent of pine was replaced by t

realized that our cell might be an actual tomb for both of us.

When the night came the heat didn't let up and even the little light that had filtered in wit

I was chained by my ankles with no water or food, dying. And what had I done wrong? I ha even though it meant a life of slavery.

"Numbah Twelve?" came a voice from outside of our hotbox.

"Eighty-four?" I answered.

"Is Johnny in there wit'you, Forty-seven?" she asked through the door.

"Yeah but he out. It's 'cause'a no watah I think."

"I brought you an' him some watah an' two apples," she said. "Mud Albert sneaked out an' And with that the food slot opened. I could feel the cool breeze of night coming in th

apples. Because my hands were free I was able to reach out and take her gifts.

"Tell him that I be prayin' for you. I sure will."

The girl that John called Tweenie closed the food slot and I held the jug to his lips. At the throat and roused. I held the cup to his lips until he drank every drop.

When he realized that he'd finished the water he asked, "Did you drink already?"

"Yeah," I lied. I figured that he needed the water more than I did and, anyway, the fruit that we each ate an apple. I devoured mine, core and all.

This is another moment that I have to stop and explain the crazy contradiction of the pain I've eaten. I have traveled, in my many years, near and far across America and beyond. I have eaten that mealy little apple that Eighty-four fed us in our prison was the sweetest, most delicious sweet potatoes could ever be so satisfying. That's because we were starving. We were near salvation.

In the morning the door to our cell was opened and we were dragged out into the light of day. Other house slaves were also there Fred Chocolate, Big Mama Flore, Nola, and the rest of the serfs and a dozen or so white riflemen. Dead center of the yard was a huge wagon wheel leaned against the wall. When I saw that big wheel my heart went cold.

John and I were thrown to the ground and Master Turner came out wearing a black funeral cap.

"We are here today," Tobias said, "to punish the disrespect, thievery, and mutiny of these trollochs for bein' punished for talkin' back, for stealin' a handkerchief, and for runnin' away while on bond so that you will see and learn, so that you will remember not to forget your place in the school."

"I have to punish these boys because it's the responsibility of the white man to keep the blacks in line. I have both of you boys whipped until you were dead. But I know that po' Forty-seven was lucky. Number Twelve is twenty-four lashes and a visit to Mr. Stewart's shack . . ."

"No!" Eighty-four shouted. I saw her try to run out into the yard but her chains and the wall kept her back.

"And as for Forty-seven, he is to receive just twelve lashes."

Mama Flore ran out into the yard yelling words that made no sense to me. She was tearing at her clothes. I stood forward and knocked Flore down with the butt of his rifle. The moment he did that Mama Flore hit the chest.

All of this was almost too much for me to take in and so when Champ Noland also broke limping I hardly noticed. All I could see was Mama Flore like a lump on the ground and Mud Albright digging up water.

Albert made it almost to Flore's side but then he stopped moving. I'm sure that was the moment.

"Get on with it!" Tobias Turner shouted then.

John was dragged to the wagon wheel and chained to his hand and foot. Mr. Stewart counted off the lashes and worked his bullwhip in a hideous way.

John didn't cry or shout. He just took the lashes and hung down. When that was over they dragged me out. I cried and shouted for Mama Flore. I begged and screamed and finally I passed out. Before I was sitting on Flore's lap and playing with her ears.

"You got big ears, Mama Flore," I remembered saying.

"You got little bitty ones," she said, "like chocolate sea-shells."

And then I passed out.

16.

My back was on fire when I came awake in the slave cabin that afternoon.

"You niggahs really messed up," Pritchard said.

I couldn't see the lame carpenter but I knew that he was standing there behind me.

"Yessiree," Pritchard cackled, "you niggers just had to act all uppity and now you see what that Mama Flore is in her closet gettin' ready for her harp."

"Mama Flore dyin'?" I cried. "Naw it ain't true."

"You see?" Pritchard said. He came into view on my left side, leaning on his crutch and gripping them sores on yo back. That's why Numbah Twelve out in Mr. Stewart's killin' shack right now. My heart was devastated. Mud Albert dead, Mama Flore dying. Champ Noland, the most powerful man that happened be-cause I asked John to save Eloise. And even though he had saved the girl, she was miserable at the cost of her survival. Everyone I had ever loved was destroyed.

I was in terrible pain but still I lifted myself from the slave cot. I wasn't surprised that my friends they probably expected me to die. The bullwhip does dreadful damage to human skin. It tore and crisscrossed tears in my flesh, but still I got to my feet at the foot of the bed.

"Are you crazy, niggah?" Pritchard cried. "Git back in that bed before somebody white sees you."

"Get away from me, Pritchard," I said. "I'm small and I'm hurtin' but I will find a way to get out of here."

"It ain't me you got to worry 'bout, boy. It's Tobias an' Stewart and every white man from here to there."

I made my way to the cabin door. Every step I took I worried about falling down. But I kept going like that before. Tobias had taken everything from me, everything except John and I would have to get him back. I had never been to the killin' shack before but I knew where the path was that led there. I knew that had been the doom of so many black souls. There were birds crying at my passage because of the tormented voices of all of the slaves Mr. Stewart had tortured and killed.

I didn't know what I would do when I got to my destination. I probably wouldn't live out there with him down.

I lumbered through the vegetation, feeling the raw wounds on my back with every step. When I got there that didn't stop me. I just took one step after another down the evil lane.

After some time I came to an open yard. Across from where I stood was a dilapidated cabin. I reached down and picked up a throwing rock that had sharp corners on two sides. I took one step and hit that someone with my rock but before I could swing I saw that it was Eighty-four standing there.

"What you doin' heah, Forty-seven?" she cried, pulling me from the road.

"I came for John."

"Me too," she said.

"That's the killin' shack," I said.

"I s'pose it is," Eighty-four agreed. "Mr. Stewart is in there right now killin' my baby."

"I guess we got to go in there if'n we wanna save him," I said.

"Yeah," she said.

But neither one of us moved. Faced with the certain death of the killing shack we were frozen. Our entire lives we were told that the white overboss had complete power over us. Our fear of Eighty-four reached out a finger and touched my cheek.

"You cryin'," she said.

It was her touch that pushed me past the line of our fear.

"You git a big stick," I said. "Git a big stick and then we gonna go up on that porch. I'ma go an' hit 'im on the head."

Eighty-four nodded and looked around for a stick. She found a tree branch that was as big as any other than chattel. She was a young woman and beautiful as Tall John had said. She was just what John found a companion in me.

We strode toward the door of the cabin. Eighty-four moved to the side and I pushed the door open. When I got into the room I took in everything at once. The first thing that assailed me was the walls. It stank and burned my eyes. There was a long table in the middle of the floor and John was tied to his wrists and ankles were attached to

heavy baskets that had cannon balls in them for weight. My friend wasn't screaming but

Mr. Stewart was standing over the table with his back to me. When I hefted my stone I realized I should have run. I doubted that I would have been able to make it across the yard. I threw the stone. But even as the missile left my hand Stewart must have sensed my presence. Everything worked together and my rock met his left eye. Stewart grabbed at his head and I staggered to my friend's side. On a shelf next to the table was a knife. I used this to cut the ropes connected to his wrists to fall but I was surprised when he was dragged down to the other side. His feet no longer had the counterbalance of the other basket and it pulled my friend to the other side. John sat up and grabbed his ribcage.

"It hurts," he moaned. "It hurts. So this is what it means to suffer."

"Can you git up?" I asked him.

"Pain," he replied.

I used the knife to cut the bonds around his ankles and then I helped him to the side of the table. The bonds were rubber. I got down on my knees to help him but just as I did a shadow fell over us.

"I'll kill botha you niggahs!" Mr. Stewart shouted.

He was there above us, blood coming from his ruined eye.

Before I could do anything he was on me. I felt his hands close around my throat.

"Damn you!" I shouted, thinking that at least I could condemn his evil soul to hell before he killed me.

"Huh!" he exclaimed, and his grip loosened.

I thought that maybe my curse had instant effect. Stewart fell to the side and there above us he dropped the log and helped both me and John to our feet.

"Take me to my yellow sack," he whispered in my ear as we went through the door.

John could hardly walk and I was weak from the bleeding wounds on my back. Without Eileen I could not stand and I supported myself by holding onto her shoulder.

After a long time we came upon the tree where John kept his shiny yellow sack. He opened it and brought out a metal disk that stood upon a spindly tripod. He did something with the legs, and the disk came down.

"We'll be safe for a while," he whispered. "Have to sleep."

He fell unconscious and soon after I followed.

In my dreams I was being chased by a one-eyed monster who was at once one of the Calasans and one of the white men.

17.

"Wake up, boy," someone said. "Wake up."

In my dream I was floating on a square raft down a wide river. The sun was glittering in my eyes. A woman stood on her back legs at the shore and roared me welcome.

"Wake up, boy," a female voice said. She shook me gently but still the wounds on my back hurt.

"Ow!" I cried.

I opened my eyes to see Eighty-four sitting there in the glow of something like lamplight. It was John. John had set up before he passed out. After a moment I realized that it must have been night.

"You crazy, Eighty-four? We can't have no light in the night. They'll see us out here."

"He said no," she whispered. "He said that they can't see us 'cause'a his little lantern."

She didn't have to say who *he* was. I knew that John had set up some magic to protect us.

"He bettah?" I asked.

"Not hardly," Eighty-four said. "He crawled off an' said that he had to do sumpin' to make his lantern work but he bade me to stay here wit' you."

I figured that he was probably going to do something so strange that he thought he might be caught. The little orange and purple man, I thought. And then I wondered about that. How could I have been thinking about magic and defying the white men that owned me? That wasn't me. I b

nawsuh whenever they asked me a question. How did I find myself in the night, half dead, knew of could save my life.

"I love him," Eighty-four said.

"You do?"

"Uh-huh. He was so sweet to me them days that we picked cotton. He talked to me like he too."

"He said, 'that Eighty-four's a beautiful girl,'" I added.

"He said that?" She seemed amazed.

"Yes, ma'am. He said that you were just as pretty as Miss Eloise. And I do believe he's right. Eighty-four grinned and leaned over to kiss my brow.

"You a nice boy," she said. "I sorry I was so mean to you that day we pick cotton."

"Shoot," I said. "Pickin' that cotton make a mad daws out of a bunny rabbit."

Eighty-four grinned some more and touched my cheek with her calloused palm.

"Maybe Numbah Twelve and you and me can get away somewhere where they ain't got no s raise you as our boy."

Even though I was weak and hurting I felt something grand about her including me in her changed from a sullen bully into a woman filled with hope.

"How are you, Forty-seven?" John asked then.

We both turned and saw him emerge into the orange light. He was walking upright and full amounted to naught. John winked at me and I knew that he had done some powerful mag

"Was you listenin' to us?" Eighty-four asked warily.

"Only a little bit, Tweenie. I was happy to see you and I didn't want to interrupt."

The slave-girl bowed her head. I knew that she was em-barrassed at what she had said. I th than she was about the white men that had to be after us.

Just as I had this thought I heard the braying of Tobias's

hounds. There was a yip and then a loud howl. And we all three knew that the white men

"Put out that light, Numbah Twelve," I said.

"No one can see us as long as this light shines," he replied calmly. "They can't see us while I had no idea of what his words meant. And even though I trusted him I knew that he

saving Tobias's daugh-ter would keep the plantation master from hurting us is what got m. The hounds were getting closer. I could hear each one barking and calling for black blood.

"We got to get outta here, baby," Eighty-four said to her man.

"Forty-seven is too weak," he answered. "And if we move away from my little machine the d

"They'll smell his blood if we stay here," she argued.

"No," he said. "You have to trust me, Tweenie. I know what I'm doing."

"You didn't know so good when you got yo butt tied up in Mr. Stewart's shack," she said.

"If you run Tobias and his dogs will tear you to shreds," he said. "But if you stay, and I sur grow into a man who will save the whole world."

"If we run we can do that."

"If we run Forty-seven will die and the world will pass away with him," John said.

Eighty-four gazed at me with an emotion in her face that I could not decipher. Maybe she wondered at the deep connection between me and her man. I had no answers for her. John

mystery to me as was the sun in the sky or the secret to how birds learned to fly. All I knew have risen to my feet if an angel flew down and bade me to follow him to the Pearly Gates.

Just at that moment a dog bayed not ten yards from where we sat. Eighty-four and I turne snout and tail of one of Tobias's hounds! The dog was tinted orange by John's glowing appa

then he turned away, howled, and ran off into the night.

For a moment I saw one of Tobias's men come into the glow but he just looked through us

We all sat silently for long moments after the hunters had gone. The dogs' braying faded in the distance. I was so tired that when I closed my eyes I couldn't open them again. But I wasn't quite asleep yet. "What we gonna do if'n we cain't run?" she asked. "When the sun comes up," he said, "I can take you and Forty-seven one at a time to a special place." "An' we just gonna wait till then?" she asked. "I guess." "Then why don't you come ovah here an' sit next to me t'keep me warm?" I heard a rustling and then I passed over into the dark-ness of sleep.

18.

When I awoke I was laying face up upon a large flat stone. The sun was hovering above the horizon. The pain from the whipping wasn't as bad as it had been before but I was still very weak. My eyes were closed.

"Forty-seven," John said.

"Yeah, John?"

"I'm sorry but you are dying."

"I am?" I could hear Eighty-four crying but I couldn't see her.

"I'm sorry," John said. He was standing to my right, looking down on my demise.

"It wasn't yo fault," I said. "I was the one wanted to go back and save Eloise. I'm glad we died next to that river we saw? The one where the bears was."

"You won't die," John said. "At least not today."

"But you said "

"I said I was sorry. I wanted to wait a while before we became brothers. I wanted you to grow up like you will find it hard to wage the kind of war that is bound to arise between you and W."

"His agents? Like sheriffs?"

"Something like you will be for me," John said.

And even though I was dying I got exasperated by his riddles.

"What you tryin' t'say, nig " I stopped myself from using the insult and my friend smiled.

"I am going to perform a ritual that my people have been doing since before any man walked on this earth. You will still be you but you will begin to know everything I know and everything my people have ever dreamed of. And with that knowledge and that power you will save the world."

It was as if I were in a dream. I saw John in that morn-ing light even though darkness seemed to be just as well been a memory.

John nodded and Eighty-four came into view. She sat next to me on the big stone and took my hand. The light of morning seemed to gather around his head and his visage became saintly. Flore used to sneak and show me.

John brought his hands behind his neck and grabbed hold of the light. He lifted it up above his head though not hard and angry but gentle. The appendages wrapped themselves around John's head. The light upon my chest. The insubstantial tentacles released him and wrapped themselves around me so intensely that I couldn't remain still.

"Hold him down, Tweenie," John commanded.

Eighty-four tightened her grip.

He grabbed hold of me too.

I didn't want to fight them but as the creature of light pressed itself into my heart and mind I bit and shouted. I twisted and knocked my head against the stone below me. As the light spread across the oceans and the continents. Conti-nents? How did I know about continents? I wondered

phrases in languages both human and inhuman?

I screamed and threw Eighty-four and John off of me. I rose to my feet and raised my hands that have no names in any human tongue. A billion billion little rainbow people tittered in And then everything went black.

"Forty-seven," Tall John from beyond Africa said in a booming voice.

I was lying on the ground next to the stone bed where I had lain. I was naked and confused through my head that I couldn't manage to get my legs working.

"Ain't I dead?" were the first words out of my mouth.

In the back of my head I could hear the chatter of a thousand beings. I didn't understand v me.

"In a way you are," John said. "Your body will no longer age, no longer will it experience th the age you were when we met."

"What did you do to him?" Eighty-four asked. There was wonderment in her eyes but no fe It was no surprise to me that her passion was even more powerful than his light.

"I gave him my cha, or the child of my cha. The infant that will grow to be a full soul within

"I don't know what you mean," I said. I managed to stand.

I felt different when I stood next to Eighty-four. After a moment I realized that the differenc than a foot. I had trou-ble standing because my legs were so much longer that I didn't know

"The essence of everything I was given to fight Wall has been planted inside your heart and that I know. You can use that knowledge in your war against the Calash."

"When will that be?"

"So many years from now that everyone you know will be long dead."

The idea that all of my friends would be dead sad-dened me.

"Even you?" I asked.

John looked away at the sky and Eighty-four put her arm on my shoulder and said, "You g

"His body has caught up to his years," John told her. "Flore kept him away from meat and into the cotton fields. My cha has brought him to his full physical poten-tial and beyond."

The chattering in the back of my mind was subsiding. The pain of my lashes was gone. back.

"So I'll never grow any older than I am right now?" I asked.

"That's right."

I was happy that I would never have to grow old and sad like the men and women I had kno not all that sure.

"Not nigger but man," my mouth said the words but I wondered where the elocution came meant the way words were said but I didn't know how I knew that. All I knew for sure was t grind me into dust and let me blow away on the breeze if I didn't oppose it.

"Champ and Flore stood up for us," I said to John. "Mud Albert gave his life tryin' to help M worthwhile?"

The words came from me and the feelings did too. But I could feel the little creature of light be in my heart was set free by my friend and now I would never be a nig-ger again.

I went down a small path to a pond and looked at my re-flection in the water. I was taller b too but I was still of a slight build. And on my shoulder was stitched the Number 47. The s lived that memory would be alive.

We waited until nightfall before John and I made our way back to the Corinthian Plantation. I found the second sound machine he'd found in his yellow bag and that would put her to sleep along with the others. He said that two could move around better than three. She didn't argue. I think that Eighth day was the last day of her life on the estate again.

It was nigh on midnight when we entered upon the main yard in front of Tobias's mansion. I was so timid. Even though I had seen his machine put everyone to sleep before I was still nervous. The sound could wake them up. And if I made that sound then they would awake to see me snoring. Flore had been the center of my life and she stood up to protect me when my twelve lashes were laid on anything to save her life.

I went to the closet where she slept but there was another woman there. It was Clemmie, Mr. Tobias's friend. "Is she dead?" I asked my friend. "Did she die while you were savin' my life?"

John put his hands on top of his head and shut his eyes tight. It was like he was trying to hold his breath for more. And while he was thinking I felt something like a pinch at the back of my neck. It was not nothing I could feel. I understood somehow that I was feeling John's mature light searching for the same thing.

John opened his eyes and said, "She's in the barn." I was running as soon as the words were out of his mouth. My face was drawn and ashen. The bruise of where she was bludgeoned loomed large above her brow. She was asleep, as was everyone, but her breathing was shallow and weak.

I went into the corner and beheld the most heartbreaking thing I had ever seen. It was the body of Mud Albert. He'd been stripped naked and the blood had been washed away. I was to bury him in. His eyes were still open and his beard hairs seemed brittle and sparse. One hair had curled into a claw-like hook.

I remembered all of the kind words and wise words Albert had spoken to me over the many years. He died because of his love for Flore. It came to me then that no one should have to die for love. "She must have a vascular cleansing to hasten her recuperative powers," John said as he looked at her. He often spoke in big words like that but this was the first time I understood what he was saying. I was sad about it because I was mourning Mud Albert. "What can I do?" I asked.

"If we put her in a wagon and took her to where my sack is I might be able to relieve her symptoms. It might be a little slower."

"Steal a wagon from Master Tobias?" I was worried about my adopted mother but stealing from Tobias was a different matter. "We can leave her," John suggested.

I was enraged by his offhanded manner. It was as if he didn't care if Flore lived or died. "Don't be angry with me, Forty-seven," John said. "What you're worried about is true. She'll die anyway. And if we're all captured she will die anyway. Sometimes we have to make hard choices." It was a tough call. Here the woman who had raised me was near death and I had to brave it. "Let's do it," I said, full of fears and trepidation.

"You go on and find Tobias's carriage," John said. "I'll stay here and get her ready." I went through the barn door into the yard. The carriage was kept next to the vegetable garden. I saw Pritchard.

The mule was nowhere to be seen but when I came to the rear of the mansion I saw Tobias's horse standing there with her back leg crooked so I knew she was asleep. Gently I roused her and drove the horse and buggy back toward the barn.

As I was crossing the yard someone shouted, in a raspy dry voice, "Hey you, boy." Coming toward me was a white man with a pronounced limp. As he shambled closer I was bald, that was the first thing I noticed. After that I made out the eye patch. A shiver went through me running.

Closer still I could see that the skin all about the top of the man's head had been sewn like a cap. "Stay right there," the man said, and I knew it was Mr. Stewart.

"You dead," I said.

"Hallelujah and I am risen," he replied, a big smile crossing his ugly maw.

In his right hand I could see the bullwhip. And even though I was healed I could feel the pain. He released the lash but before it could reach me before I could even think I was a quarter of a mile away. After the bullwhip cracked in the air he turned and smiled.

"You lookin' a little taller, Numbah Forty-seven," he said. "Look like you gotta new master t'night." Again he swung at me and again I moved faster than I could think.

"Neither master nor nigger be," I said, standing at a spot eight feet from where Stewart was. Again. Six times he swung at me and six times I avoided the whip. On each swing I felt the sting of its passage.

But I was ready to run again. What I hoped was that John would hear us and come out. I did not know that I had an ally. If I kept my friend's presence a secret I hoped that we could overcome the slave boss. There I was in the year 1832. There was no electricity yet or flying machines or laser beams. Nothing had been invented and so when I looked upon the walking corpse of Mr. Stewart I could only think of the salt and Stewart had become a zombie. He was the walking dead and everybody knew that a weak man was of salt or silver and I didn't possess either one.

The onetime overboss was maybe twelve feet away from me but I was prepared to defend myself. There was no man in Georgia who could catch me. I waited for him to draw back his whip but he didn't. He hurtled through the air even faster than I could run. I made it four steps and he came on me. Everything that happened next came to pass in a few seconds but those few seconds felt like many long minutes.

As Stewart's arm curled around my waist I stepped up on it and over his grasp. I skipped a step away but before I could run he caught hold of my ankle. I turned around then and pushed on his hand. He turned to face for a moment. I could see that his skin color was paler than it had been and he smiled. I had no time to consider those things because the one-eyed man pushed me and as I fell he was on me. I made it into a crouch but I have never in my very long life been in a tighter spot. If I turned around he stayed there all he had to do was reach out and seize me.

In that standoff, which lasted no more than two seconds, I noticed that Mr. Stewart's eye-patch was etched with delicate designs. In spite of my situation I wondered, *Where could he get such a thing?* Mr. Stewart bent down a bit and I knew he was about to jump. I prepared to avoid his lunging arm. The slave boss grinned.

"Begone!" The word boomed all around us.

I was amazed by the splendor of that voice but Mr. Stewart grabbed his head and fell to his hands behind him. He was standing tall and regally.

"Begone!" he intoned again, and Stewart raised up on all fours and scampered away like a cur dog.

"Quickly," John said to me then. "We must be away from here."

"What about Mama Flore?" I cried.

"There is no time," he said. "Big trouble will be here soon."

The next thing I knew we were running through the woods, moving quickly between trees. I didn't have to rely on holding onto my friend.

After we had had run for some time I stopped. When he realized that I was no longer following he said,

"Come on," he said. "We have to get away from here before he comes."

"You already chased Mr. Stewart away," I argued.

"Not the ghoul but his master," John said.

"Who?"

"The one you know as Andrew Pike."

I remembered the tall man on the chestnut mare who had interrupted poor Ned's funeral. I didn't want to give in to fear.

"Why would he be coming after the Corinthian?" I asked. "I thought he was only after you."

"He is," John said. "He thinks we're on the plantation. He'll go there first. In the meantime he'll try to take from his power."

"But what will he do to the peoples on the plantation?"

"I don't know," John said. "But I'm sure that he will come in force."

"But what about Mama Flore and Champ and all the other slaves?"

"All we can do is hope that they survive the attack," the strange bronze-colored boy said, his eyes fixed on me.

"Attack? What attack?"

"It's like I told you before. Pike wants something that I have my machine. It has the power to destroy the universe. He could start a chain reaction that would disrupt the entire universe. He would kill everyone and help the others."

Something about the light that John put into my chest allowed me to understand his words. I could almost see all the species of life throughout the world: trillions of hearts and minds beating, from the smallest insect to the largest whale.

"But every life is holy," I said, somehow knowing this was the truth. "And without Mama Flore I would never be able to help you and your people."

"We can't go back," John said.

"We have to," I countered.

When our eyes met I understood the relationship between the disguised alien and me. He had seen suffering and hard-won survival for every moment of my brief life. He had a deeper knowledge of what it meant to be on the brink of losing everything. That's why he was willing to fight against any odds.

I think these same thoughts went through Tall John's mind because he bowed his head again.

"You are the chosen hero," he said. "I must follow." And even though I wanted him to say that I would go with me to try and help my slave family I had to wonder why he would do so.

"What do you mean chosen?" I asked. "How was I chosen and who in hell chose me?"

"The answer, like your true name, Forty-seven, is in your blood. You and a few others like you were chosen. And you, unlike many others, have a pure heart and an innocent view of the world. Even though you were killed by Wall's ghoul proves that you have a brave soul and true spirit."

"What happened to Mr. Stewart?" I asked then.

"He was killed before the vitality had gone out of his blood. Wall resurrected him to fight for me."

"If he can do all that then why can't he build his own machine to dig down in the ground?" I asked.
"The Calash are not as evolved in technology as are the Tamal," John said. "They work mainly with biology. They even travel through space using certain unique qualities of their anatomy. Wall needs my machine or it will be more than a century before he will receive the power to try again."

"So it's our job to keep Wall from getting to your machine?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I promise to help you do that if you help me save Mama Flore and Champ and as many others as I can lead."

When we got back upon the Corinthian Plantation it was just before dawn. Everything was dark. "Are they still under your spell?" I asked John. "No. Everyone is sleeping normally. But I saw some men in the woods on the other side of Tobias's mansion. Somehow his touch allowed me to see what was going on. I saw behind the woods, making out a group of a dozen or so heavily armed men. The one-eyed man was in the center. All of the men were white, armed with rifles, and had pistols tucked under their arms. They were moving stealthily toward the big house and the workmen's dormitory.

"Quick," John said. "Hurry down and release as many slaves as you can while I warn Tobias. Before I could run he added, "I will be weak from the effort of waking the slave master's clock. Maybe if I had time to think about his last words I would have changed my mind. But I can't do that now."

"Where I find you aftah?" I asked John.

"Under the hanging tree," he said ominously.

I nodded and then I was gone.

I ran as fast as I could toward the Tomb, having made up my mind that Champ Noland was still there. Again I was amazed at how fast I could run. I moved as nimbly as an African cheetah and soon I was at the door. I got there I saw that it was padlocked.

I knew where the key to the Tomb was kept because of all the years I'd spent near Mama Flore. I ran to the back kitchen door. I found a ring of keys hanging from the hook. Then I hurriedly took the key and opened the padlock.

"Champ!" I cried.

He was curled up on the floor with his head down between his knees. When he heard my voice he opened his door.

At once I went to work finding the right key for his manacles.

His face was all bruised and the flesh above both his eyes was swollen from beatings. There was something wrong with his jaw. "What you doin' here, Forty-seven?" "Men wit' guns comin'," I said, "and run 'fore they kill us all."

I might have been John's people's hero but Champ Noland was mine. He took in my words and his manacles and chains fell away. He rose up and strode out of that prison just as if it was any other door. He would be killed no matter how valuable he was as a worker and a stud. But having heard John's words I knew that I would not be. "AWAKEN, TOBIAS TURNER AND TENNESSEE BOB AND WILLIAM THORNDEN AND ALL THE OTHERS OF THE CORINTHIAN PLANTATION!" that I lowered almost to the ground.

"What's the mattah, Forty-seven?" Champ asked. "You were shot?"

"Don't you hear it, Champ?" I said.

He pulled me to my feet and started dragging me toward the slave quarters.

"RISE ALL YOU MEN OF THE CORINTHIAN PLANTATION!" the voice boomed again. "BROTHERS, I knew that it was John somehow speaking in my mind and in the minds of all the sleeping men."

the voice because of the light in my chest but Tall John wasn't speaking to the slaves, and As we moved toward the slave quarters the voice got weaker. And by the time we were a "Wake up, boys, they tryin' to kill us all!" Champ yelled as we barged into the men's quarters. "What you doin' here, Champ Noland?" Pritchard asked as he rose up from Mud Albert's mattress. I realized in that instant that Pritchard had been given the job as the new top boy in the cabin. The mean-hearted Pritchard had already taken his place. Champ stepped forward and struck Pritchard a mighty blow while still shouting, "Wake up!" Champ took the key from Pritchard's belt and ran from cot to cot unlocking shackles. "Go to the women's cabin," Champ told Number Thirty-three. "Run down there and tell 'em!" Number Thirty-three, a tall slave with coal-black skin, hesitated for just a moment, then he grabbed the key. All the men I had sweated and strained with in the cotton fields leaped from their cots. The mansion stood. After a moment there were more cracking sounds and someone cried, "Gunfire!" The men started shouting then. They rushed out of the cabin and scattered. I came to the mansion fighting in front of the mas-ter's mansion. There were flames rising from his house. "Mama Flore!" I shouted, and then I was running.

21.

White men were firing their muskets and fighting hand to hand in front of the mansion. I saw a disfigured Mr. Stewart. Stewart had superhuman strength. As soon as one of those men jumped on Tobias and his men kept coming though. It was a terrible sight but I didn't have the time to worry about what happened to Tobias and his men. The flames from the mansion had spread to the barn. I hastened to Mama Flore's side. She had given me had lit-tle effect on my strength. I could barely lift one of Mama Flore's big arms. I could hear the yells and struggles outside of the barn while the flames crackled around, and I cried, "Wake up, Big Mama!" I cried. "Wake up! It's a fire!" When she didn't stir I took her by the arm, intent on dragging her from the blazing barn. I had managed to move her about three feet when my strength failed. I looked around to see if there was a blanket that I could roll her onto. I thought maybe in the stall I saw a blan-ket and grabbed it before realizing that it was the pall John had used to cover the corpse of his death. I thought that he would remain like that through all eternity, all twisted around to Flore's unconscious body. I was afraid of being burned to death in the barn but I couldn't move her to wake up but she was still unconscious from that white man hitting her. The barn door was just beginning to burn when it burst open and Champ Noland came running. "Come on, boy," Champ told me. "Let's go out the back and put Flore in the carriage." Even though the back door was covered in flame Champ managed to kick it open. I saw that he'd found the carriage that I'd led to the barn earlier. He hefted Flore into the carriage for me up, but I was al-ready at his side using my newfound speed. Champ yelled at the gray mare and we took off. There was gunfire now and then and plenty of shouting. A white man, Roger Brice, jumped at us. He landed on the side of the buggy and yelled at Champ, "Pull this wagon ovah, nigger!" For the first time in his life Champ did not obey the di-rect order of a white man. Instead he drove the wagon into a ditch on the side of the road. The bearded white man hit the ground hard and he didn't rise. Champ and I looked at each other then, and even though we didn't say a word we knew we had great strength to fight back against a white man. He might have killed that man. It wasn't just unheard of in the history of us slaves. It was as if he had broken some higher law that would have been I had already conspired to attack Mr. Stewart with Eighty-four. I had thrown my rock at him.

seemed as bad as a full-grown man-slave going against a white man. A man-slave throwing entire lives had been broken.

We both turned our heads to the sky, looking for God's retribution. But it didn't come. Chaos from the scene of the battle.

In the distance we could see the tall flames rise from the Corinthian Plantation. The sound and a scream.

"Did you hear that, Champ?" I asked.

"What?"

I heard another scream. It was a girl.

"That," I said.

"I don't heah nuthin', Forty-seven," Champ replied, cocking his ear.

"Stop the wagon, Champ. Stop it."

He did as I said just as soon as he was sure that we were hidden behind a stand of dark trees.

"What's wrong, boy?"

"You know where the hangin' oak is?" I asked him.

"I guess I do," he said. "They hanged the man I called uncle from there onceit."

"Numbuh Twelve will be theah waitin' for me. You go to him and I'll be by in just a while."

"Where you goin'?"

"Hand me that rope from under yo' "seat," I said.

Big Champ Noland did as I asked and I ran off in the woods faster than a deer fleeing a cougar.

Running through the deep forest toward the sound of the girl's scream, I realized that it was

I was agitated and afraid for my life and the lives of the only family I had ever known. But I

managed to run through those woods. My feet moved surely between the low-slung branches

moved quickly through the upper branches like a wily chipmunk avoiding some land-bound

the fastest footholds there.

I was at such a lofty place when I saw Mr. Stewart fall upon Eloise Turner and her faithful

barefoot, was trying to evade the leather-skinned madman while Nola, wearing only a nightgown

Stewart grabbed Eloise and lifted her in the air.

"Help me!" she cried, and I remembered when Pritchard had slapped me silly and branded

I knew I had to save those two girls. I knew I had to face my fear of the man who daunted

myself Nola ran forward and threw a rock, hitting Stewart in the head. That blow would have

Stewart was no longer an ordinary man. He had risen after Eighty-four delivered a fatal blow

The stone made a metallic sound upon striking his skull, and for a moment Stewart

was screaming and I chose that moment to jump down from the tree.

I came down on the ground behind Stewart. I made to run up to him but I tripped on some

the obstacle that made me fall was the body of Tobias Turner. He was lying half on his side

pants and a white shirt with the tails out and no shoes. It was his bare feet that made me

of his slaves was that he was always shod and we never were. Now that he was fallen down

was impotent.

I stared at the man who I'd always thought of as master, until the coming of Tall John. I felt

never hurt another slave. These feelings struggled against each other in my heart. A slave

man has the power of life and death over his slaves and even though you might be hating

I might have sat there all night between those emotions if Nola hadn't screamed again.

"You leave my mistress be, Elias Stewart!" she shouted, and then she screamed like a banshee

Quickly I tied a loop in the rope I got from the carriage. I tied the other end to a poplar sapling

he raised a foot I put the loop about his ankle and pulled hard. The one-eyed goliath fell

"Damn you, boy," Stewart bellowed.

He released Eloise in order to grab at me but I was too swift. I ran all the way around him,

We all three took off through the woods.
As we ran away Stewart roared an evil curse.
Eloise was so frightened that she stopped running.
"Come on," I hissed. "We gots to go."
"Yeah, Miss Eloise," Nola echoed. "We gots to get away from that man."
"I'm scared," she cried.
"We all scared, babychile," I said. "Scared is the lamp that lights the way."
"Yes, suh," Nola said.
They were words that Flore had often said to me. They had the right effect. Eloise pulled her light-skinned servant through the dark wood. The three of us moved quickly amid the howl

22.

It didn't take us long to come to the hanging oak. Because we could make a straight line the three of us arrived at the same time.
There were alarm bells ringing throughout the valley by then. People on other plantations were coming to help out. The hanging oak wasn't on any direct path and so we knew that Mr. Stewart and Tall John hadn't shown up yet but I wasn't worried about him. I had the feeling that if he was here he would be dead.
"What you doin' wit' her here, Forty-seven?" Champ asked me when he caught sight of Eloise.
"Mr. Stewart was tryin' t'kill her and Nola," I said. "I took 'em away from him."
"Take me home," Eloise cried.
"No, Miss Eloise," Nola said. "That Mr. Stewart's still out there. An' he must be untied by now."
"That's yo home, girl," I added, pointing at the smoke rising with the sun. "It ain't safe for you here."
Eloise looked at the thick black plume and took a deep breath. "My father will stop that trade for your dinner and set you free for bein' faithful and savin' my life."
At one time that would have been my only dream, to be given freedom by my master. But *neither* by Georgia law I was now the property of Miss Eloise Turner I expected to take my freedom.
"Yo' daddy's dead, girl," I said.
"No," Eloise replied sounding almost reasonable. "Mr. Stewart hit him but my daddy only fainted."
"No ma'am," I said. "He fell down all right but his neck broke when he went down. I saw his blood."
"No!" Eloise protested.
She looked around at Nola and the slave girl wrapped her beloved mistress and half-sister in her arms.
Champ pulled the buggy behind the hanging tree and I climbed in the back to see how Flore was.
Her skin had gone dull and her eyes were open but it didn't seem like she saw anything. I touched her cheek I felt that she was burning hot.
"Forty-seven," Tall John from beyond Africa said.
When I turned around I saw that my friend had retrieved his yellow sack. As John approached us from the deep wood Champ faltered and then fell to the ground by the burning door.
Quick as anything John brought out a tube of healing wax and slathered it on Champ's bloody forehead to examine Flore.
The sun was coming up and there were the sounds of dogs braying all around.
"Let's get these people into the woods," John said.
He took a tarp from the back of the buggy and laid it on the ground. Then he and I together rolled Flore on the blanket. Then we pulled with all our might, dragging Flore into the forest.
"Come on, girl, and help us," John said to Nola.
For a moment she gave her mistress a worried look but then she ran to our side and helped

for so many years to the hangings of so many slaves and criminals.

"Is she gonna live?" I asked John when we were hidden.

"I think she might if you didn't bring every white man in the county down on our heads."

"Don't you worry about that, Numbah Twelve," I said proudly. "You just leave that to me."

With that I ran out to the buggy, grabbed the reins, and yelled, "He-ah!" The mare threw back her head.

Champ yelled but he couldn't stop me because of his burned foot. John called for me to stop.

I didn't use the buggy whip on the horse. Somehow she and I both knew that she was supposed to be afraid of

and stones. We were headed for the main road that crossed the path to the Corinthian Plantation.

We, the gray mare and I, had made it about a mile when we heard a yell.

"Hey, you, nigger!"

I turned my head to see a group of about five white men on foot surrounded by half a dozen

"Run, horse!" I yelled, and the beast understood. She whinnied and then kicked her feet at

The horsemen came after us. And no matter how fast my horse could run she was still

between two hay fields. The horsemen were bearing down on us and there was no avoiding

to go even faster.

Up ahead there was a wood of knotty pine.

One horseman had made it to the back of my carriage. He leaped from his horse onto the back

"I'm'onna cut your throat, nigger," he yelled.

I turned my head to see him. He was about to jump on me but we hit a stone and he was

When he fell I could see that the other horseman was almost upon us.

The man who was in the buggy was trying to get his balance, all the time cursing at me. He

the piney wood.

"Stop, girl!" I yelled to the horse.

When she slowed down things around us happened very quickly. First the horse that was

saddle and onto the hard road. The man who was in the buggy was also thrown down. I stood up

head. Then I made it through the trees as if I were a bird playing among the branches.

From the cover of the foliage I could see the five men on foot come up to their fallen friends.

The man who had jumped in the back of the carriage said, "Niggah jumped up in that tree."

Another man, breathing hard from his run, said, "Must be headed north toward the Lippman

Two other men agreed with his guess.

I smiled to myself, knowing that I had sent our pursuers on a wild goose chase. I moved in

oak.

The sun was just now peeking above the horizon.

When I got there Flore was sitting upright and talking with Champ. The pain that had been

under a tree. He was telling her something and she was listening closely.

Nola approached me.

"I wanna thank you, Numbah Forty-seven," she said.

Hearing these words I longed for a real name. I wanted Nola to know me as person and friend.

"That's okay," I said, made shy by her steady gaze.

"You seem different," she said. "Like you biggah or sumpin'."

"With all this stuff goin' on," I said, "I think I did grow some."

"When you fought Mr. Stewart that was the most brave thing I ever seed," she said. "Just a

forget seein' that for all the rest of my life."

She reached out and touched my face and I felt that everything I had gone through was worth

smoky morning.

"Where did you go, Forty-seven?" Tall John asked as he approached us.

"I got them white mens to chase me," I said. "And then I run off into the woods where they

t'other side'a the valley so they ain't gonna come around heah no time soon."

"What about the dogs, boy?" Champ Noland asked. "What about them bloodhounds?" I looked around and saw that Tall John had put up his little plate-thing that made the oration. "They won't smell us, Champ. You can count on that." "I seen them dogs hunt down a man in the rain," Champ said. "We gots to run, Forty-seven." "You can't run with that foot, Champ," John said. "Here, drink this water and relax." John handed Champ a small stone cup filled with clear liquid and the hero drank it down. He lay down and then laid down to sleep. Eloise was already asleep under the tree where she and Nola were. Only Flore and Nola were still awake. Flore was sitting up on her tarp with her legs stretched out. "Come here, boy," she said to me. "Come talk to yo Big Mama." I was so happy to hear Flore call to me that I ran to her side. "How you feelin', Big Mama?" I cried. "I feel good, baby. But what happened? Where are we? I remembah that Tobias said that he was free." I put my arms around Flore's head and squeezed her. I kissed her face. "Why you cryin', babychile?" she asked. "Is we dead?" "Naw, Big Mama. We free." Flore's eyes opened big as moons. She looked at me and then at the tree branches above her. "Free?" The truth was dawning on both of us. We were free.

23.

Free to do what we wanted to do. Freedom what every slave dreamed about from morning to night. Flore's mouth opened and tears flooded her eyes. "Free?" she said again. She rocked forward and put her arms around me. When she hugged me I was her little boy. In the distance dogs were howling and the smell of smoke was in the air but we didn't care. The stars were in the skies. Even if they caught us and hung us from the tree we hid behind we still had the green powder. After a while Flore fell asleep too. Nola had taken a sip of Tall John's water earlier on and she was awake. "Will they find us?" I asked my friend. "I don't think so," he said. But his brow was furrowed and his words were heavy. "What's wrong?" I asked. "There's a place about ten miles north of here where my machine lies hidden under the tarp. The map of the Calash is somewhere nearby." "Did that alarm ring?" I asked. John nodded. "Maybe it's just some animal rubbed up against it," I suggested, wanting to calm my friend. "No. It's Wall. He has found my ship while I was dis-tracted here with you and your friends. He has the green powder from the earth." "Then we bettah go an' stop 'im 'fore he can do that," I said, speaking right up. "You helped me, John. You helped me." John smiled then. "You would help me even though you are just now free?" he asked. "If'n we can put Flore an' Champ ovah wit' Eighty-four then I'd be happy that they was free. I was free from Andy Pike." "It will take him a while to open the door," John said. "And together we might be a match for him." I smiled and shook my friend's hand. "We gonna do it," I said.

Then John said something that I didn't understand at the time but it struck me as being right. "Your courage gives me the strength to surrender my-self," he said. "All life flows toward the center of the star." After that John gave me a drink of his sleeping water and I drifted off into a dream that was not a dream. I was floating in the air among thousands of the tiny, multi-colored people of John's race. They were all looking at me and I disappeared and there was nothing above but blackness and stars. I was thrown out of the blackness and I was looking for anything toward one of the glittering stars.

All of a sudden I knew that I wasn't dreaming about me but about Tall John when he got into his Sun Ship and headed off toward Earth. The star I was heading for became as big as the sun. It was a wide field of fire that sang with the white flames of the star and came to a place that was pure and red. It was hot but there was no pain. I/John dove into the center of the blackness and suddenly I/John was somewhere else. I/John would never be home again. All of my people were far behind me while I/John would find star after star. There was no home for me, anywhere.

I woke up crying for that loneliness. And I knew some-how that the dream was not really a dream. John was there. His light was a part of me now and it was telling me about my friend, his history, and his future. "You awake, boy?" Champ Noland asked.

It was nighttime. Champ and Flore and Tall John and Nola stood around me as I lay on the ground. "Where's Eloise?" I asked.

"We sent her home," John said.

"She was like in a spell," Nola added. "John put the evil eye on her."

I could see that the newly freed slave girl was of two minds about my friend and his powers. "Yes," John said. "I put her in a trance and suggested that she tell her friends that we saved her. It was the best we could do in enough time."

I got to my feet and clasped hands with Champ. Then I kissed Mama Flore and touched Nola's hand. "Are you still willing to help me?" John asked.

"Yes, sir," I said.

Champ was walking just fine and Flore stood on her own two feet with no assistance. I was surprised because even though she was a fellow slave, she'd been in the service of Eloise and so I had thought she would be weak. I guess I must have been looking at Nola while having these thoughts because she came up to me.

"Do you trust that boy they call John, Forty-seven?" she asked softly so that no one else could hear. "Sure, Nola. He's the on'y reason that we got away alive."

"But before he got here nuthin' ever happened that we had to get away from," she said, looking at me. I realized that I was like a savior to her because I had saved her life her and her mistress Eloise.

"Do you miss Eloise?" I asked then.

"Miss Eloise?" she asked, repeating the last part of my question. "I s'pose that I will miss her. But things will never be the same. An' even though I love her in my heart I'd be afraid evah to see her in the fire."

"You were brave out there, fighting Mr. Stewart to save Eloise," I said. "You're a hero too."

Hearing this made Nola's brow furrow.

"But I was scared to death fightin' that man," she said.

"Me too," I added. "Bein' brave, I figger, is just the othah side'a the coin from bein' scared. I ain't no reason to be brave."

Nola smiled at me then and touched my arm. I knew that from that day on we would be together.

"It's time to go, Forty-seven," Tall John said.

And so we were off through the deep woods that sur-rounded the cotton plantations.

John was in the lead, holding up an orange light to show us the way.

"Is that niggah crazy?" Champ asked me along the way. "Holdin' up that light so them white folks see it?"
"We free now, Champ," I remember saying. "There ain't no more masters or niggahs of no color they is."

"But what about that light?" he asked.

"Only we can see it, Champ," I said.

I didn't know how I knew that but I knew it was true.

When Flore said that she was hungry John gave us all little squares of food that looked like pieces of those squares I wasn't hungry at all.

We walked for hours before reaching the field where John saved me with his light. Eighty-four hugged him on the lips and hugged him to her. She was happy to see the rest of us too but Tall John was not.

The sun was coming up again and John told everyone that we needed to sleep before making it to the water that he carried in his yellow bag, but only Champ and Flore and Eighty-four and No. 1.

"What now?" I asked my brother in light.

"Now we go after Wall and his minion Mr. Stewart," John said, hefting his yellow sack over his shoulder.

"Sounds good by me," I said, even though I was quak-ing inside.

With that John and I took off through the woods while my friends and fellow ex-slaves slept peacefully.

I expected John to hurry us along toward Andrew Pike and Mr. Stewart. But instead of that we heard the whip-poor-wills singing in the trees. A dry breeze was blowing and bright sun-beams peeked through the trees.

We walked along a shallow creek bed that burbled over large white stones.

For quite a while John was silent on our country stroll. I didn't want to interrupt his reverie.

I didn't want to know about his fears. The battle at the Corinthian Plantation had been the worst of the war. Andrew Pike meant to cause a conflagration that was on an infinitely grander scale. I didn't want to do it.

After a long time an hour or more the smile came back into Tall John's face.

"You must wonder why," he said. I knew what he meant. It was almost as if I knew what he meant. He brought us closer than brothers.

"Yeah," I said. "Why me? There's a many millions of peoples in this world. You could'a picked any one of 'em whole army with the tricks you could pull."

"Yes," Tall John said, shaking his head sadly. "And then Wall would raise an army and the niggahs would be his enemy." "It'a on'y hep him if he win," I said. "No, my friend. If Wall could start a big enough army he could be inventing when he wants to win a battle. Soon enough he wouldn't need my Sun."

"Mankind itself would furnish him with the tools he needs."

"But why me?" I asked again. "Why am I here wit' you? Why not a real hero like Champ No. 1?" Tall John stopped walking and put his hand on my shoulder. When he did this I realized that he was telling me something.

"On my homeworld," he said, "we had a machine made of glass. There were a trillion trillion of tiny reflec-tions . . ."

I understood the meaning of his words as they filtered through the light in my mind. I could see the light throwing off an uncountable number of rainbow-colored beams of light.

".. . this machine was one-of-a-kind," John continued, "built by our ancestors who were very wise. Our ancestors placed all of their knowledge into the crystal globe so that in times of great stress they could find the answer."

"An' so that big glass ball got the answer to anything you wanna know?" I asked. "In a way, yes. We were standing in an open field of grass surrounded by a dozen or more live oaks. The sun was shining and we were scared of going into battle against Wall I was also deeply happy to be learn-ing things that no other human could learn."

"You see," John said, "it is the custom among my people that every citizen gets to ask the machine a question. Queziastril was the name of our glass machine." "Was?"

"The Calash attacked us and destroyed Queziastril so as to keep it from revealing their plan to take over the world."

"But you knew anyway," I said.

"Yes. But knowledge is a strange thing," John replied. "A thousand people might ask Quezi and would give a different answer."

"Maybe your machine was broken," I speculated. John grinned.

"No," he said. "What would the answer be if I asked you how long it would take you to run a mile? Give me I expect it would be pretty quick."

"Now what if I asked Flore the same question?" "Big Mama don't run," I said. "She only runs when she's angry."

"So the answers would be different." "I see what you mean," I said. "For everyone asks a different question."

"And so," John said, "when I went to Quezi and asked how could I stop the Calash from coming back, I don't know if John finished his explanation in words because suddenly it was as if I were in a mirror."

I saw strange and alien images at the end of each hall but there was no time to ponder them. I hurried off into another. Then, finally, after seeing ten thousand fleeting scenes, I stopped at a mirror.

The image I beheld there was my own. I realized that I was seeing my own image through a mirror. I was sure that the boy I was seeing was me. I seemed somehow different, not older but with a different expression when John started speaking again.

"You," John said, and I came out of the vision to find myself again in the grassy lea. "You were granted special access and so I came back again and again to learn about you and what role you played in the world."

"And so you know everything that's going to happen?" I asked.

"No," he said. "One day the Calash came and destroyed the machine of the ancients. It was a machine that could travel through time. The machine is sentient."

"What does that mean?" I asked. "It is like a living thing and knows to keep certain information from you. It knew mistakes that you were going to make and you tried to change them. The world was different when you were born."

"How long ago did you ask that question?" I asked John. "Thousands of years ago." "I wasn't born then."

"No. But time, like all other things, moves in a circle. Every moment comes back on itself. I was born then. That was way beyond anything I could understand at the time. Even though I contained pain and suffering known and experienced as a child and a slave on the Corinthian Plantation. "We bettah give up on this world beyond the stars said with a grin."

I ran as fast as I could through the thick forest. I tried my best to keep up with John, but I couldn't. I lost sight of him completely. I'd hear his voice in my head saying, "This way, slowpoke." After a short time I came to a ledge that looked down into a basin. John was there scanning the ground with his head and neck. Over his shoulder down about five hundred feet or so, I could see Mr. Stewart's freshly dug grave. Mr. Stewart was on his knees, holding up what looked like a long green powder.

"That's a part of the machine I used to come here," John said. "It once held enough powder to do what the green powder can do."

"What now?" I said.

"We have to destroy the machine that still lies in that hole," John said.

"How big is the rest of it?" I asked.

"Like so," John said, holding his arms out as if he were holding one of Mama Flore's prize vegetables. "Really ain't all that big," I suggested. "I guess we can fall on 'em and it'll prob'ly get broken up."

Tall John smiled. He opened his mouth as if he were about to laugh.

"No, Forty-seven," he said. "You can't just fall on my golden machine and hope it will break up. It will take more than a clumsy boy to destroy it."

"So, what then?" I asked, a little piqued about him laughing at my ignorance.

"I will climb down the left side," John said then. "You go down to the right. When you get to the bottom, start throwing rocks as you can. Then, when you see my signal, start throwing your rocks at Stewart. You have to keep moving because Stewart will be shooting at you."

"What about the powder?" I asked.

"That's a part of the machine I used to come here," John said. "It once held enough powder to do what the green powder can do."

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"What about the powder?" I asked.

"Shootin' what?" I asked. "He don't have no gun."

"You don't want to find out, brother."

Brother. It was a word that I had heard most of my life. There was Brother Bob who called my mother, there were the male puppies from the same litter, but never had the word meant a brother. He was as close to me as my hands or feet. His pain would be my pain and his people more important to me than my newly found freedom. Because the love in our hearts for each other was the power that would save both his race and mine.

I didn't have long to consider these thoughts though. I ran down into the woods and gathered stones. I squatted down behind an old pecan tree. Most of the branches were dead, and only one survived. Andrew Pike were working with a rope and pulley, trying to pull some-thing heavy out from the hole. Up at the top of the gorge I saw John stand and hold up a hand. A flash appeared. Pike nodded. "Keep digging!" Pike shouted at his ghoul. Then he strode off up the hillside toward the place where the hole was hidden again. As soon as he was a dozen steps from the excavation I hurled my first stone at the ex-slave-boss on the forehead.

He felt the blow but didn't go down like I expected him to. Instead he gazed in my direction. His eye-patch began to glow, and then a crackling flash of light burst forward in my direction. The tree I stood under exploded into flames, and then I remembered that John told me to throw a stone. The rock hit Stewart but at the same time his eye flared and the earth blew up under him. From the ground I could see that Pike had turned around. When he laid eyes on me he began to run down the hill.

"Go back to the hole!" he yelled at Stewart. But Stewart didn't hear because he was cursing. At the same time John came out from hiding and was running toward the hole. Pike turned to pursue him and crouched down. Then the most amazing thing happened. Pike's body fell away like a shirt from a man's skin a full-grown, winged Calash flapped its great blue wings, speeding toward the hole. No one could see its destination.

I couldn't worry about them right then because Stewart was only five steps from me. I hurled another stone at his eye-patch. There was a great blue spark that jumped off the torturer's metal eye. He flipped over and threw another stone at the Calash named Wall but missed.

He and John dove into the hole at the same time, it seemed.

I ran toward them with a rock in each hand.

Just when I reached the hole, Wall flew out with a golden ball clutched within his hands. He hid his pale hide.

The great black eye turned toward me. In the brief instant that Wall looked at me he seemed to know my blood held. He knew every thought and fear I'd ever known.

I knew that he was laughing, laughing at my weakness and ignorance and fear.

And even though the only thing I wanted to do was run away I yelled and leaped forward. I threw a stone at Wall from steal-ing my brother's Sun Ship.

A voice in my head said, "Good-bye, Forty-seven. What I do now will give you the time to prepare. I will be there."

Wall must have heard the voice in my head because he screamed then and flew high in the air with the golden ball...

... and then they both exploded in the air like a thousand sticks of dynamite.

I was thrown to the ground, and for a long time there was nothing but darkness.

25.

When I came to I was on my back, looking up at the sky. I got up on one shoulder to see if a little way beyond I saw the prone body of my brother in light Tall John from beyond Africa. I tried to make it to my feet but I was too groggy from the explosion. After trying to get up a side.

He was in a bad way. Both his arms and both of his legs were broken. There were a dozen His glassy eyes stared up at nothing. I was sure that he was dead, but I couldn't believe it.

"Where's yo yellah bag, John?" were the first words I said.

Then I put my face on the ground, suddenly made even weaker at the loss of my friend.

"There's no healing this body again, Forty-seven," he said.

I looked up to see him turn slightly in order that he might see me.

"John!" I shouted. "You're alive!"

"Would you please hold up a hand to block the sun from my eyes," he said weakly, and the

I held my hand to shield his eyes and asked, "What can I do, John?"

"Listen," he said. "I am going to the Upper Level now."

"Where that?"

"It is the river of dreams where we all flow together."

"Like heaven?"

John nodded and coughed and then he said, "I will come to you many times over your life, fight against Wall."

"Ain't he dead?" I asked, feeling a prickling along my spine as if the evil one-eyed monster

"No," John said. "He survived the explosion but he's very weak and will not appear to you a plans imprinted on the world you must stand against him, even though you will feel small

"How do you know what he'll do if you dyin'?" I asked, even though the question hurt my h

"I will come to you," he whispered. "You will be a great hero and I will be the hero's friend."

"You gonna be a ghost?" I asked, fearful of being haunted but even sadder over the loss of

"No," he hissed. "Do you remember the crystal ma-chine that I told you about?"

"Queziastril," I said, remembering the word through the light in my mind.

"Through her I have spoken to you many times."

"I don't remember those talks, John."

"That's because you haven't had them yet...," he said, and then he took a deep and painful going to get up but instead he fell back, and I knew that Tall John was dead.

When I could stand I dragged John's body down to the pit where Wall and his ghoul had d used the spade Stewart had used to cover him.

My right foot hurt me some. I guess I must have sprained it running away from Stew made my way back toward my friends.

Near the ledge, where we first spied Stewart and Pike, I found John's yellow sack.

Because of my limp the trek took me many hours.

That was the saddest journey of my young life. I was free but my friend was dead. And his something to lose. At times along the way I'd fall down on my knees and yowl some incomple

John from beyond Africa.

I reached the flat rock at just about sunset.

I was sad about the death of John and Mud Albert, about the slaves running in t sorry for poor Eloise and the death of her father, my one-time master. But the hard-est thi was dead.

She cried and caterwauled like a deep forest creature, and her grief called mine forward ar dead. He died, I knew, saving all the peoples of Earth.

When night came we moved north into a wood that I knew was uninhabited.

I could tell that the wood was safe because when I gazed hard at the valley of pines a

that the gift of light that John had given me was telling me that no one would molest us in
There we found a cave that we used as a shelter. We stayed for a fortnight, until we were a
There was a rill not far from the mouth of our shelter. In the early morning and late at night
I found in John's yellow bag. We had to eat the fish raw because none of us knew if John's
smoke.

One afternoon I stole away from the cave and climbed way up into a willow tree. There I sat
"Hello, boy," a small, squeaky voice called.

Hearing those words I was so startled that I almost lost my balance and fell from the
"Who?" I said, looking all around.

"Up here," the little voice said.

I looked up and there, standing on nothing but air, was a tiny little person who had orange
above his head.

"John!" I cried. "It's you!"

"I'm sorry," the true form of my friend said, "but you are mistaking me for someone else. M

"No," I said. "You are looking into the future through Queziastril. You sail across the univer

"How do you know about Queziastril?" Little John asked. "It is the most closely guarded se

"I know you think so," I said. "But someday soon the Calash are going to break into your h

"You know about the Calash and the Talam?" Little John was amazed.

I was surprising him as much as he did me when we first met (was that only a week before
quarters.

"I know a lot about you, Neglect," I said, mispronounc-ing his Talamish name. "You are my
tell me that I, Forty-seven, will fight a war against a creature of the Calash called Wall."

"Wall is their greatest warrior," John said. "Surely you must be what you say. Tell me more

And so I began the long story of the past week or so that I had shared with the little be
had happened yet. It started much as this book did. I had to explain the concept of slavery

When I told him that white people owned everything, even the ground and the trees, and s

"But that seems so silly," N'clect, who was destined to become Tall John, said.

We talked for hours. Sometimes I would say things that he didn't seem to hear. For instan
the words came out all garbled so neither one of us understood. After I tried to explain two
words got confused.

"Queziastril must be interfering with the transmission," he said. "Tell me something else."

He became very somber when I told him about his death. I was about to explain the

"I don't think I want to know how I die," he said. "It might sadden me too much."

I understood how he felt and resolved never again to tell the story of Tall John's death. I ha

"You must never tell anyone on your planet about these amazing experiences or about you

"Why?" I asked. "Maybe somebody like Champ could help me."

"If people were to learn about your powers before they're ready, they might hurt them

I promised that I wouldn't tell, but that reminded me of something else.

"There's a lot I don't understand myself," I said to the floating elf.

"What?"

"I have this yella bag," I said, holding up John's treasure.

"Oh that's grand!" the tiny elf shouted. "All you have to do is reach in and close your hand
in your mission. And over the days that come if you keep the object in your hand or pocket
know how to use it."

We talked through the night. Me sitting on that high branch and John standing on air tho

Toward dawn I asked, "You know, John, sometimes all you have to do is walk from the hou
tongue as you but they talk so different that you can't hardly understand a word they say.

"Yes," he said.

"So how do I know what you're saying when you're so far away an' you haven't even heard "Queziastril," John said simply, and I understood every-thing.

The crystal translated our thoughts and so we understood each other.

When the sun peaked over the mountains John began to fade.

"Don't go!" I cried.

"Queziastril is turning to some other concern, my friend, Forty-seven. But don't fear, I'll co With those words my little friend faded into the air. And even though I was sad at his death Something I have learned over the years since those times is that nothing is ever truly gone change from one thing into another. And no life ever ends but itself trans-mutes into other John was alive in my heart and so I was able to glean a lesson that he meant to teach me. And what I needed to do was to consider his words and make sure that I and my friends co Stewart.

Every day we saw white men in the distance searching with hounds and muskets.

One evening Champ came running into our cave, drag-ging Bitter Lee, slave Number Seven back but still he managed to throw off the hounds and escape. Champ had found him near

"Why'd they shoot you, Bitter Lee?" Mama Flore asked him.

"They blames the slaves fo' burnin' down Corinthian," he said. "They say it was niggers kill

"But didn't nobody tell'em 'bout Mr. Stewart and his band'a thieves?" Champ asked.

"None'a the white peoples from Corinthian lived," Bit-ter Lee said. "They's all dead 'cept for niggers gone west but she didn't remember the fire or the attack."

Somehow I knew that Tall John had helped Eloise to forget the events of that terrible night the murders he would have done differently.

"How you know all this?" Nola asked, "if you been runnin'?"

"They caught me," Number Seventeen said. "Caught me and told me that they was gonna b but in the night Miss Eloise come to me an' unlocked my chains. She said that she had he told her that there was no nigger or master and she thought that that meant she s We all looked at each other, wondering what spell John had put on Eloise to make her act began coughing. It was a deep, wet, rolling cough that went on for well over a minute. And We buried Bitter Lee at midnight. When Mama Flore was saying a few holy words over his s not twenty-five feet from where we were praying.

Later on I picked up the little disk that we used to hide us from the search parties. Physical Somehow, the light that John gave me allowed me to understand his technology in this wa and soon the white men would find us. So I reached into John's yellow sack and came out through it.

I studied that plate for three days without eating or sleeping.

Mama Flore and Champ and Nola and even sad Tweenie tried to get me to rest and sup but I told them that but for all my fasting and staring in three days I hadn't learned a thing ab But then, at the end of the third day, when I was feeling dizzy and weak, something strang It was as if the world stopped but I kept on going. I rose up out of my body and looked at th wound together and waved toward one side of the rim. When I looked toward that rim I saw bears that stood twice as tall as tall men stand.

Canada. The word sounded in my mind. *Freedom.* This word rung true.

I snapped out of the trance and said out loud, "Follow the blue and red threads and they w When the morning broke I told my friends that we were going to take a journey through th they might let a col-ored man or woman be free.

"How do you know what way's the right way?" Champ Noland asked.

"Because," Tweenie said, "he an' John shared the light and now Forty-seven is the one to l There were tears in her eyes and a deep sadness in her voice. Everyone listening believed her, e

over fifteen hundred miles to travel on bare feet. There were wild animals and evil white men. Some of us nearly died more than once. But we made it to Canada and freedom. Mama Flore was able to get Tweenie and they adopted Nola and me. And for some time we all lived together safe from the war. Maybe some other time I will tell the story of our escape or of the times years later when I saw the Wall.

But for the time being this story is over. Some of us lived, others did not. But at least for some of us the trail.