

THE POWER

A Novel of Voodoo

Historical Fiction

Website Excerpt 52 pages

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PART ONE

Riverview Plantation

1840

1.

A lazy Georgia moon, so big and so pale it seemed unreal, floated over Riverview Plantation in August of 1840. Intent on its own celestial journey, the moon paused only briefly to light the face of an eight-year-old slave girl. Tall for her age and skinny, all arms and legs, the most startling thing about the girl was her color: as fair as the moon, a milky color – whiter than any of the slaves at Riverview, whiter than many who lived in the favored, white world. Night after night, that little girl, the one they called Lucy's Reyna, lay awake while others slept. Many were the times when, half asleep, she'd heard her Mama rise from their straw pallet in the cabin, heard the hushed tread of bare feet, and realized that mama had gone. That's when the long nights began.

When Mama left, the cabin came alive in its stillness and Lucy's Reyna began to hear things stranger than the shifting of sleepers in the next cabin, stranger than the thin screech of locusts and deep-voiced challenges of bullfrogs in the pond. When Mama was gone, she thought she heard a far away thumping like the throb of a human heart.

Unafraid of the noises, she was too naïve to be afraid. She'd never known a world larger than Riverview Plantation where she knew only the slaves' quarters, the path to the river where they bathed and the one to the cotton field where they worked. Other than odd bits of tales told by grownups and her observation of things in her tiny world, she knew nothing. Even so, she asked so many questions that adults stopped answering, walked away when they saw that curious

look on her face. Lucy's Reyna wanted to know why things did what they did and how they worked.

This night, Lucy's Reyna had decided to investigate the insistent booming noise. Drawn by that singular pulse, she crept from her pallet, slipped through the door, and cautiously entered the forest. The sound was out there in the tall trees, thrumming, beating, calling to her.

2.

Two others joined the hunt that night. Not far away from the young slave and guided by the same pulsing sound, the plantation owner and his overseer entered the forest. The two men were as different as East and West, but their love of the earth superseded all petty differences. Master George Jackson Goodman, the planter, stood tall and lean as a willow, sandy haired and with smooth, creamy skin which gave him an effete look not expected in a man born to the soil. In contrast, Master Henry Knott, the overseer, was as stocky as an ox with a great shock of auburn-red hair twisted this way and that, and a full, dark red beard covered his bull neck. Now, walking as fast as they could through the heavy thicket, both men knew what it was they heard. Drums. Voodoo drums. That spelled trouble if the cult ever took hold on a man's plantation. Loss of control on a plantation could cost a planter all he owned.

In the distance they could see the leaping light of a bonfire and hear the crackle and pop of burning logs. Behind a ten foot clump of underbrush, the sky suddenly flamed with orange. There, silhouetted in ghostly relief, an ancient pecan tree stood out against the sky, its branches creating a canopy for the drama taking place below.

The white men dropped to their knees and crawled up to peek through the shrubbery. From ten yards away, the fire opened a furnace in their faces. Although neither of them would ever admit it, both feared what they might find. Perspiration blossomed on the planter's forehead and a maddening itch developed under the overseer's coarse, red beard.

"Jesus Christ! Would you look at that!" Knott whispered. Although he'd expected something wicked, what he saw was ungodly.

Circled around the fire, shadowy figures had linked arms and stood swaying together, their midnight bodies dripping wet from the heat of the flames, the summer night, and the excited ritual. Bells, attached by leather thongs, tinkled from their ankles. Kerchiefs of undyed osnaburg, the coarse cotton cloth woven on the plantation, kept sweat from running into their eyes. Aside from brief osnaburg loin cloths, they were naked. A trance had settled upon them as they gave themselves up to the night, the heat of the bonfire, and the hypnotic drums. Master might beat them, starve them, or work them to death, but at this moment they ruled their lives.

The overseer blinked and swallowed hard. They were his people. The slaves of Riverview Plantation, gathered there in a naked, demon circle, suddenly seemed dangerously free.

They chanted in time with the insistent drums. Bass voices of the men called out:

"Eh! Eh! Bomba hen! Hen!

"Canga bafie te!"

The women's sopranos answered:

"Danga Moune de ta!

"Canga do Ki-li!

"Canga li!"

Shivering despite the heat, the white men watched as time and time again the two choruses sent the hypnotic chant into the night-forest. As the drums increased, so did the chant, higher and higher, faster and faster.

"Jesus Christ, sir," Knott swore again, glancing over at Master Goodman to catch his reaction. "It's the devil's own workshop."

Dancing, chanting there in the firelight were the tribes of the slave trade. Asa and Ezekiel, from the Whydah tribe on the Slave Coast, lean, six foot bodies with the grace of reptiles, the color of blue berries. Between them, they held Lisa, the gentle, short woman from the Pawpaw tribe. Betsy, a dark coffee-colored descendent of the Ebos, held onto the waist of Big George, a proud Corramante swaying as liquid as an aspen in the wind. The incessant pounding quickened and the human chain heightened the tempo circling the flames.

Concealed in the brush not 30 feet away from the Masters Goodman and Knott, Lucy's Reyna felt her own heart quicken with the call of the drums. On some subconscious plane, she knew these rhythms, felt the heat of them in her own body. But, where the master saw his possessions, bought and paid for with dollars, Lucy's Reyna saw the people she loved as family. Dancing and singing there were her uncles, Asa and Ezekiel, who brought her hard sugar candy from the big house kitchen. Best of all, Auntie Lisa, came to braid her hair every Saturday night. Furthermore, Lucy's Reyna knew a secret that she held tight on her tongue, sworn never to tell on pain of death. Betsy and George had been married just three weeks ago by old Uncle Tchaba. If master found out the couple had married without his permission they would be beaten or sold. Tchaba would certainly get his ear notched for his part in the secret affair. Sharing such secrets bound their family even tighter.

The greatest joy for Lucy's Reyna was to witness the celebration of their religion, a coming together forbidden to slaves. Mama had told her not to come here till she got grown, but once more her insatiable curiosity led her to disobedience. In spite of mama's warning, a broad

grin of happiness lit up her face. These were the rhythms natural to her, the church of her very own gods. The pallid Sunday God that Master forced upon them she remembered mostly by the hardness of the bench they had to sit on.

At the far end of the clearing, a walnut tree stump served as a crude altar where greasy flames simmered and smudged in small, round pots. The votives, burning raw fat, probably opossum judging by its rank odor, flickered next to a large, slat-sided crate. To the left and right of the altar, two more Africans, Cairo and Ben, squatted on their heels with drums between their knees. The drummers, from the kingdom of Gaboon with thick lips and tight-knotted hair, looked like polished jet in the firelight. Faster and faster they beat the stretched skins, urging the congregation to even more frantic leaps and turns. As the night wore on, Cairo and Ben played a game with the dancers, pushing them to greater speed, more intricate steps, then falling back, and then sped up once more.

At some undetected signal, the drums stopped. The last of the reverberations died away and the place grew deathly still.

Then, the drums began again. Louder. Faster. More demanding. The worshippers implored their god once more:

"He-ron Mande!

"He-ron Mande!"

A moment's silence fell over the congregation, then they cried out:

"Do se dan do go!

"Do se dan do go!"

Suddenly, a crash of forest branches and undergrowth electrified the gathering. The hairs on the back of the planter's arms stood and the overseer gaped, glassy eyed. An enormous man, muscular, naked, and shiny black as a lump of coal, lunged into the clearing, ran barefooted between the double row of worshippers and through the burning logs.

In his powerful, upraised arms, one hand at her buttocks and the other at the back of her neck, he held the rigid body of a naked woman the color of cafe au lait. They froze, still as a statue, until the drum commenced once more to excite the night.

Lucy's Reyna's heart leaped to her throat. Mama, she choked out. It was her mama she saw lying atop Uncle Caesar's arms. She'd known all along that her mama was special, a woman people sought for advice. And, yes, it seemed some folks were afraid of Mama, but the sight of Mama as the most important person there struck her with awe beyond comprehension. She knew though, and knew it absolutely for sure, she was proud to be the daughter of such a mama.

In the circle, all eyes on her, Lucy gazed down from her lofty perch and prayed for her god to give her strength. As a slave, she'd had never known anything but humiliation and pain. Lucky slaves learned to conceal the slightest hint of pride or intelligence, never gave master reason for punishment.

Only here. No one could touch her here. In this place with her congregation gathered around her, she could wallow in her pride. She could have her power.

It was no ordinary mortal who descended from her perch on the big African's massive arms that night. She dismounted from the giant as a snake might have, sliding and slithering down his sweat-slicked body. The drums called out like muffled sobs, insinuating themselves in the air about the enchanted circle.

When she stood alone, the coal-black colossus fell to his knees before her. Her breasts and flat muscled belly rose and fell and she took a deep breath. Pausing a moment in meditation, she lowered her head to release a shock of gleaming, jet black hair waterfalling below her waist. Still the drums called out; faster, now, more commanding, the beat persuading the slaves to catch the rhythm, feel it, move with it, be a part of it. When she had done, she whipped her head back, glared, slant-eyed at her followers, and extended talon fingers.

"Vodu!" she hissed. "The serpent is God. Vodu!"

"Jesus Christ!" exclaimed Knott, an escape of breath more than speech. "Jesus Christ! It looks like they're all ours! It's Lucy! She's one of our field niggers! That big 'un who carried her in is Caesar, our best driver."

The planter touched a forefinger to his lips to silence the overseer. He needed time to plan how to handle them.

Lucy, an insignificant field hand, chopped cotton by day, dragged heavy sacks of it down the sun-broiled rows of the field. Lucy, the tall mulatto from Santo Domingo, some combination of Haitian, white, black, and God-knows-what-all, went about her work quietly. Eight years before, soon after her arrival at Riverview Plantation, Lucy had indifferently delivered a child even whiter than she. Neither planter nor overseer, if they noticed her at all, ever gave a thought to Lucy. Now, docile Lucy stood before them as a priestess of voodoo, surrounded by half the slaves of the plantation.

Squatting in the bushes, Lucy's Reyna's eyes blazed with the sight of her mother, their high priestess leading the ceremony. Her mama was a queen; every movement, every glance

radiated. Lucy's Reyna bit the insides of her cheeks to keep from crying out and betraying her disobedience. She'd surely get the whuppin' of her life if Mama found out.

A chill swept over the white men. At the back of their minds, in the dark corner of terrors and night sweats, the egg of their unspoken fear broke open. An undefined dread lurked behind the exotic ritual. There was no telling where this raw power could lead.

Lucy, slave and voodoo queen, regally faced her expectant worshippers while the drums slapped out as soft as cotton against the night. For a long time, the priestess did not so much as blink an eyelid. Now her mind was full with her beauty. Now she drank of the spirit of their religion and its mysterious power. The congregation waited, transfixed and mute in breathholding silence. Only she could start the ceremony.

Ever so slowly, with exquisite restraint, her dusky cream flesh duplicated the drumbeat in ripples across her belly and back, thighs and soft underarms as if she were made of a reptile's connecting joints. All the while, not a muscle, not a bone above her ankle stirred. Only a thin line of dampness across her forehead and a spastic pulse at the base of her graceful throat betrayed the anomalous mystery of her motions.

In spite of himself, the overseer felt himself thicken and harden against his trousers. Her ravishing beauty and sensuous movement sent ice crawling down his spine and the backs of his arms turned as rough as chicken flesh. Kneeling there in the shrubbery, unseen by Master Goodman, he rubbed his forearm against the insistent front of his trousers. For that moment, he'd abandoned his fear or perhaps had been tricked into a fantasy of spending a night with the slave.

A sigh burst from the worshippers when the trance was completed. Lucy was Vodou, the serpent. The simple, rhythmic, rippling-fleshed gesture pleaded with them to follow. Follow me, her body seemed to say. Follow me to the unknown.

Giving themselves to her, the congregation swayed in a stupor before their queen. A leaden, zombie, foot-to-foot shuffle linked them together while their priestess lured them deeper and deeper into her kingdom.

Now they entered that sacred grove to see through her senses, a hypnotic web of unconscious world. Eyes saw dancing flames and the exotic queen leading the drums. Noses smelled the pungent burning hickory and musky, votive oil. The hard, dusty earth beneath their feet, the soft touch of their partners' hands and bodies; these things they knew on feeling, sensuous planes. There was no mind. That, they gave to the bewitched one, their queen. The reptile woman was fire; she was water; mistress and master. Mother Earth and procreator, she shared their suffering and freed them from it. The enchanted congregation swayed to and fro as one body, mumbling low-throated prayers to the serpent god.

All at once, the queen leaped high, landed on one foot, and twirled like a human top, doubling, tripling, quadrupling the speed of the drums. Round and round she whirled; hair, breasts, arms gyrated, until it seemed that by sheer force of spinning, parts of her would break away and fly off into the forest. Just as quickly as the mad frenzy captured her, Lucy stopped, head bowed, to face the slatted crate on the altar. Then, slowly, deliberately, she removed the lid from the box. An involuntary shush of breath escaped the congregation. Reaching into the box, Lucy withdrew and held out for all to admire, a snake four feet long and as big around as a woman's wrist. Her undulating hips matched the movement of the dangling serpent that wrapped

itself around her neck, coiling and uncoiling for purchase between her breasts. She drew it to her face. Her black eyes snapped and darted with the same quick movement as the creature's tongue. From its tongue came the vision and the power; from that caress, she became oracle. Her face softened to love when she touched its mouth to hers.

Crouching in the underbrush, the planter struggled against his simultaneous fascination and repugnance. Shaking his head as if the fleshy quivering of his own heavy jowls would bring him to his senses, he nudged Knott sharply with his elbow.

"Now," he mouthed the word silently. "Now. Let's break 'em up."

3.

The white men stood and rushed into the clearing. Goodman fired his pistol into the sky and Knott's whip cut the night with whistling slashes.

The drummers stopped. The snake slipped from Lucy's shoulders. Gone was the charmed ecstasy and gone the queen who could set them free. The magic of the night slipped away in the forest and the slaves hung their heads before the white men. Nothing remained of the dream but a bunch of half-naked black people collected around a fire in the woods.

Lucy's Reyna's face froze, waxen and dead, and her throat closed over, strangling her breath. She'd seen the whip before. Sharp enough to cut the clothes off a body. She knew the marks it could leave on a back. How did the masters know about the meetin'? What would they do? More than anything Lucy's Reyna had ever wanted in her life, she wanted to sneak away and run as fast as she could back to the cabins. But the appearance of Master Knott and Master Goodman so terrified her that her body went numb, rooted to the grease grass under the concealing shrubs.

"What the hell is going on here?" Knott railed.

No one answered.

It was all so easy, Goodman thought. One shot fired and they regained control over the slaves. Looking at them then, Goodman allowed himself a speck of sympathy for them in their

debasement. He felt as awkward as an eavesdropper at a family quarrel, but he had no choice but to play his role as stern master in the charade. Stepping aside, he let the overseer take charge.

At the fireside, Knott continued raving. "Caesar! Tell me what in the hell is going on here? What in God's name do y'all call this?" Caught up in his own rhetoric, now that danger was gone, he strutted among them, glaring at each one as he passed.

The giant black who had lifted the queen looked at his bare feet, not daring to meet the overseer's eye. Cairo and Ben, lineal princes of the Kingdom of Gaboon, turned away in mortification. Jackson and Jefferson, Whydah tribesmen who ran swifter than gazelle, buckled their long legs under them to kneel before the overseer in pleading shame. Betsy, whose Ebo people killed lions with spears and ate the hearts of the beasts, sobbed behind her hands. Even Big George, descended from warrior Corramantes famed for disemboweling themselves rather than surrender, trembled with fear.

Only Lucy, the mulatto queen, seemed unrepentant. Lucy stood implacable, head erect. She stared with unseeing eyes while the overseer moved among them flaying the air with his whip.

The effort of his own shouting seemed to calm Knott when he stopped in front of Lucy. His eyes wrinkled beneath his thick red eyebrows as he strode back and forth, scowling. His hands gripped the whip so tight that his knuckles blanched white. Although his bluster had been mostly mock fury toward the others, this one was another matter. He could not forget the cold fear he'd known just minutes before. Neither could he deny the demanding hardness that strained against his trousers that the woman now stirred up below his belt. Moreover, this incredible beauty was their ring leader. That she did not flinch or bow her head, but continued to stare right

through him infuriated him all the more. Her unspoken attitude was a thrown gauntlet he could not ignore. Now, the slaves were subdued, he vowed to tame her if it was the last thing he ever did.

"We'll settle with y'all, nigger bitch," he spit out. "We'll settle with ya'll when we get back to the cabins."

Pivoting angrily, Knott commanded, "Now I want all of y'all to get back to them cabins! When you get there, get all of the rest of 'em up and line up like it was morning call. And, see that you put some clothes on you before you do. I'm ashamed to see ya'll like this. And I'm ashamed that Master Goodman has to look at y'all like this. Now, git! Double file! Go on home!"

Almost in the same formation as the ritual ceremony, the Negroes formed to trudge woefully back to the cabins. Their gaits retained traces of the haunted rhythms of the forced marches their people had taken from village to slaver's ship. Invisible chains shackled them as securely now as any iron ones ever forged.

4.

The white men arrived at the slaves' quarters just as the truants returned from the forest. The so-called "cabins" of the slaves' quarters were in fact two crude, unpainted, windowless, one story structures divided into equal ten by fourteen foot rooms. Foot traffic between the two buildings had pressed a rude alley of hard packed dirt where the slaves came and went visiting one another. No doors covered the openings to the dismal cubicles. With the sole exception of old Mariah, the cook who slept on a pallet in the big house kitchen, 126 men, women and children lived in those two miserable buildings.

At the east end of the cabins lay the grassless clay quadrangle where the slaves gathered at the sound of the morning horn. There, Knott assigned them daily duties, and dispensed favors and punishments before marching them off to work.

Masters Goodman and Knott went directly to the "workmaker" where they stood imperiously scrutinizing the double row of cabins. A solid shaft of oak with a wooden cross piece at top and bottom, it precisely fulfilled the purpose for which it was named. Lazy and indolent slaves were shackled at ankles and wrists by thick leather straps to the twin beams of the workmaker and whipped until they gave up any hope of straying. The workmaker of Riverview Plantation cast a particularly ominous shadow over the slaves that night.

Going quickly to the cabins, the worshippers routed their families and friends out of sound sleep to bring them to the quadrangle. In a matter of minutes, slaves poured from the

cabins confused and scared and rubbing sleep from their eyes. Knott lined them up so that the innocent faced the guilty in front of the workmaker where he and Goodman stood.

Looking at them there, even with his distasteful duty to perform, Goodman had to admit his people were a handsome lot. Big and strong, the men and young males stood straight and tall in the plantation's loose, open-necked tunics and trousers of undyed osnaburg. Inspecting them now, the plantation owner was no less pleased with himself for having chosen his breeding stock so well. The women and girls in their knee length shifts of the same material as the males were equally fit, good workers and breeders. Standing before the master, speechless, the innocent ones stirred uneasily, suspicious of why they had been summoned. A nursing infant choked and whimpered and was shushed by its mother.

Lucy's Reyna, alongside Caesar's wife with the innocent ones, burned with the double guilt of her duplicity. Cheeks flaming, she hung her head too low to lock eyes with her own mama.

After they were all gathered, Knott stepped forward, held up his hand, the signal for complete silence. Waiting for them to gather gave him time to plan what he'd say and do. Forty years in the fields and half of it managing slave labor had never presented him such a dilemma. His was a world of black and white in every sense of the word. When he met an obstacle he didn't comprehend, man, beast, or stone, his natural inclination was to move it with brute force.

When he thought he'd kept them waiting long enough, he called out, "Y'all are all up because we 'uns are up. These here niggers kept Master Goodman and me up and now all of y'all are up."

He paused to punctuate the words. "Don't look so Goddamned surprised. Every one of y'all know what it's about. It's them Goddamned black devil gods. While I'm on that subject, I want y'all to hear me out. There will be no heathen worship on this place. None. None at all. Do you hear me? We got a colored preacher come here every Sunday. That's the Christian way and that's the end of it."

'Fool,' Lucy whispered to herself. Standing at the front of the guilty ones, dusky flesh gleaming in the light of the midnight moon, her beauty enough to shame Aegean sculptors, she'd taken herself to that place of mind beyond his anger. But, there was room in that place for anger of her own, and she knew he'd be an easy man to hex.

The gathered slaves shifted nervously while keeping their faces expressionless. The master held absolute authority over them, but they knew a power greater than his. Unseen shades, older than the white man's gods, controlled the universe. With that other power, men could be made to love or to hate. They could be cured or they could be made to sicken and to die. Master Knott must be crazy, they thought. No one in his right mind tampered with such things.

Dramatically pointing the whip toward their master, Knott continued berating them. "Y'all know full well that y'all's got the best master a body could ever want. You eat good. You got clothes on your back. Y'all's not right to treat a man like that in this way."

The high praise set Goodman's mind back to a time just two hours earlier. Although it now seemed weeks ago, he recalled a horrible argument with his wife about the value of their slaves. The quarrel was about money; she'd raised her voice and shouted at him because he refused to sell some of the slaves for the cash she wanted. I know I'm too soft with my people, he mumbled stubbornly to himself, but it's my way; it's the way I am. I prefer the carrot to the

stick. But even as he thought it, he also realized that there were moments when the stick was absolutely necessary.

Knott's invective ceased a second while he caught his breath, nodded meaningfully at the voodoo woman, "Now, Lucy, get yo' yella ass up here."

Lucy's walk toward him was a smooth, gliding pace when she left the line of guilty ones. There, she seemed even taller and more fearless than she had in the light of the bonfire. Again, the straight forward stare lidded her eyes as she looked through the white man.

Goddamn! Knott thought, the bitch has more balls than most men. Gotta hand that to her.

"This here nigger," Knott bawled, jabbing his index finger in her direction. "This here nigger's the cause of all of y'all's troubles."

A gasp escaped the frightened Africans. The biggest man and the smallest child at Riverview Plantation knew that Lucy possessed strong magic. Even those not devoted to the black art reserved a special place for her and it horrified them to see the master toy with such powerful juju.

Believing their scared looks to be favorable to him, Knott rambled on with his diatribe. "What'll her punishment be, Master Goodman?"

The ultimate judge and jury on his plantation, Goodman felt weary of it all. The smallest controversy jangled his nerves almost beyond relief. This day, what had begun with his wife continued with obscene devil worship in his woods, and now the judicial decision about what to do about it made it seem the day would never end. Still, the girl had to be dealt with lest superstition run amuck and destroy the white man's authority. She must be made an example for the others.

"What'll her punishment be?" the question rang out again.

The planter found his voice deep in his throat and without looking up, said. "Thirty-nine stripes. Thirty-nine and salted."

"Thirty-nine lashes," Knott bawled out the punishment for all to hear. "Thirty-nine lashes. Thirty-nine lashes and salted."

The sentence struck the assembly like a horse kick. Stunned, they stood ramrod straight and stiff. No one moved or said a word. For a long moment the quadrangle was deathly still; then they shook their heads in disbelief. They simply couldn't have heard what they heard. The voodooenne was to receive the maximum punishment allowed under Georgia law, thirty-nine strokes with a cowhide belt dipped in salted brine. The sentence promised horrible consequences. Not one of them dared steal a glance at the face of the sorceress.

To break the tension, Knott shouted, "All right, now you've heard it! That's it, you people! Go back to bed. I want a full day's work out of y'all tomorrow."

Incredibly, it was over almost before they knew it. The planter had taken charge; life, such as it was, would continue. The overseer had redeemed himself as a man of action. And, the slaves, the innocent as well as the guilty, could return to their families and cabins to rest until dawn. Too dumbstruck for conversation, they drifted away to disappear in the murky interiors.

Goodman and Knott stood patiently before the workmaker until the last of them had gone. Knott exhaled with a rush of air, grinned broadly for his part in the masquerade. The two white men understood each other; now looked grimly forward to sharing the tale with other Georgia farmers.

"Good night, sir," Knott said. "See you in the morning and we'll finish off this nasty business."

An undeniable, dark spell clouded the planter's brain as he trudged back to his mansion. Try as he might, he could not seem to shake it.

The "nasty business," as Knott called it, was truly all but 'finished off.' Or was it? One bad apple could surely spoil the barrel and the voodoo gal was as bad an apple as he'd ever seen. It was heresy to believe that there could be anything to that voodoo business, yet he could not quite get it out of his mind.

Nonsense, he kept saying to himself. It was nonsense. Still . . . still, something strange had happened out there in the forest. At least for a split second, something, some strange thing, had pulled George, himself, toward it. Think of that. A force strong enough to affect a God-fearing Christian. Something that strong had to be the work of the devil. Knott had felt it, too. No doubt about it. Not that the occurrence was anything they could really talk about. That made it all the more queer: they had shared something too shameful to discuss. But, all the same, it had been there. A nasty business. It was most assuredly a nasty business.

5.

Lucy's Reyna was crouched down against the far wall of the cabin when her mother returned. The dark silhouette, the drifting lemon oil scent she used, her slow, graceful movements were matter of fact and told of no alarm. At those signs of normalcy, the little girl rose and moved over to sit on the edge of the straw pallet they shared on the floor. They didn't speak, the child sitting cross legged on the pallet and the beautiful woman now diffidently removing her kerchief to free her fine stream of black satin hair. They didn't speak; but, then, they rarely did. It was not their way.

With all she'd seen and heard that night, Lucy's Reyna agonized in her mind. Oh, Mama. Mama. I didn't know, she thought. I'm sorry I didn't mind you and I promise I'll never do it again. She couldn't stop feeling that in some way her disobedience was to blame for what happened.

Lucy stretched herself out on the straw as if this night were like all others at Riverview. Her breathing was measured, even and relaxed. Only her sleepless state suggested she gave the events a thought.

Alongside her, her near-white child rolled herself into the smallest and tightest ball she could become as though that fetal position could protect her from the catastrophe she feared. The world she knew was falling apart.

Sometimes, like right now, for instance, Lucy's Reyna wished she was all grown up, but such thoughts scared her, too. She was trying to remember a game she'd played far back as she could in her eight years, but lacking the landmarks of anything but Riverview there was nothing to hang the memories on. Where there should have been dreams, she found only a vast emptiness.

With prompting, old Aunty Peony from the nursery told her some things to satisfy her search for her lost past. Afterwards, she had forgotten that Aunty Peony had told them to her; she believed she remembered them herself. And, then, too, Peony, an aging, ebony crone too old for chores other than rocking cradles, had unpredictable lapses of memory. By squinching her eyes tight shut, so tight her forehead ached, and thinking as hard as she could, Lucy's Reyna seemed to recall Lucy coming in from the fields with the other women to nurse their infants. Lucy's Reyna never had a daddy and Mama said she didn't know who it was. But, by the way she said it, the child suspected Mama did know and was keeping it from her deliberately. Other than that it was all a blank until she went to the fields with families where the smallest of the children pulled weeds and cleaned out dead branches between the rows. Because of their small hands, they also stripped the last fibers of cotton from the boll.

The years were all the same. A memorable year was marked by no more than some special Christmas favor like the time Miz' Suzanne came to the cabins to give the pickaninnies a bit of taffy. The sight of the dazzling white lady in a brilliant green velvet holiday gown walking among them, reaching and bending and actually putting the sweet piece of hardened molasses in their very own hands, nearly caused the children to swoon. The jaws of their parents ached afterwards from the broad smiles the occasion forced. And, that candy! Sucking it ever so

slowly, it lasted an hour; but the burnt molasses-sugar taste of it lingered all year. No one could ever forget those few times. And, indeed, few they were.

Thus, it was not a child's fear with special feelings for a mother that prompted Lucy's Reyna to tremble on the eve of the promised beating. In fact, she had not the faintest idea what such feelings might be. Although it was true her mother was to be beaten that morning, something else distressed the child.

When she could bear it no longer, she timidly put out her hand to touch Lucy's arm.

"Mama," she whimpered. "Mama?"

"What, gal?" Lucy yanked her arm away from the massaging rubs.

"Why Master goin' to whup you?" There. She'd said it and the sound of her own words in the dark released a large tear to dribble down her temple.

"Cause he's scared, child. I got the power and Big Master know it. He just be scared, that's all."

Again, the tiny fingers felt their way through the dark to find and grip her mother's hand. In the silence of that moment, the child could feel Mama's body stiffen, her breath whistle faintly in her nostrils.

"Oh, Mama," she whispered. "I think I be, too."

"You be what, chile?" Mama's breath stopped altogether as she waited for an answer.

"I think I be's scared, Mama. Just like the master, I be scared."

At that, Lucy rolled over onto her side to face her daughter. The whites of her eyes flashed as she pulled away the little hands from her child's frightened face. Gripping the girl's wrists

tight, the woman rasped, "You got nothin' to be 'fraid of, gal. Don't you know? Don't you know who you be? Don't you know you be a queen?"

"A queen, Mama?"

"Yes, chile, a queen. Yes, it be in our blood. My grandmama, she have it. My mama and me. As far back as anyone knows, we be queens of Vodou. It be in our blood. We gots the power and it goin' to pass on to you. You listen to yo' mama. It goin' to pass on to you, by and by. Just you wait and see if it don't. You'll see." Lucy turned onto her back again and exhaled loudly as though so much talk was exhausting.

"Oh, Mama, I don't know nothin' 'bout that." Wonder shaped the tone of the words.

"You don't yet, chile, but I seen it in you. You my daughter. We never been close because that ain't our way." Lucy turned onto her side again, looked at the form of the pale child next to her in the dark, then took her little white hands gently in her own, the most intimate holding her daughter had ever known. She said slowly, dreamily, as though from far away, "We never been close, but I seen it in your walk. You gots the power. The way you look sometimes. Your eyes. Where you get them eyes, you reckon?"

Lucy's Reyna blushed at the mention of her eyes. The slave child had never seen a mirror to confirm what others said: her eyes were different. Her eyes were the color of fresh clover honey and the pupils were tawny green like those of a jungle cat. For that oddity, she lived with the ridicule of the other children despite the fact that she, herself, had no idea just what she looked like.

"Those eyes come from him Him. They come from Vodou, chile. Yes, chile, you my daughter and you gots the power."

An amused cackle at some secret joke sparked in the room. "You gots the power."

They lay in the dark, unsleeping, not speaking for a long while, each listening to her own slow breathing. The eight-year-old was only partly comforted by the astounding notion that she was meant someday to lead the voodoo services. All of that was confusing; there was no way she could reconcile it. That would happen later, when she was grown.

Finally, it was Lucy who broke the silence. "Nother thing you should know, Reyna."

How strange that sounded, the first time Mama had ever called her by her name. "No matter what they do to yo' mama, there's somethin' else for you to remember. Remember it good. Remember it always and always. You got the power. Master he be 'fraid of it. But, there's somethin' else for you to 'member. Your real daddy is richer than Big Master Goodman. Big master hate you for that, too, if'n he find out. That's why I never tell you about it and if you smart you keep it under yo' hat."

"My daddy?"

She could hardly believe her ears. She had a daddy. There was a father out there, somewhere in the world. She had a daddy. She, Lucy's Reyna, nigger slave, had a real, live daddy. A white man.

"Yes, your daddy be a planter in Virginy where I come from. He own more slaves than Big Master Goodman ever heard about. Him has more cotton and tobacco, too, than Master ever dream of. Why, he even be kin to the president hisself."

The words rolled out and filled the child with wonder and hope. She had a father. Her daddy, grander than Big Master Goodman, roamed the world searching for her at this very minute. Someday he would find her, claim her, take her home to Virginia. The dreams were hers

alone. Not noticing, or caring about the awe she had inspired, Mama turned over to lie on her back again, her stiff-muscled attitude insisting there be no more talk. But, still, out there, far away from Riverview, farther away than she had ever imagined, a kindly white man, her daddy, looked for her.

Lucy's Reyna fell asleep dreaming of him.

6.

Silvery mist rose from the creek and hung in streamers from the persimmon trees on its bank. Although not uncommon for summer heat and humidity to turn to fog in the early morning, a sinister presence lurked in the haze of this auspicious day. It carried a portent of impending calamity.

The fog gave Knott an anxious feeling as he dragged himself out of bed and plodded onto the porch. A hairy man, as unabashedly naked as a red-furred bear, he stretched himself awake and uneasily regarded the clouded landscape. Something strange was taking place, or was about to do so, out there on the plantation. He could feel it.

Finally, shaking his head to put his misgivings aside, Henry stepped to the side of the porch, pissed a strong, arching stream into the yard, then went back inside to dress. At least the fog dispelled the chance of rain. There would be a good day's work that day.

Once, twice, three times the mournful wail of the hunter's horn assailed the daybreak. Knott, fully awake and dressed, trumpeted the three alarms, replaced the horn on its shelf, then strolled up to the big house where Mariah served him breakfast. That gave the people in the cabins exactly forty-five minutes to rise, gobble up some lukewarm grits, then gather on the quadrangle.

Although the rising, eating, and assembling was routine, the slaves were sullen and edgy. On other mornings, cheerful banter or good-natured grunts resounded about the cabins. This day,

they took their food, then moved apart to stand about glumly, lost in private thoughts as they swallowed the thick, corn gruel.

They didn't care about the white men, but even the least of them knew that what happened to the white man happened to the black one as well. The sentencing of Lucy meant that bad stuff was sure to follow.

Neither Lucy nor Lucy's Reyna appeared for their morning ration.

Knott, jacketless in khaki pants and shirt, seemed no more brusque than on any other morning. Only a three inch strap, replacing his customary riding crop, confirmed the special job he must do that day. A hogshhead of brine, left over from pickling cabbage for sauerkraut had been dragged from the root cellar and stood alongside the workmaker.

Goodman rode up astride a roan gelding with a nervous habit of skittering sideways. In tight beige breeches, bloused at the knee and tucked into the tops of spotless, brown riding boots and a jaunty green brocade vest beneath a hunting jacket, the planter looked dressed for a celebration. That was not a good sign. In spite of the effort to control his mount, the planter leaned over the neck of his horse and said, "Good morning" and offered a tight lipped smile which concealed his true feelings.

The planter had no taste for the proceedings; indeed, he was always somewhat saddened by the use of force to control any farm animal, mule or slave. It was, however, a man's law-ordered duty to supervise the punishment of his property. And, so, dressed for riding, he must see the punishment carried out.

Only social convention kept the two men from being equals. From their labor, the planter got rich and the overseer hoped to buy his own place; but, the feeling they got was greater than

the money. The land gave them a sense of themselves. The farm, the red, Georgia earth, was like a lover they joyfully seduced in good times and bad.

Lucy and her daughter had not yet been seen.

As Goodman struggled to control the high spirited animal, he couldn't avoid considering how wrong everything had suddenly turned. Of course, he was aware of the brooding silence of his people, but he figured they'd forget the whole incident in a few days. Basically, he liked his people – no, that was an overstatement, he appreciated his people – but at the same time, he realized that he must never lose control. Pondering the matter until late last night, he'd concluded his sentence had exactly fit the crime.

Continuing his blustering talk of the night before, Knott's attention focused upon Caesar, the driver and the leader of the slaves. How would that big fellow respond to today? Something told the overseer that Caesar was too dependable to get himself in trouble, but it was a fact that the driver had come under Lucy's spell. Well, no matter, Knott concluded. We'll take care of that when it happens. At last, he muttered to himself with more confidence than he actually had, "If Caesar wants trouble, he'll get it."

Standing a head taller and bigger than any of the others, Caesar, head driver for Riverview Plantation and chief acolyte of the voodoo cult, had planted himself in the center of the tide of slaves milling about the quadrangle. The workers flowed around his mighty presence like a stream around a rock. Shaking his head at the sight, Knott amended his statement, "We'll need to do something about that'un one day soon."

Outwardly controlled, a mind as tough as his body, both attributes came naturally to Caesar. Muscle, from twenty-eight years of lifting and carrying for three masters, rippled like

sailor's knots beneath his coal black skin. One after another, the three masters of his history had sensed a thing stronger than brawn about him, but were unable to define it. Not being able to put a finger on the exact nature of that quality never failed to unnerve them. Caesar survived because he was too valuable to kill and too smart to let his mouth betray his mind. It was also true that when his owners could no longer tolerate their suspicion of his superiority, they sold him.

Lucy's promised beating had stunned Caesar and he'd spent the sleepless night trying to guess why Master Goodman would do such a thing. He worried, too, about the possible effects on him and his family. As the one closest to the queen, when she was diminished, so was he. Surely, some terrible thing would happen to Master Goodman for ordering the punishment and to Master Knott for carrying it out. There was also the distinct possibility that some of that misfortune would spill over onto them all.

"Now, come on, y'all," the overseer bawled. "Get in order. We ain't got all day!"

The barked command set the stage. Like obstinate children testing authority, Lucy and her Reyna, emerged from their cabin slowly with an air of indifference as though they didn't know this was a special day. The two of them, so calm and dignified, electrified the gathering. It wasn't possible; they mused. Not even she would dare to vex the master so. Despite themselves, an involuntary, admiring sigh escaped the slaves for the sheer impertinence of Lucy's deliberate defiance. Her big round eyes proudly met theirs and bathed them with her courage and pride.

Lucy's Reyna carried her eight-year-old self no less bravely. In truth, she felt nothing. She was numb with what she'd learned during the night. She saw the gaping slaves, the familiar faces strained with fear, but still her young mind couldn't sort it out. This was all an act, a dream from which she'd wake. No one, not Master Knott, not even Big Master Goodman could hurt

them. At the last minute, the magic would save them. The snake protected believers. No one could hurt Mama.

The double line of slaves before the workmaker separated to form a path en route to that hideous instrument and its companion barrel of saline water. Lucy's Reyna hesitated at their usual place in line. Lucy halted an instant, too, gazed directly at Master Knott. Her intolerable arrogance crackled between them.

Knott's mouth fell open, so aghast that he could only sputter. It was several minutes before he could find his tongue. "I'll be Goddamned and gone to hell," he muttered. "The sassy bitch must be crazy. Ain't important how good she looks; she ain't got brains enough but to come up for her lickin' with that kind of attitude." Seconds later, when he saw the effect her entrance was having on the others, his confusion turned to raw fury. He'd make the uppity bitch wish she was dead before this day was done.

Despite his anger, Knott could see most of the slaves lean forward as though physically involving themselves in his struggle with the voodoo gal. Their recognition of his humiliation at being bested by the disobedient slave was more than he could put up with. He realized that he must control the woman if only to show the others who was master.

As much for intimidation as anything else, he shouted for all to hear, "Get on up here, gal! Come on up here and get your medicine!"

Even then, the woman sniffed indifferently, refused to flinch. She turned to her daughter, paused a moment to touch the top of her head, then glided toward Master Knott as though paying a social call.

Well, by damnation! the overseer silently cursed. A sample of the strap would take that out of her. Reassuring himself, filling in the impatient time of the studied walk, Knott added a snarl, "Let's get this over with and then get back to work."

A hundred pairs of eyes riveted on the sight, horrified, but unable to turn away.

"The hands, gal," he snarled. "Get your hands up here."

Lucy offered up her hands placidly; no begging, no tears, no shrinking back. She held out willing arms for the overseer to lace the cuffs, linked to the lateral cross, tight about the wrists. Moments later, the overseer felt weak enough to faint. When he thought about it later, he seemed to recall it had begun when he took her arm to manacle her wrist. Yes, he thought. It began with the feel of her skin when he felt the silk-soft flesh of her underarm. Later, backing away, his leg had brushed her thigh and he felt his breath catch in his throat. The touch of her set off a quaking in his legs and a trembling in his hands. The whole of it lasted but a minute; after all he'd manacled dozens of others to the workmaker in days gone by. But, this one he wanted in a special way.

He was aware then that a hundred pairs of eyes followed his every move and half in panic, he snarled loudly for the audience to hear. "Now, the feet," he shouted. The others must see her broken. She would beg before he was finished. Her example would correct them all.

Feeling foolish with the kneeling, head lower than the gawking slaves, Knott dropped to one knee to bind her feet. From the corner of his eye, he saw the people lean forward. Petrified, not a sound, not a breath escaped them as they watched like caged birds eyeing the cat.

Fettered at hands and ankles to the weathered beams of the workmaker, Lucy held her noble chin high. Her eyes trained on the cross as if inspecting the grain of its rough timbers. She

gave no sign that she had noticed his shivering, his abrupt shortness of breath. Rather, her attention turned to the chant of the vodu rite, to put herself in another world, out of harm's way. Placing the tip of her tongue against the ridge above her front teeth, she began a voodoo breathing defense involving long, slow breaths circulating the spiritual energy of the snake in a circle heart to head to spine and back again. No master on earth could penetrate the shield such breathwork created.

Dumbfounded, Knott suddenly realized the woman was still clothed. In the confusion of his conflicted emotions, he'd stupidly forgotten to make her lower her dress to the waist. Good whippings were accomplished on bare backs.

Grabbing the dress at the back of the neck, he abruptly tore it to the waist. An audible gasp burst from the watching slaves. The shredded garment piled about her ankles while the useless sleeves drooped limply from her manacled wrists. The early morning sun bathed the naked body bound to the rude pillar and tumbled down the rounded shoulders from waist to buttocks and long, well-turned legs. In that light, her dusky flesh glowed bronze.

Oh, Lord, he thought. He couldn't look there. But no power on heaven or earth could have torn his eyes away from her dusky cream flesh. He must do this thing and do it well. For the crowd and his own tortured mind, Knott made a great show of dipping the leather strap in the barrel of brine; then, stood back, sliced the air with the cowhide band, and slammed it onto the bare back.

"One!" he cried.

The noise in the air, the crack of it striking its human target where it left a broad, red slash from shoulder to waist, brought an involuntary wince of pain to the onlookers. Now, stiff

and straight, Lucy appeared unaffected by the blow. Like an animal paralyzed with fear, Lucy possessed the other world ability to transport her spiritual self out of harm's way. While her body received the battering, a mental telepathy of sorts turned away its pain. Safe in that special place in her mind, she accepted the hurt, breathed into it and through it, offered it to vodu, her god. She could feel the quivering in the arm behind the strap, knew what that was about. On his forward bend, his hot breath burned on her neck. That energy, too, she could send to the universe.

Caesar's wife, Rebecca, felt her husband recoil. He closed his eyes against the slap to his religious mistress. That was all. His expression did not change, merely shuttered his eyes to the sight; but Rebecca knew. In the tiniest touch of knuckles, she felt the big man tense.

"Two!" the count rang out again.

Overlapping the mark of the first, the second stroke left an angry red seam atop its brother. This time the tail of the lash licked under the woman's extended arm and lapped at her tender breast. Again, the cowhide dipped into the brine and the beating continued.

Repetitive work such as whipping assumes a rhythm of its own. The backward stretch. The slamming blow. The retraction preparing to strike again. As he worked, Knott fell into the task and as he did so he admitted more of the curious feelings to his consciousness. How good it felt to meet the tender resistance. The succulence of the red lips printed by the belt. In an amazingly short while, he came to welcome the sexual stimulation of it, too. It was not something he could talk about . . . but it was there.

"Nine!" the overseer shouted huskily.

A thin stream of pink flecked up, following the lines on her back. Then, the brine began to do its work, stinging its way to a river of flame.

It was the sight of her mother's blood that finally awakened Lucy's Reyna. Not until then had she truly understood what was happening. Then, the crimson rivulet streaking Mama's naked back released the torrent of hidden terrors that had been walled away in her child's mind. Lucy's Reyna drove a tiny, balled up fist in her mouth and whimpered silently. "Mama," she prayed. "Oh, Mama. Call the snake. Call Vodou to save us."

But, Mama didn't call and the beating progressed; the sound and sight of it hammered away at Lucy's Reyna's young brain. Then, the shocking red stream down her mother's back brought yet another dread. God had betrayed them all. The great snake, vodou, had not come out of the woods to slay the white man. Her heart broke with the thought, then healed itself with an ache. Perhaps, just perhaps, there was no God. Lucy's little Reyna suddenly realized that what she had felt all along was true. She would have to take care of her own small self alone.

"Twenty!" the beating went on.

Knott showed signs of tiring. A horseshoe of sweat darkened the back of his shirt.

Still, Lucy neither cried out nor resisted the blows which left the flames of hell in her body. The salty brine seeping into the wounds further fueled the awful fire.

Incredibly, she moved with the rhythm of the beating, actually backed into the measured blows. At number twenty-three or twenty-four, the flesh itself seemed to anticipate, to creep away to avoid the strap. Feeling the flesh crawl, Lucy turned her elegant head to watch the cowhide descend and willed her flesh to accept the pain. Contempt for her own weak skin twisted her lips.

Not everyone who watched suffered with Lucy. Those who did not worship voodoo felt peculiarly exonerated by her beating. They took a certain perverse pride in seeing it done and

done well. In days to come they would tell each other how it had been: "Can't say I didn't done warn her. I seed it comin'; but, that gal don't listen no how," and "Mind yo' step less'n you get what Lucy got" and "Mast' Knott sho' know how to lay on the strap. Tore that gal clean up, he did. An' salted her, too. Nobody ever hit a lick better'n Mast' Knott."

The whipping of Lucy justified their own good behavior. It was not so much her disobedience or their own fear of punishment that made them feel better; rather, the example made of Lucy allowed them the self-righteousness of law abiding folks.

At the thirtieth stroke, the woman fell forward, pushed by the weight of the strap. She leaned against the upright beam of the workmaker as the blows went on. The overseer worked harder, more hurriedly then, in spite of a fierce cramp in his whipping arm. Lucy lost consciousness from shock and loss of blood when the thirty-fifth blow struck her back. Slumping down, comatose, the leather straps on her wrists held her suspended for the last four stripes. When it was over, she hung there like a side of beef, a heavy line of drool hung from her chin.

Knott pumped his aching arm to relax the soreness, and shouted as loud as he could. "Well, now. Let's go to work unless someone else wants some of this. We've wasted enough time this day. Hettie! Lettie! You gals untie this one and get her to her cabin. She won't be worth a tinker's damn today."

Goodman, his obligation fulfilled, left without a word.

Up in the big house, no one saw Mariah, the old black house-maid, put an amulet, the heart of a dog stuffed with chicken feathers and strange stones, under the mattress of Big Master Goodman's bed to bring bad luck in the days ahead.

7.

It was an omen. It happened to Lucy's Reyna and the chance occurrence confirmed her place as heir to the voodoo throne. It was a sure sign of the power.

Sweltering midday heat beat down and radiated up in lazy, undulating waves between the rows of cotton. Even the plants' tough outer leaves wilted under the scorching sun. The field hands, muddied head to toe with dust and perspiration, moved down the rows picking the first of the crop. A burlap sack hung from the neck of each picker, child and adult. When the sacks were full, they dumped the cotton in large baskets to be weighed and recorded by name. Children followed adults like scavengers, cleaning out the last wisps of fiber with their tiny hands and climbing slender poles at the base of the plants to pick the cotton too high for them to reach. The workers tried to let their minds go blank. In the oppressive heat, it was best to concentrate on nothing but the basket at each row's end.

If they had not been ahead of the others, the omen might have gone unnoticed.

Lucy led the section. Tall, strong, and nimble-fingered, she was proud that she could pick and carry like a man. It was a contest with herself, how many times she could straighten, sight down the row, and, after a toss of her head, carry another full sack to the basket. She had missed only a week's work after the whipping; the aching soreness went away a few days later. Resenting the heat and the odor, she had refused the lard-soaked rags to help cure the wounds. After a week, the cuts were healing. Perspiration loosened the itching scabs under her shift.

After the beating, Lucy's Reyna followed behind her mother in a daze. Nothing about her mother's strong, lithe figure suggested that anything extraordinary had happened; but that dreadful morning of the punishment had dashed the girl's tiny world. Her small universe – no more than the distance from the slaves' quarters to the fields – seemed hopelessly shattered. She had never spoken to a soul save fellow slaves and had never seen a white person other than those at Riverview. Now, even that restricted space and limited human contact had been dipped in brine and bloodied.

To whom did she belong, really belong? If master could hurt Mama, what could he not do to her? If only mama would talk to her, reassure her. At night, long after her mother went to sleep, the child nestled up to the warm body on the floor of the cabin, sneaked an arm about the woman's form, and whimpered because she did not even know what questions to ask. "Mama," she sniffled. "Oh, Mama. Mama. Mama."

Then, that day it happened. The world came together again.

Tramping along behind Lucy, Reyna spied several ripened bolls of cotton in the top branches. Eyes squinted against the blazing sun, she shinnied up the slender pole anchoring the plant to reach out and pluck the soft fibers. As she did so, the pole swayed, wiggled, uprooted itself from the earth, and threw her flat on her back between the rows.

For a moment, she lay there unnoticed. No one heard the dull thud of her light body hitting the hot, powdered earth. She was unhurt. The fall had merely knocked the breath out of her. It was even pleasant to lie there a minute to catch her breath, pass in and out of consciousness and watch the sky careen crazily overhead. At that instant a peculiar wriggling crossed her chest; she heard screams and opened her eyes.

Above her, looking down, a ring of black faces cried out, "Reyna, chile? You all right?"

"What you doin', girl?"

Caesar, Rebecca, Cairo, and even Mama had run together and circled about. Then, the tone of their shouts and the look on their faces changed, struck dumb somewhere between amazement and fear.

"Oh, my Lord! Look at that!"

"What you done found?"

"Get back! Leave the chile alone. It's a sign!"

"Lawsy! Lord, help us! Get back! Give her room!"

It was not until then that Lucy's Reyna looked down to see the cause of their consternation. Crawling over and away from her was a fat, mother snake, a venomous copperhead, slithering waves in the red, Georgia clay. The mother serpent was trailed with equal haste by a brood of six or eight young ones, a family of snakes who'd had a burrow at the base of the pole. When it fell, they fled.

The startled, fascinated slaves drew back in horror. There was no reasonable explanation for the phenomenon. This was not the time for breeding and snakes did not choose heavily trafficked fields for nesting. More incredibly, not one of the fleeing reptiles struck the child. It was a sign. Believe in voodoo or not, it was a powerful sign.

Lucy's Reyna got to her feet, futilely trying to smack the dust from her shift and bare legs. "I'm sorry, Mama," she pleaded. "I didn't do nothin'. The pole jes' fell down. I didn't break the cotton. I'm sorry. I didn't mean nothin'."

Caesar, Rebecca, and Cairo drew back, wonder filling their eyes. Knott, seeing the commotion, rode toward them from the far end of the field. The buggy whip in his hand signaled more than curiosity about the work stoppage. Ignoring the sight of him, Lucy reached out to touch her daughter's shoulder in a gesture approximating tenderness.

"Don't worry about it, Reyna." There it was again. She had called the child by her given name for the second time. A flash of contempt skinned her lips back from her teeth as she glowered toward the approaching white man. "Don't you worry about nothin', chile. You be a queen. You jes' gettin' the power. That's all, you just be gettin' the power."

It happened then, standing strange and straight in the dusty row, gazing at the workers gathered round, looking them in the face with her strangely colored eyes. Lucy's Reyna saw their sheepishly returned glances, the same reverence she had seen for her Mama. There was a god and she was favored. There was power and safety in that.

The rumor traveled from row to row under the watchful eye of the overseer. Caesar, taller than the plants, leaned over slightly and muttered it without moving his lips. Cairo whispered it to Ben who passed it on to Betsy who flung it in the face of her unbelieving cabin mates.

"We got ourselves a new queen a comin'. Lucy's Reyna gettin' the power! Ol' Caesar and Becka done seen it! That gal done hatched copperheads right outa her mouf! Cairo done seen it, too. That chile maybe be mo' powerful than her mama when she gets growed."

Lucy stood taller than ever, a beacon of the swelling pride they all felt. And, Lucy's Reyna, under their appraising glances, began to shape a new world for herself from the ruins of the previous one.

A second surprise struck the fields later when the horn to summon them home split the afternoon two hours before quitting time. At first, they looked at each other quizzically. What was wrong? Was it a mistake? No, there it went again. Master Henry had disappeared. No doubt it was he who blew the call and they must go without knowing why. Still, it felt odd to leave the fields before sundown. There was, however, no explaining the vagaries of white men and the slaves resolutely dragged their burdens to the ends of the rows where they emptied the heavy sacks, dutifully weighed and recorded the baskets, and walked back to assemble in the quadrangle.

They saw the reason there.

8.

They saw the dogs first. Two massive bloodhounds, chained to a large wagon, sniffed the air when they entered the square. Mean-looking, yellow-haired dogs with wrinkled faces and flopping black mouths dripping saliva glared at them from red-rimmed eyes. Tails arched and a row of hackles rose on their backs. Straining against the chains, the pair of them waited impatiently for someone to order them to tear a man to pieces.

At the front of the wagon, two thick-legged work horses placidly shooed flies with their tails. The wagon, an unpainted, weathered wood frame outfitted with five cross-wise benches on the foremost of which sat a huge, fat white man, was bigger than those used to haul bails of cotton to market. The fat man, hunched over a shotgun across his knees, did not look up as they gathered. At the rear of the wagon, Master Goodman and Master Knott talked earnestly with a tall, blond man who seemed mostly to be listening.

They were looking at traders. Slave traders. Someone was to be sold down the river. They were staring at the standard tools of the trade; the wagon, the gun, and the dogs. Some families would be broken; some parents taken, some children left. Down the river. No one was ever sold north. Down the river, a legend of increasing hardships, the farther south one went. Down the river. As bad and as good as it was, some of them would be leaving this place they had called home. That wagon, driven by that fat man would take them to auction to be sold. If they tried to escape, those dogs or that gun would kill them.

A wail poured from the people, "Oh, Mast' Goodman, please don't sell me."

"I works hard. You knows that. Let me stay on."

"Oh, Mast', I don' takes much keep, keep me."

Louder and louder; the laments drowned out the conversation between the white men.

The planter stared, red faced at his feet. Master Knott held up his hand to command silence.

"Now, y'all, let's quieten down," he began. Their cries subsided so they could hear.

"That's better. A body can't think with all that racket goin' on. You guessed it right enough.

Master Goodman has got to cut back . . . "

The moaning began afresh.

"Now, don't y'all start up again. It's not what you think. That tall man's to be your new master. That's Master John. Up there in the wagon's his partner, Master Thomas . . . "

The fat man in the wagon nodded his head and leered.

"Master George, he don' wanna do this. He wants y'all to know that. He don't wanna do it in the worst way; but, the plain fact is, he's got no choice." The planter's face reddened even more at the reference to him. "But, the truth is that cotton prices is pitiful. Just not enough money to go around."

Knott hesitated a moment, then continued, "Now, when I calls your name, come up here for Master Thomas to inspect your good health. Now mind you, one more thing. Master John is a good master and a fair one. He's told Master Goodman that he'll find all of y'all good homes with good people who'll treat you right. If'n you behave yourselfs and is obedient, he'll do it, too. If you don't, if you sass him and is disobedient . . ." The overseer glanced about meaningfully, jerked his head toward the fat man on the wagon. "Well, then, Master Thomas will have to take

proper measures to get your proper respect. He'll do that, too. Just make up your minds to make it easy on yourselves."

Thomas swung his enormous thighs over the side of the wagon and let himself drop to the ground. A bullwhip wound around his arm and shoulder accompanied the shotgun he carried. .

Knott read out the names as dispassionately as a laundry list, "Hettie and Lettie." Tremors of relief shook those whose names were not called.

"Betsy."

"Lucy and her Reyna."

"Caesar."

Master John McMartin, leaning against the rear of his wagon, hated his profession, but he knew no other way to make a living. Tall and thin with blue eyes as pallid as his translucent complexion, it hurt his vanity, an inverted sense of nicety, to work with the likes of the repulsive Thomas in peddling dirty, black flesh.

"Hettie and Lettie. Lucy and her Reyna," Knott bawled again.

When they heard their names, Hettie and Lettie, cherubic, pecan-colored twins, stepped out of the line of their fellows. Accomplished cooks, under other circumstances they might have been happily married, settled with families, looking forward to grandchildren. Instead, their lives had been transient. Born in Virginia, sold to Carolina, then to Georgia; they never knew the next stop. Now, they would move to another uncertain future.

Ashen faced, Hettie twisted trembling fingers in the waist of her shift. Lettie bit hard on her lip.

Lucy and her Reyna joined the two cooks. Lucy's aloofness froze the atmosphere. They had seen that regal quality in the fields, in the mystic ritual, and tied to the grim workmaker; yet, there were those who shivered when they contemplated her defiance of the traders.

Lucy's Reyna stood just as ramrod stiff. What did it mean to be sold away? Could there be another tree like the big one over there where she always played? Would there be a cattle pond to catch tadpoles and minnows and gather mint-scented pepper grass? Although she played alone, the tree, the tadpoles, the damp grasses made up for the lack of playmates. But, still, Mama was with her. She had the promise of power and she had Mama.

At Caesar's name, Rebecca thought she would swoon. The voice calling it came from far away, some distant place, a dream. The ground beneath her feet swayed and her breath stopped short, cut off by choked sobs in her chest. They could not sell Caesar. Caesar, her husband, her great and good love. Without Caesar she could not exist. Without him, there would be no day, no night, no nothing. When her mind could tolerate no more of the grief, it seemed to break apart and Rebecca threw herself at Master Goodman. Her screams, bubbling with tears, shattered the air. "No. Please, Master. Please don't take Caesar."

She thrashed in the dirt at the planter's feet. Her hands groped insanely for his ankles.

"If you take my husband . . . Lord, take us, too! Me and the babies! Please, master, sell us together!"

It happened so swiftly, Goodman could not escape and found himself falling back, awkwardly trying to extricate his legs without tripping over her arms. Knott watched in dumbfounded confusion, not knowing how to help.

"Get this woman off of me, Henry," the planter ordered.

Thomas, the slave trader, was first to act. With amazing agility for his size, the fat man took but three long strides to reach the woman clinging to the white man's legs. In a single, liquid arc, he raised the shotgun over his head and crashed the gun stock down across her butt. Rebecca, writhing in the dirt, screamed in pain, then rolled off to the side, releasing the planter's legs. The trader raised the gun overhead again.

Caesar charged like an enraged bull; a roar thundered from his throat.

The sight of his wife, clubbed and floundering on the ground, shattered the composure of the unmoving rock. At first, when he heard his name, Caesar remained mute, stunned to disbelief. His mind and muscle simply shut down. Barely conscious of Rebecca leaving his side, her pleading with the master, too, was a hazy image from some other, unreal place. His faculties concealed the awfulness of it until the fat man brought the gun down upon her body. Then, the sight of her, his woman, the bearer of his children and sharer of his life; the sight of that woman, clubbed by the nauseating, white hog snapped some previously unbreakable thread in his brain.

He rushed blindly into the scene, unaware of the shout, the charge, the dive into the dirt where Rebecca lay; unaware of anything save the need to throw himself between his wife and the bludgeon. The second blow of the weapon struck Caesar at the base of the skull exploding flashes of blue, red, and yellow light behind his eyes.

Before the arching swing of the gunstock had finished, the corpulent trader reached for the bullwhip at his shoulder. Deftly, quickly, the device a living extension of himself, Thomas unfurled the whip, cracked it in the air and cut through the afternoon heat to find Caesar's body. As easily as a knife, the whip left an angry trough welling blood in its furrow. Caesar slid over the ground, away from the stinging leather rope, not to save himself, but to divert it from his

wife. Another sweep of the lash wrapped it around and around his neck in a tightly strangling knot. Mechanically, unthinking, as easy as tying a shoelace, Thomas yanked the line tighter, stepped on it, stretched it taut, and held his victim's head to the ground.

It was over. The mighty black man lay subdued, choked and gawking at his captor from bulging eyes. The pig eyes of the victor peered down malevolently. The battle had occupied no more than ninety seconds.

Scarcely winded by an encounter he had enacted many times, Thomas hissed, "Now, nigger, have you had enough? Or, do you want to play some more? There's plenty more where that came from!"

Caesar did not respond, lay inert and strangling from the arrested wind pipe. For an idle moment, he hoped to die. Becca had been spared.

In the role he liked least, John, made even paler by the ferocity of the brief struggle, hurried around the wagon to straddle him and efficiently clasp five pound manacles to his unresisting wrists. Thomas, jiggling the wooden handle of the whip, flicked it loose to pull the line away. Raw, red bruises tattooed Caesar's neck. Rebecca's guttural sobs filled the silence on the quadrangle.

"Now, get up, boy. Stand on your feet," the fat one snarled.

Caesar stirred to rise, as leaden-footed as from groggy sleep.

"Get on your feet when I tell you to!" the trader commanded, teasing the whip in his face.

"Get up, unless'n you want another sample of this!"

Caesar stumbled to his feet, downcast eyes fixed on the iron chains binding his wrists.

"Now, climb up on the back of that 'ere wagon. We'll get back to you later."

Turning to the overseer, the obese one addressed Knott with the same insulting tone used on the slave, "Now, sir. Where're them gals you're supposed to have for sale?"

Knott, startled by the rapidity of the violence, nodded toward the four women and the girl. From the rear bench of the wagon, Caesar saw his wife pick herself up and skulk back to the line eyeing those to be sold. Her chest heaved with suppressed whimpers.

Thomas marched back and forth in front of the females. Shotgun in one hand; the bullwhip trailed from the other. The women felt his eyes burn over their bodies in the search for telltale marks, scars or signs of infection. The disease, yaws, not uncommon on plantations, left bluish scars that drove prices down. When he drew near, the white man's acrid breath caused them to tremble in fear.

At last he seemed to be finished and stood back, squinting. "The teeth, gal," he said finally. "The teeth."

Betsy dutifully held open her lips with index fingers for him to inspect her mouth. The others imitated her.

"Well, now, not bad," Thomas assented. He nodded to John. "Not bad a'tall. Now, let's hike up them dresses to see the rest."

Once more, Betsy led. The rest followed suit, lifting their shifts to allow the gross, foul-breathed trader to examine their private parts for symptoms of the pox. Again, he strutted back and forth staring intently at the exposed bodies. He paused before Lucy and chuckled evilly.

"Now, that's a pretty sight. Spread 'em, gal."

Having put herself in that impenetrable place of the mind where she alone dwelled, Lucy was impervious to indignity. The others shrank back or trembled before his touch and look. Lucy stood like a block of granite.

"Spread 'em gal. Let's see what you got."

With the tips of her fingers, Lucy placidly separated the labia to enable the ugly man to stare at the innermost folds of her genitals. John, pretending to daydream at his place alongside the wagon, looked away.

"Enough." Thomas turned away from the woman. "Y'all got a nice bunch of property here, Mr. Goodman."

Goodman, mildly nauseated by the procedure, glanced back with an assumed indifference. He loathed the traders, the physical examination, and he despised his own part in it, but smiled wanly, masking his feelings, trying to appear proud of his valuable property.

"Get in the wagon, gals," the slaver blustered.

The women clambered aboard the wagon to seats ahead of Caesar. Once they were seated in pairs on the benches, John locked irons bolted to the floorboards about their ankles. Their hands were free. Caesar, a threat to the trader by his great size and strength, was shackled in leg irons as well as the weighty handcuffs. Thomas hitched himself up on the wheel to plop down on the seat ahead of the human cargo and grabbed the reins of the horses, ready to go.

John, the close-mouthed trader, muttered something almost undetectable to Goodman. The few phrases that could be heard sounded like "sixty five hundred for the lot."

"Seven thousand," replied the planter, pointing a thumb down toward the earth.

A distorted idea underlay the reaction of the slaves lined up in counted rows on the quadrangle. Now, the deed was done and those still standing considered themselves fortunate and safe, however temporary. They could imagine the slightest stroke of fate to call them to take a seat upon the wagon; but, until that actually happened, they relaxed in the knowledge that they still belonged to something. A breathless silence fell over the quadrangle as they ghoulishly eavesdropped to learn what price their unfortunate comrades would bring.

They inwardly puffed up a little to hear Master Goodman insist upon seven thousand dollars. It flattered them to know that they were such expensive niggers. So intent were they upon their listening, they were startled to hear a noise and see Mistress Suzanne enter the area clapping her hands.