

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

The Avenue of Palms

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5g30d3pb>

### Author

Lark, Athena

### Publication Date

2011

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

The Avenue of Palms

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Athena Louise Lark

December 2011

Thesis Committee:

Elizabeth Crane, Co-Chairperson

Susan Straight, Co-Chairperson

Tod Goldberg

Copyright by  
Athena Louise Lark  
2011

The Thesis of Athena Louise Lark is approved by:

---

---

---

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank God for giving me the fortitude and resources to accomplish this. I would like to thank also my sons, Mark and Maurice, who encouraged me to pursue my dreams. I thank my professors, Elizabeth Crane and Tod Goldberg for all their hard work, dedication, and encouragement. I also thank Susan Straight for being on my thesis committee.

Dedication

This Thesis is dedicated to my dear departed  
Mother, Brenda Joyce Strouble.

## Table of Contents

### Chapter 1

Rebirth.....1

### Chapter 2

Life Force.....28

### Chapter 3

Upstream.....55

### Chapter 4

Prophecy.....85

### Chapter 5

Rebellion.....115

## Chapter One - Rebirth

### The Kingsley Plantation - 1832 Ft. George Island, Florida

The flames rose up the barn door engulfing the frame and the only way out. Violet grabbed her two little ones, Rachel and Benjamin by their clothes and carried them to the far end of the barn. Quickly the fire spread to the opposite side. The children held on to her tighter, crying as the red monster got bigger. She tried to gather her thoughts and figure out a way to save them, but it all seemed to be moving in slow motion to her.

She remembered the sting of the slap from her mistress just moments before, when she told her she would first have her whipped and then sell "those little nigger bastards of yours."

A beautiful woman, Violet's smooth brown skin, almond shaped eyes, thick nose, and pouty lips were more a curse to her than a blessing. Standing just over five feet,



there was still something about her that made her seem stronger than her slender body.

She ran to the cabin where Auntie Rae watched all the slave children. She didn't say a word as she snatched up the kids. Instead of heading to her own cabin, she ran to the barn to hide. She hoped her master would have enough time to calm down the mistress before she came after her with the overseer and the whip.

When she heard the rustling of leaves outside the barn, she looked through a knot hole in the wood and saw Big John. He had a lit torch in his hand. Looking around to see if anyone could see him, he threw the torch at the door.

Violet watched the dry timber burn in a flash. The smoke instantly burned her eyes and began to fill up the barn. A sliver of sunlight on the wall led her to the direction of her salvation; a small window above the hay loft.

Her hands gripped the tall ladder to the top as she struggled with the children hanging on to her. Only minutes had gone by, yet all walls of the barn were engulfed in flames. The fire spread to the ladder,

lighting her long skirts just as she made it to the hay loft. She beat at the flames until they went out.

The pain seared through her legs, but she knew she had to move quickly or they would be dead once the flames made it to the bays of hay. She stood on her tippy toes lifting five year-old Benjamin through the window, onto the burning roof. With a burst of energy the fire attacked the hay stacks with ferocious speed.

So quick was the fire that Violet was holding one-year old Rachel up in the air when her whole body caught on fire. She screamed as the fire trailed up her body and consumed her baby girl.

She was a ball of fire cradling her dying baby when she looked up and saw Benjamin's crying face and tiny hand reaching down for her. Then she left the world in ashes.

Ibo Village - 1825  
Sierra Leone

The setting sun cast an eerie glow over our small village. The straw huts sat empty. The men were off hunting, leaving the women to prepare the evening meal. I stood outside our hut and pounded cassava with a rock.

Even though I was just a child of eleven, I had been helping with the evening meal since before I could walk my mama say. She let me rub the goat down with herbs from the bush. Then she took him by his feet and while I held his front side she stuck a spear through his middles, and we put him over the fire. Mama tended to the goat as it roasted and its juices poured down its sides into the hot rocks.

The goat was a treat for my twin brother, Kweisi. It was his thirteenth birthday and his initiation into manhood. The elder of the village sat on a tree stump and painted colorful designs on Kweisi's face for the night's ceremony in front of the whole tribe. Little chillun played games, running in and out of the trees.

The goat had been roasting since before dusk when a flaming spear sailed across the horizon landing on our hut. Mama hit at the fire with a big stick as more men came screaming out the bush. She took me by the hand and we run real fast towards the forest. We found a large tree on a small hill and hid behind it. It was my favorite spot in the village. I would go there and play by myself when Kwesi got tired of me always by his side. It was a little clearing surrounded by trees. Just space enough for me to sit on the hill and not be seen, but be able to watch our whole village below.

My mama and me crouched there and watched the men with spears run through the village, lighting more huts on fire. It was a lot of fussing going on as everyone ran around screaming and crying.

One of the men noticed me and mama behind the tree. He ran towards us with his arm raised to stab at me, when a big man caught his hand and stopped him.

"We keep them all," he said to the man. I had heard the voice before, but never had seen the man.

They looked like our people from the Ibo tribe, with bright feathers tied around their arms and legs. It all made it more confusing to my young mind. "Mama, why?" I whispered into her bosom. "Shush, chile." she said while the big man shouted orders to the other men.

"Get the boys, get the boys!" he said. "Don't let them get away."

One of the men grabbed Kweisi as he headed towards the forest with the elder slowly following behind. He turned around to grab the elder's elbow when the man leaped on him, knocking them all to the ground.

The Ibo man with big strong muscles had one arm wrapped around my brother's neck. But he just kept on a kicking and a punching at the same time.

He finally broke away from him and was crawling towards mama and me, when the man threw a flaming spear at him. Mama ran out from behind the tree after him. She held him as he lay on his side with a bloody spear tip in front of him and the end of the spear sticking out of his back.

They killed my brother who be the other half of me. They burned our village, then tied our legs together and

made us walk a long time. We walked for many days. Some people died along the road. They just untied them and kicked them in the brush. The buzzards circled around us, along the way.

And then Mama came down with the sickness from the men. She dragged behind, but they just pushed her tired body along. As the day went on they would untie her and take her again. I thought she would die like my brother, but we made it to the beginning of our end.

#### The Kingsley Plantation - 2009

The last time I walked down this here road I was a young gal toting some cloth for the missus's new dress. I took care not to get a smudge of dirt on the fine yellow fabric. But the passing wagons and men on their horses to and fro town kept the dirt flying from here to there. Back then it took a mighty bit of time to get back from town.

I'd say I was about half way home when my spirit returned. All about me kind of looked the same.

Tall palms and piney trees lined the road as the hot sun came through the canopy of moss from above. Then a moving machine came from behind me on the road. It scared

the living daylights out of me. Never saw anything like it in my life. It stopped and the woman sitting in it looked at me all funny like.

I looked down at my dress that reached my ankles. Even though it was all tored up, it was clean. My apron didn't have a spot of dirt on it neither. I felt my head rag. Thought it might of slipped some. I never showed my hair, it always cause me hardship. Black as night, it came to the middle of my back. Massa George say it's the prettiest hair he ever seen on a nigger straight from Africa.

The rag was tight on my head. Couldn't figure out why she was looking at me like that. But let me tell you, she and that machine was a sight to see.

She be a nigger like me, but she don't look like I do. Her hair was in funny looking braids, twisted all up like. She was dressed in some kind of man suit. She asked me which way to the park. I told her I don't know nothing bout that, but to follow the road if she was looking for the plantation. Before I know it her and the machine was gone again, kicking up dust behind it.

The sun done moved almost on the horizon by the time I made it there. A sign at the entrance of the iron gates say

- Welcome to Kingsley Plantation National State Park. Just when I walked through the big gates, a peacock ran out from the woods and stood in front of me. He spread his wings all royal like, in blue, gold, and green colors. It was a grand welcome home.

I looked around. I knowed the place, but it look kinda of different. The slave quarters was in a mess. Some of the walls of the cabins were still there, cept there wasn't no roofs on them. My old place be the only cabin that still had a roof on it. All our gardens be gone too. Don't know what folks be eating without their own vittles. Cause I sure don't remember the missus feeding us much.

It was real quiet, with no other slaves milling about. I figured in this new world maybe the good Lord done made us free. Inside the cabin I see it just like I left it. The big fireplace where I did all the cooking was there. The furniture look the same. My old rocking chair sat in front of the hearth where I liked to keep it.

Oh, there were many a nights I would sit rocking in that chair imagining what freedom look like. Then I would lay all dead like on the pallet and wait for massa George to make his nightly visit.



Yes indeedy, I was back home, but it was mighty dirty in there. Cob webs all in the corners. And the floor needed a good sweeping. I took to cleaning up the place. Everybody who knows me knows I don't tolerate filth.

Whilst I was sweeping I heard some folks talking outside the window. I went out there to see what all the ruckus was about. I bout passed out when I saw a nigger all wrapped up with a white woman!

I slapped him hard across the face. He didn't move a lick. "Boy, you gonna be killed for sure if you don't get your hand offa that woman right now," I said looking around to see if anyone else be around. There was a white man pointing some strange thing at them.

"Smile," he said to the man and woman.

"Who you all be?" I asked them. No one said anything. They acted like I wasn't even there. They just walked over to one of those moving machines and headed towards the big house.

That's when I knew in this new world some people could see me and some can't. I was like one of those Ibo spirits my mama used to tell me bout. The kind that came back before they passed on to the heavenly world.

I don't know where I be from my time passing till I returned. Since the Almighty done decided for me to be here I took to thinking I best get to knowing what life be like around here.

On the path to the big house I passed the main gardens. The collards looked like they were ready to be picked, but the turnips and kale seemed to be tended to.

The big brass bell stood right outside the kitchen house, just like it used to be. Life was set by it. It told us it was eating time, work time, meeting up time, mostly at the whipping post, and when I could sit my tired body down for the day.

Next to the bell be a sign that say, Roscoe's Café. Never saw that before. And the only Roscoe I knowed was lynched by those white trash crackers one night on the road, when he was heading back from town.

Inside the kitchen house be the same, cept instead of a big empty space where we used to sometimes stand to grab a few vittles, there be some tables and chairs, and some fancy curtains on the windows. And wouldn't you knowed it, there was old Roscoe with his gray beard and big round belly cooking like he used to at the hearth.

"Good Lord, have mercy," I said. "Roscoe boy, how you be?"

"Violet? Is that you?" He said looking round all scared like the missus and massa be there.

"Course, it me. What you doing here? You was dead last time I seen you."

"I know. Them ole boys got me good. So nice to see you gal. Haven't seen any folks from the old days since Big John come through."

"Big John? Where he at?" I said. Something didn't sit right with me and that nigger.

"Oh, he just come back for a few days. His spirit be roaming around. Not here nor there. Tell me gal, where you been?"

"That's a mighty fine question? I be dead, then the next thing I knowed I'm a walking down the road, and a big moving thing almost knocked me to the ground. What kind of world this here be, Roscoe?"

"It's not another world, just another time. It be the year 2009. These people here done voted for their first nigger president. Barack Obama. They call him African-American."

"Is that so? Can't be African and American. But he sure do sound African enough for me," I said.

It was almost too much for me to understand. I would always be African, even when they made me a nigger. And I knowed if it was up to white folks there would never be a nigger president, lest we did like it was done back home.

It reminded me of that story my mama used to tell me bout the tortoise and the rabbit. She say the rabbit and the tortoise had a race. The tortoise gets a lot of tortoises and put them along the way. Every now and then a tortoise crawl along the way, and the rabbit say, "How you now, Br'er Tortoise?" and he say, "Slow and sure, but my legs very short." When they get tired, the tortoise wins because he there, but he never run the race, because he had tortoises strolled out along the way. It looked like maybe our people had lined up our own tortoises.

"Why you come back here?" I asked Roscoe.

"Don't know," he said while some white folks walked through the door and sat down at one of the tables. "Been here bout two years now. Still trying to figure that out for myself."

He picked up some cups and a pot and sat them in front of the people dressed up the same in brown shirts and short pants.

"What can I get you all this morning?" he said to them.

"Well, Roscoe," a short portly white woman said, "Give us the usual."

He nodded at them, then came back to the hearth where I was standing.

"They can see you." I said to him. "Can all people see you?"

"Most can, but some can't. Haven't figured that one out yet either. Come on gal, sit that body on down and eat some of old Roscoe's cooking."

He sat down a piping hot plate of fresh fruit, applewood bacon, cheesy grits, scrambled eggs, and homemade biscuits with white gravy. I ate like I hadn't eaten in ages while Roscoe told me what had happened since I was gone.

He say that a lot had happened over the years. That we weren't slaves no more. That we be as free as a bird flying in the sky. I got up and twirled around the kitchen house just a praising God. Chile, I was a stomping my feet

and speaking in tongues. Yes Indeedy, I give thanks right in front of them white folks.

After a spell, I calmed down a bit and listened to Roscoe tell me the rest of the story. He went on to say that the government had turned Kingsley Plantation into some kind of park. And the people in brown worked there. The moving machines be cars, he say that's how people got from one place to another.

"How long I get to stay here," I asked.

"Can't tell you, gal. That's between you and the maker," he said as he picked up my plate. "But you better get to starting to find out why you do be here, before that time comes."

Then he took me by the hand and led me to the door. "Go on, now. I got work to do. Come see me round dinner time, I'll have something for ya."

I stood outside the kitchen house. A stone path led to the big house. Above the path was a long roof of white boards. Ivy and white flowers wrapped itself around the boards.

I took two steps towards the house, and for the life of me I don't know why, I turned around and headed back to the cabin. I thought I might just be tired from taking

that long journey between the years and needed to sit down for a spell.

A fire was already lit in the hearth when I got to the cabin. Rocking back and forth in my chair, I stared into the fire. It took me back to where my journey began.

Bance Island - 1825  
Sierra Leone

Along the cliff sat the other end of the stone building where they held us captive. At daylight I would look out between the bars and watch the water crash against the rocks. At night we begged for food. Scary looking men that looked like the ghosts my mama used to tell me about in stories would throw food at us. Later I learned them to be white men. All I knew then was they looked mighty strange to me.

I was just a little girl and I couldn't figure out why they were treating us so badly. I cried every night for my brother. I whispered to mama, sitting in the cage next to me, where were they taking us? She shook her head and cried.

"Wherever it is," she said. "It won't be a good place."

More white men worked below on a ship on the docks. The men from the ship took us from our cages and chained us together by the neck with one long chain. They pushed us all onto a wooden plank. On board there stood a tall man



who looked almost African and almost white. He shouted at the other men.

"Hurry up, hurry and move these heathens along! Faster. We don't have time to waste," he said. Then pointing to a gal of about twelve or so, he told them, "Take her to my quarters, now."

The white men kept on pushing us further down into the bowels of the ship. Inside the dark space were about a hundred other Africans. An oil lamp cast shadows over all the black bodies.

They used big sticks to push us closer together in the small space. They crammed us so tight we couldn't move our arms or feet. We mumbled prayers in our native tongue. Next to me a pregnant woman laid sobbing. As they pressed her harder into the people around us, blood flowed from beneath her and seeped between my toes.

We sailed packed tight like that for about two moons. Men on the bottom, woman folk on the top. I had never smelled something more poorly in my life. During the voyage I saw many people die around me. You never know what you can get used to, until the soul has been crushed. We were

treated like cattle, worst than cattle even. Cause we would never treat our animals so cruelly. Every so often the crew would come down below and drag out the dead bodies. I heard the splashes of water as they threw them over the side. So many of us die along the way that there be whole graveyards on the bottom of that sea. Yes indeedy, lots of bones rubbing up against them seashells that come to shore with the marks of the dead.

I can't make my mind believe sometimes that I made it through the middle passage from there to here. The body and the soul are separate I learned, when my mama died about half way through the voyage. I still remember watching them throw her battered body overboard. They had to hold me back as I tried to go with her. I was just a little thing, but I kicked up a fuss. When they put me back under I laid next to another woman with chile. She kept mumbling in our native tongue. She was hungry she said. When they brought us the goulash, I gave her mines. She put her arm around me like mama used to do. It made me think about our village and my father.

He was the chief ruler of the tribe. He didn't live with us. He lived about a mile down the road in another

village. His first wife made him banish us. He had six wives. He never acknowledged my mother, brother or me. We were cast offs, but we were together. I got to thinking during those long days at sea that I be all alone. I had no one.

The dank bowels of the ship was where we spent all our days and nights, cept for a bit of time on deck for fresh air and the dancing they made us do. Only about forty of us made it through to the end. Some would say I was one of the strong ones. I tell you, like I told them, it not about strength, but the will of the spirit.

Kingsley Plantation - 1826

It was hard when they first bought us here to this strange land. From the river bank I could see a white house up high on a hill. They had taken those irons off of us, but we was still together by a long rope in knots between us. They led us up the hill to the front of the house. There stood an African gal who I knew to be Ibo like me. Cept I was a mighty confused, cause she was all dressed up in fancy clothes. She wore yellow and white gowns with a bonnet. She looked to be bout sixteen, maybe a little younger. Some little chile fanned at her with a huge palmetto leaf. Next to her holding her arm stood an old white man with a powerful air about him.

They led us in a line before them, and took off the ropes, one by one.

"George Kingsley is my name," the man say. "I'm your master here on this land." Then he held up the gal's hand and said, "This fine woman here is my wife, Zola Kingsley. If her mouth open to call your name you be there before it says it, and you'll have no problems with her."

They was the oddest man and wife I had ever seen, with her clear ebony face next to his colorless wrinkled face and gray hair.

I was one of the first to be bought in front of her. She lifted up my dirty and mangled hair with her gloved hand. The sack I was wearing was filthy and torn.

"Your name is Violet now, nigger girl," she said to me real slow, like I was a little baby chile who didn't know no better. I had spent a year at the mission outside our village with Father Rios. He was black like us, but came from some far off land. I learned most English words, and knew she was telling a lie.

"My name be Fatima," I said looking into eyes that were mirrors of mines.

"Violet is what you will answer to or I'll have your hide whipped," she said, and then she turned to my new master. "George, didn't I tell you to get them cleaned up before you bring them here? I can't abide seeing them this way."

"Don't you fret none," he said while pointing to a large black man, "Big John, take them down to the quarters and get them cleaned up for the missus."

That's how I started a living in this here cabin. I shared it with two other gals; Isabel, a freeborn like me, and Lucy a nigger whose mama was Ibo, but her father be the massa's older brother.

When I first got here the missus picked me as her personal slave. I worked in the big house, not out in the field with the other niggers. Massa had a handful of slaves that were already here before we come.

I find out that me and the missus be just a few years apart. I learned a lot taking care of her. I learned to sew ball gowns for her parties, embroider lace for her under clothes and take care of her every need. She was a demanding missus. She was beautiful and acted real royal. Yet she was dangerous to be around.

It didn't matter that she was African like most of us be. She still ruled the plantation with a heavy hand and a strong whip. "Hurry up nigger gal," she would shout at me

if I moved to slow. Or she would throw whatever object was handy at me, just missing my head by inches.

When I first got here, I missed my mama so. I moved around in a daze. I just didn't want to live no more. My people were strong proud people. I tried to pull up that warrior blood in my veins, but it was hard to watch the others that came on the boat with me cower down to the hate that was brought on us.

I watched as Shaku and Kioni, both big and strong men from my village, get beat to nothing but work horses. They work them like mules. For some reason, massa hated them the most. They did their work, but they had pride in their eyes and our homeland in their soul. He just wanted to beat it out of them. After awhile they were shells of men, their bodies were there but their spirits were gone.

Kingsley Plantation - 2009

So, it seems my spirit has returned. Don't know what happened to me from my death till now. I reckon it was a time of peace to give me a rest from all the hell I was living. Freedom done cleaned up this place. The sun seem brighter, the grass greener, and hope is not something to be hidden, but lived aloud.

I feeling just fine now. Just fine. Life is good when you not getting whipped for sneaking a spot of gravy left over from missus's plate, or, when they not cutting off your ear or slicing your heel cause you done run away.

Most days I walks the land studying what be done changed and what stay the same. I finally went into the big house last night. It took a mighty long time for me to make my feet get to moving in that direction. Way too many bad times spent in there.

At the front of the house was a white wrap-around porch with rocking chairs and large fern plants hanging from the posts. The sloping front lawn led down to the banks of the river where I first planted my foot on my new homeland.



When I walked into the house I noticed the pretty shine on the floors. I spent many an hour on my knees just a scrubbing away to make them look good. Don't know who do the cleaning now, but they do a mighty good job of keeping up the place which looked just like I left it.

In the parlor where the misses would hold company at was the same red velvet couch, mahogany arm chairs and golden mirrors. A spiral staircase led up to the two large bedrooms that took up the second floor.

Walking up the stairs I came down with grief from all the wrong that done happened to me in the house. I passed the long hall that connected the two rooms, and then stopped in front of the door to the grandest one. It be the missus's chambers. I looked down at the floor and could still see where my body would lay at the door sill most nights.

That's why I have such pain in my joints now from sleeping on that hard wooden floor. Even when Benjamin and Emanuel be big in my stomach she would have someone come fetch me from the cabin so's I could be there in the middle of the night case she need me.

The grief came down on me harder when I got to the narrow staircase that led to the attic. Up there was a

small windowless room. There wasn't any furniture in the room, just two straw pallets on the floor.

It was always a hard place for me to be, cause that be where the massa first took me and have his way with me. I had been here just one moon by then. I was still a little bitty gal. As he grunted on top of me, I remember thinking bout the waves crashing on the rocks at Bance Island. I would always go back to those waves.

I have much to tell you bout the massa and me, but I don't like to recollect on it all, so's I tell you some other time.

After leaving the attic I made my way down the stairs and passed the windows that faced the barn. I kept on going then stopped in my tracks. Went back and looked out the window. There was a piece of a silver moon high above the barn roof. I walked over to the barn, it was dark but I could see the shape of it.

I felt a rush of air when I stepped inside. Flames danced all around my feets. I heard my babies screaming for me. I fell on my knees and cried. My babies were gone. Dead in the fire. And so was I. But now I'm back to make it alright.

## Chapter two - Life Force

### Kingsley Plantation - 1826 -1827

It was hard being a slave when all your life you be free. Some of my people who made it through the journey died once they got here from tiredness and a broken heart. Others just lived with a broken spirit. Since I was missus personal slave I spent most my time in the big house taking care of her.

She run this plantation with a strong fist. And not partial to any foolishness. With most folks you could find something good about them, if you looked hard enough. But there was nothing good in the missus. She hit and curse me almost every day. One day I got the stitches wrong on her new quilt.

"You just a stupid nigger that can't do anything right," she said. Then she spit in my face. I didn't dare wipe it off till she left the room.

It was bad for me, but not as bad as the other gals in the work gangs in the fields. They toiled under the hot sun for many hours a day. I would be making my morning vittles when I'd hear them gather and start to singing as they headed to the cotton fields. They was always singing a song with grace for the good Lord. Like the one I'd hum to all day long, "Swing low, sweet chariot, come for to carry me home."

When they came back from the fields the songs would have a different sound. Tired to the bone, they would sing about the burdens of the world. Although I didn't work the fields, my whole being would be as tired as theirs by the end of the day. I was a house nigger, but I still had to share the cabin with them, so there really wasn't that much separating us. We was all still slaves.

Overseer Henry, a mangy white trash heathen, made our days hell on earth. He was a towering man, well over six feet tall, stringy hair, and one of those mustaches that twirled at the ends. I figured massa George give him run of the place cause he was sure to bring in a crop of new slaves every year.

There be many a night when Henry would come busting through the door grabbing at Lucy, a field nigger and make me take leave. That is how I started working on the slave garden in back of the cabin. I tended to the moist soil, growing life, trying to block out the sound of her screams. No matter how many times he took her she always fought, never give in. After while she went and runned away. They never did catch Lucy. She be my motivation for what was to come.

There be some no count slaves who say massa and missus good people, but good people don't keep slaves. Good people don't work us like mules and horses. Far as I see the mules were treated better than us.

They say missus nicer than most cause she African like us. I say she treated us worse for that same reason. She Ibo, but seemed like she had American blood flowing through her veins.

You see, when massa first bought this here land there nothing here but swamps and piney woods. To start his fortunes he took a trip to the homeland and met a chief that made a deal with the devil. This chief sold his own

people to the massa and men like him. When the massa saw the chief's daughter, Zola, he forgot about black and white and fell right in love with her.

He asked the chief to betroth her and gave him a dowry of goats and guns. Being a young gal of thirteen she was scared of the strange looking man that looked at her like he could see beneath her robes.

It seemed that feeling didn't last long for missus Zola though, cause in no time she was accustomed to the fine clothes and small treasures that the massa give her. She also took great pleasure in having her own slaves to do her bidding.

Roscoe said he heard it from another slave that she might be some kin to one of us slaves, since she came from the same parts of the land as some of us. She didn't take to kindly to any of us slaves talking about the homeland. I reckon she wanted us to keep the place away from our minds and out of our hearts.

We weren't allowed to keep our traditions alive neither. There was no talk of our priests and rites of passage that we took in our life in our villages. She

wanted our memories to die like our souls felt from the journey away from our home. But she might have had her own reasons she wanted to keep hidden.

Of course massa caught hell in these parts marrying a nigger and making her a lady, but he was always the kind of man that did what he pleased.

I was here just a short time when he took to looking at me. I was just a girl chile of close to fourteen. Aunty Anne, who was like my mamma to me, was always a telling me to be careful, to never be caught alone in the same room with him. We both knew it would happen, but we was praying it not.

First thing in the mornings I would do the washing in the yard over a big scalding pot of water. I would stir the clothes around with a wooden stick, then wring them out and put them on the line. Then I would do some spinning and sewing. I also got hired out to sew for the missus' on the Grady and Buckner plantations. The ladies like my ball gowns the most and my fine quilts.

In time I would have to run from the massa and his roving hands. Working at my stitches in the parlor, with

the missus away, he would just grab at my breasts like a teat on a cow. Once he started after me, I made sure to stick close to the kitchen with Anne.

Missus was pregnant with her second chile, Jim then and meaner than her usual. With Lucy gone I had the cabin alone. One night massa came after me. I knew something was wrong as soon as he came through the door. He had this angry look in his eyes. He took two long strides towards me and pulled my head rag off my head. I stood still has he ran his grubby fingers through my hair.

Then he took his hands and squeezed at my breasts. I pulled away from him.

"Leave me be," I said. "Massa, I do whatever you say, but please let me be."

Without saying a word he caught me by my ankle, and then dragged me across the room to the pallet. He tore the bodice off my dress, rubbing his rough hands all over my body. I tried to fight him. I tried with all my might.

It seemed the more I fight the more he liked it. He yanked me by the hair, and held me down with his other hand. And then he pulled down his pants and took me so



roughly the pots over the fireplace shook, making a clanking noise. I cried out from the pain, but he kept on grunting on top of me like a hog eating at the trough.

It was worse than living next to dead bodies crossing the ocean. I thought it would never end. It was too much for my young mind to take cause I went to thinking about home and sitting under the papaya tree with my mama. I missed her so much.

Massa just kept at it until finally he stopped. He pulled his pants up and straightened his clothes. Then he took my face with both his hands and kissed me right on my mouth. That's when missus Zola came bursting through the door. She was dressed in a red ball gown. She must of have left the Carter's party when she got to wondering where her man be.

"Get your nigger hands off of him!" she said to me. Then she slapped me hard across my face. She just kept on slapping me, making my head go from left to right, with each hit. Blood streamed out of my nose, ran down my breasts and seeped into my torn dress.

Massa pulled her off of me and took her out the cabin. Before he left he look at me again, with that mean look in his eyes that told me he would be back. Maybe not that night, but soon.

In time I came down with chile.

"You disgusting little wench," the missus said to me one afternoon whilst I was bending over the lye pot washing clothes. "All you nigger women are the same, lusting after our men. Make sure you stay away from master George, or I'll have you killed." She said "our men" like she was white herself.

I borned my chile just like we used to do in the homeland, standing up holding on to a tree whilst squatting over a straw pallet. It took all day and half the night to push her out. I was glad she be here, but was sad for the life she would have. When the seventh day came I didn't have no man to hold her and give her her name.

So, I kneeled in front of the fireplace with her cradling in my hands and held her up to the Almighty. He whisper in my ear to call her Faiza. So's I named her to

be victorious, for her to live free from hatred. When the missus saw her she said her name would be Jane.

I worked long days after she born. I nurse her and little massa at the same time while doing the laundry and the sewing. It was maybe a month or so before the massa come after me again. I still fight him, but instead of thinking about my mama and the ocean, I started thinking about ways to escape. Then he left for a trip back to Africa to get more slaves. I was glad I didn't have to run from him for some time.

During the end of the harvest this free nigger from St. Augustine, named Ishmael started working on the plantation. So skilled at carpentry he was hired out all the way to Virginia.

His father, Benjamin, also a carpenter bought Ishmael and his whole family from his owner, Orwin Smithy. It took his father ten years to do it, but in the end they live under they own roof and they own command. God sure do be good. Most times.

Ishmael built most of the furniture in the big house. Like missus's four poster bed and cabinets and the spiral

staircase. He would always find a way to be in my way while I was doing the missus's bidding around the house. He had his eyes on me from the start.

Big with chile again I didn't pay him no mind, besides he was too good looking a man for my taste. He had light brown eyes, like my Jane. There weren't any scars on his dark smooth skin. Standing next to Henry he was maybe a foot taller. But what I tried my hardest to resist was his smile that reached up to his eyes whenever he saw me.

All the other gals acted like silly little fools around him, raising up their skirts around him and cooking for him. But he didn't care a lick about any of them.

One night he come to the cabin with this here rocking chair he made specially for me.

"Good evening, Miz Violet," he say to me all proper like. "I think it be time for us to start a courting. I likes you, and you know it. Ain't no nigger on this place, or miles around that can do for you what I can."

"I don't need no body doing anything for me." I said. "I been doing for myself, and I'll keep right on doing it."

So, go on now. Go on round those piccaninnies. I don't have time for no foolishness."

The next time he came to the cabin he came carrying a cradle he made for Jane and a piece of red and white calico fabric for me. All's my dresses were the missus's caste offs. They the dresses with too many tears or holes in them to be patched, or they were stained badly.

I had never had my very own dress that I made just for me, so he finally won my heart. Sides, I had become accustomed to his good disposition. He didn't cower in front of Henry. He looked him in the eye, not down to the ground like us slaves do.

Since the massa still gone missus Zola let us marry. I wore my new dress and let my hair down which had grown to the middle of my back. I tied it with a red satin ribbon Ishmael also give me when he was courting me.

We jumped the broom right there in front of the cabin, under the oak tree. Anne and the other slave women cooked up a mighty fine helping of dishes. We had roast pork, collards with fat back, chitterlings, cold water corn

bread, chocolate cake and potato pie. We ate and danced to the fiddle for most of the night.

When it time for Ishmael and me to be man and wife, I took off my dress and laid on the pallet waiting for him to come to me. He sit on the floor, take my hand and say to me, "look here we both know you be massa George woman."

"I'm just something for him to bed with," I said. "You be my husband now." I reached over to him and put his hands on my breasts. His hands shook as he rubbed me real soft like, nothing like massa's roughness. I loved him so.

"Massa will have us both killed, don't matter if I be free or not," he said.

"He won't know. Take me," I said as I lifted up my skirts. "I want to know what love feel like inside of me."

"We both know that's not how it works," he said standing up. "I wants you bad girl, but I have to stay living long enough to buy you and the babies' freedom."

He began to make himself a pallet on the other side of the cabin. I could hear him muttering to himself as he

made it. It sounded like he say something about a black man not being able to do nothing.

"First they take our dignity then they take our women," he said to me, lying down on his pallet. "They put all the troubles of the world on our shoulders, and don't even allow us to love. I'm gonna get us away from all this, Violet. Till then you do what you got to do with the massa."

That's when I knowed the difference between nigger love and white love. You see, I was the one that was a toting Ishmael's heavy load. I was the one being taken by the massa, carrying his chile in my belly. I tell you, it is hard for a slave woman to love when she don't know if her man or chillun going to be sold the next day. But with Ishmael I didn't have to worry about that, except if we have chillun, then they be slave like me. Oh, we knew it would be hard for us, but we didn't know how much heavier our burdens would become.

Little Benjamin and Emanuel come into this world one fine morning in 1827, during the end of the harvest. Ishmael named them after his father and grandfather.

"You gonna be a strong black man," was the first words he say to Benjamin. "Yes, indeedy you gonna get an education and make your daddy proud." He didn't have a care in the world that they wasn't his chillun. He would come in from work and hold them for hours talking to them, like they understood his rumblings.

We was a family, and lived as happy a life as a slave woman and free nigger could until the massa got back from the homeland.

He was a mighty upset to know that the missus let me get married. I was in the sewing room when I heard them cause a ruckus in her chambers.

"What do you care about some little nigger wench?" I heard her say to him. "Besides, he would pay us top dollar to buy her and those brats of hers."

"She will not be sold to anyone, Zola. You yourself know she is the best seamstress anywhere around here. No, absolutely not, I won't hear anymore of this."

The massa being so firm with her just made her more mad and deceitful. It must have brought to her mind that it wasn't overseer Henry bedding me, but maybe it be the



massa after all. She began to treat me worse than her usual when the massa left again for one of his trips.

Little Jane was about a year old when one day I went to Aunty Rae's cabin to nurse her, and she say to me that the missus sold her to Mr. Carter who came visiting from Charleston.

I made my way real quick to the river walk just when they were loading the boat with my Jane and Rebecca another slave woman that master bedded down with. The missus stood there saying her goodbyes to the Carters.

"Not my baby girl," I cried to her. "Please missus, don't sell my Jane, I do whatever you tell me to do, but don't take her away from me." My knee was aching from a sharp rock cutting into it. But I didn't care nothing bout that. Pulling on her skirts, I begged for my chile until Ishmael take me away.

Watching the boat round the bend, I felt like my heart was just a breaking. The pains in my chest where so great I couldn't walk. Finally, Ishmael picked me up and toted me back to the cabin.

I didn't want to live anymore. My life force be gone. I had lost hope in my future. The hope of better tomorrows for my chillum, of freedom is what had kept me alive. Without it and my Jane I thought I would surely die. I had to find my hope, but I didn't know where to begin to get it back.

Ishmael stay right there to nurse me through it all. I tell you the good Lord gave me a heap of blessings when he give him to me. I wanted to run then, but he say he will get more work so he could buy me and the boys sooner.

When massa returned again, he leave me and Ishmael be for while. Anne say he started after missus's new slave gal, that he bought off the block in Atlanta. Missus make me stop nursing Benjamin and Emanuel, when she borned little missus Aliza so I could have enough milk to nurse her.

I nurse her all the time, and sew for the missus too while the boys stay in the cabin with Aunty Rae. My days begin before the sun up and it didn't end till way after the sun go down. I missed my baby girl, but I had to live for my boys and Ishmael.

They forbad us slaves to learn how to read, but Ishmael taught me how to. It was dangerous, but I learned from reading from small notes of paper he would find and sneak in the cabin. He would teach me under a lone candle, late in the night, after the massa would leave.

One paper I learned from heart be his freedom papers. It say, Ishmael Smithy be a free nigger. That he be six feet nine inches tall, 225 pounds, with a small scar on his neck and the branding "S" on his upper right arm. His freedom date read September 20, the year 1825.

Another paper he brought home was the sign that say massa George offer anyone \$500 for the return of one runaway slave by the name of Lucy Kingsley. Somehow his papa find him a book called the Elements of the Philosophy of Right. I hid the book behind some loose bricks in the fireplace when I wasn't reading it sometimes till the rooster crowed in the morning.

Ishmael would leave here for many months trying to earn enough money to buy our freedom. I missed him a lot, but I was glad he didn't have to see when the massa came

after me and watch the way the missus treated me when she was in one of her foul moods.

When the boys got older they started to look like little massa Jim, cause they be brothers. Cause missus and I same color and our chillun have same father, mines and hers looked almost the same. I don't know what the missus was thinking but she seemed to grow meaner by the day. One morning while massa be at the Carter plantation she called me into the parlor.

"Violet! Come here right this minute," she said.

She stood in front of me, staring at me with cold eyes. She slapped me hard across my face.

"Who is the father of your children?" she asked, holding me by the collar of my frock. Then she slapped me again.

"I don't know missus," I stuttered.

Course I knew who the father be, I only be with one man. But, who was I to tell her that her husband be a rapist? We just didn't tell if we valued life, or didn't want our chillun to get sold away.

"Tell me or I'll have you whipped," she said spitting in my face.

"I don't know missus," I said again, expecting her to hit me again. Instead, she pushed me away.

She called overseer Henry up to the parlor and demanded I be taken to the whipping post and given five lashes from the cowhide.

They made Ishmael stand next to me holding both of the boys, as they tied me to the post. The first lash felt like flaming fire on me back.

She stood right in front of my face and asked me again who be the father. I said nothing.

"Again!" she shouted to the overseer.

She did that about three more times. I passed out after the fifth lash. I woke up when Daniel, another slave, and Ishmael untied me. I saw the pool of blood around my feet, and then I passed out again.

Anne put a salve on my back to close up the flesh. They say I be out for two days. When I woke again, massa be sitting by my bed.

"You better not tell, or you be whipped again," he said. After that missus leave me alone till the next time she come after me on Christmas morning.

They sent Ishmael away for a while. He went back to his home in St. Augustine to work on the Smithy plantation where he was once a slave boy at. When he came back home and saw my back it had healed but the heavy welts were there. He cried as he ran his fingers down my back. I could see his emotions all over him. I knew a part of him wanted to kill them for what they did. Another part of him, although free, was a black man who had no rights or protection for his family. What could he do? Nothing. I be slave first, his wife second.

Late one night soon after he come back he come over to my pallet and unwrapped my head rag from my head. He hadn't done it in a long while. When he combed my hair I felt such calm joy with him. It was our only way of being close to one another.

Then he would have me lay down and spread my hair out like a fan, to let it breath he say. We would stay like that for hours talking, except when the babies woke up. I

would sneak and nurse them, even though the missus told me not to. I knew I would have to try real hard to have enough milk for little missus Aliza in the morning.

Laying next to one another never touching he would tell me about his travels. He told me I had to keep it a secret between us, but that he had met a man when he went up to Virginia after the harvest.

"What kind of man, this be?" I asked him. "There's some niggers you can't trust."

"He's not one of those kinds. Nat is a prophet that will lead us to the promise land."

"You mean up North?" I said sitting up, getting happy we was finally making plans to leave.

"Shush, woman! Yes there. We met for bible studies one night behind this old barn not far from the port. Of course we had to be careful, cause some of us be free and some slaves. Besides you know a group of niggers can't be together without them thinking we planning something, which we was. Nat a real powerful man who knows the word best I've seen. He say God told him that there would be a day of judgment."

Then he said in my ear real low like, "We gonna be free, baby. Free." Before I said anything, I got on my knees and thanked the Lord, for his blessing.

Ishmael said we had to find a way to talk about the North without talking about it. Holding my quilt he say to me we could use the quilts. He wanted me to make a patch with a bear on it. When he touch the patch on the quilt it meant we had to find a way to talk in secret. All the talk of freedom made me want to take leave right then and there.

For the first time we slept in each other's arms. I dreamed of a little gal dressed all in white running through the cotton fields.



Kingsley Plantation - 2009

After leaving the barn, I felt some of that hope come alive in me that left when they first took my Jane away. I knowed I come back for a reason like the Ndi Ichie spirits of my people before me.

Ever since I was a little gal my mama would tell me that once we died we would come back, and in the between time we would live in a spirit world until we found peace. I believed my mama, but all I knowed was that my babies died too in the fire and there was nothing I could do to bring them back.

One day while sitting at a table in the kitchen house eating some vittles that Roscoe made for me, I asked him why come the people can see him, but don't be bothered none about him talking to me, who they could not see. He say that the people could not see him when he was in his spirit realm with me, only when he in the physical realm.

That made some sense to me. It sort of explained why the lady I met the first day on the road could see me. "But, why only her?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "In time you learn the rules of the spirit world. They not be the same for each of us. For me it will be different than for you. No two spirits are the same. I been here two years, and I still don't know all the answers."

Then he went back to serving the people at the tables. It was a different sort of people that day than the usual workers in their brown shorts and shirts. The people were dressed in different clothes. Some had on long dresses, some had on dresses so short you could almost see their privates. The men wore long pants and short pants. And they all carried those little machines that Roscoe said be cameras.

I pulled up a chair to one table to listen to what they was saying to each other.

"Isn't it just beautiful here?" a white lady with half a hat on said to the man sitting next to her. "So peaceful, so calm. It couldn't have been that hard for the slaves to live here."

"Mother! That's a terrible thing to say," said a young gal in a bright yellow dress.

"That's right, Alice. That's absurd," the man said. "Just because it looks peaceful and calm doesn't mean it was anything like that for the slaves that had to live here."

"Yeah, mother. You need to get with the times. I'm glad we brought you here today. Maybe you'll learn something from the tour."

Yes, indeedy. I thought please let her learn something cause she was dumb as a mule. I wished she could have seen me. I would have given her a good talking to.

I waited until they got done eating then followed them into the big house. A lady in brown who said her name be Tammy, talked to them as we walked throughout the house. In each room she told them mostly what each room was and what the massa and missus did in them. She wasn't saying much to hold my attention until she started talking foolishness.

"George Kingsley was considered a kind slave owner around here," she said making me wish I had the power to push her down the stairs. "He used the task system with his slaves. Each slave was given an allotment to make each

day, and after they finished their tasks they were free to tend to their own gardens, mend clothes, or work on their cabins."

She told a big ole lie when she said that. We weren't free to do nothing. Every minute of our days and nights be controlled by the missus and massa.

When we got to the sewing room I saw that it was different. My spinning wheel was gone. The chair by the big windows facing the river, where I did most of my sewing was not there. It looked like it was some kind of store.

Mostly everywhere was the face of Aunty Rae. Her face be on almost everything in the room. Cept, it wasn't really Aunty Rae, this woman had skin the color of midnight, bulging eyes, and big red lips. The only thing that look right was her red and white head rag. Her face was on dishes, papers, aprons and hats. All kinds of things. There was even a big rag doll of her sitting on a bench.

I picked up the doll wondering who would buy such a thing. Was it for the nigger chillun or the white chillun? And when did someone who looked like us, but with big

features become something to make a profit off of? Then I realized, it was nothing new, it was what they had done to us from the beginning.

The family that I was following stood by the counter paying for their things, including the doll, when I saw the lady that I met on the road that first day. She was talking to a fine looking nigger that looked like he worked on the plantation.

She was dressed in a different man suit, but it still be her. She still had those funny looking braids in her hair. She stood there with papers in her hands and was writing as the man talked. I walked over to her and touched her shoulder. When she saw me she dropped everything and let out a scream.

## Chapter Three - Upstream

### Kingsley Plantation - 2009

I was as shocked as the lady to see that she could see me again. But no one else could see my confusion. When she dropped the papers and screamed, everyone in the store stopped to look at her.

"Kara! What is the matter with you?" the man in brown said to her as he bent down to pick up her papers.

She looked at me with fear in her eyes, like I was going to hurt her in some way.

"There's a..."

"Shush, chile!" I said to her. "They can't see me, only you. You want to make a fool of yourself in this here place? Act like I'm not here."

She looked mighty confused, looking back and forth between the man and me. The family I was following got

closer to see what was happening. A clerk, a lady with all white hair and big breasts came from behind the counter. She went over to the Kara lady and put her arm around her shoulders.

"Is everything alright?" she asked her. "Nigel, what did you do to her?" She said turning to the man.

"I didn't do anything to her. Kara, please tell me what is wrong."

She finally pulled herself together and told them she thought she had seen something run across the floor.

"I think it was a mouse," she said. "I'm alright. Sorry to cause such a commotion. Let's take a break from the interview. Is that ok?"

"Sure. Why don't you go over to the kitchen house and grab something to drink. I'll meet you around noon," he said to her.

She walked out the store while the man searched for the mouse. He told the clerk they were out of control and were taking over the house.

I let her leave the house before I started following her. I wanted to give her a chance to get her thoughts together, cause I knowed I scared her to her wits end.

Looking through the kitchen house window at her, I could see her sit down at the table closest to the hearth. She saw me, but kept on drinking her coffee that Roscoe served her. Her hands shook each time she picked up the cup. Roscoe was talking to her, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. I figured she didn't see him in his spiritual realm like she saw me.

When he saw me I signaled for him to meet me in back of the kitchen house. "Who she be?" I asked him.

He said he had met her a week earlier. That she was a reporter that worked for a newspaper, and that she was doing a story on the plantation. She told him she was investigating the ancestral links of the slaves.

"What that mean?" I said.

"It mean she trying to find out what happened to us slaves after we was let free."

"How she going to do that?"



"They have something they call DNA testing now. They can test your spit and find out where you were borned at and by who."

"Sound like some kind of magic to me, but I needs to learn more. Maybe she can help me find out what happened to my Jane," I said getting up to leave when I saw her leaving. "I gotta go."

I walked next to her as she walked along the riverbank. She was a mighty pretty woman, with high cheekbones like my peoples, tall and thin boned. There was a lot of people milling about so she had the good sense to try not to say anything to me. But when we got to the thick swampland she walked through the bushes and sat down on a tree stump. I stood next to her waiting for her to say something.

"Who in the hell are you?" she asked me. "Are you some kind of witch or something?"

"Witch? No chile, I'm just a spirit. Don't be frightened I'm not here to harm you in any way. We Ibo spirits come back for peace not for vengeance."

"But why me? Why can I see you, but no one else can?"

"I don't have all the answers yet. All's I know is that you be the only one that can see me since I returned back to this time. My name be Violet Kingsley. I hear say you be trying to find out what happen to the slaves. Can you help me find my daughter?"

"Your daughter?" Hold on a minute. I'm still trying to understand how I'm talking to a fucking ghost."

"Stop that cussing round me. Like I told you, I not be a witch, and not a ghost either. I am a spirit. My people, who I reckon be your people too since we all come from the same homeland, have always believed in an afterlife. Didn't your mama teach you nothing about spirits?"

"My mother never talked to me about anything. She didn't raise me. But my father's mother, Grandma Ester, believed in spirits. She talked to them all the time, like they were in the same room with her. We all thought she was just a little loony. You know crazy."

"Don't sound like she crazy to me. It looks to me that you like to be the judge though."

"Well, anyway. We put her in an institution when she got older because she became an invalid and had dementia. Before she died she asked everyone to leave the room so she could talk to me. She told me a spirit was going to come for me. She said it would be a woman from a long time ago. She told me to embrace the spirit, not to fight it otherwise I would never be the woman I was made to be. I thought she was talking nonsense like she normally did. But I guess she wasn't crazy after all. If that's the case I am too, because I sure as hell can see you."

"No, you not be crazy. And your grandmother be a smart and blessed woman. Now, tell me gal, you going to help me find my Jane?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure how I could help you. I'm only looking for the roots of two slaves, Stella and Isaac Kingsley. Did you know them?"

"We didn't have any niggers by that name far as I can remember. When did they get set free?"

"1865, after the war."

"Don't know nothing bout that. I died in '31. My husband Ishmael Smithy died that same year too."

"You mean *The* Ishmael Smithy? You knew him? He..."

She stopped talking when the Nigel man stepped through the clearing. He asked her why she was there talking to herself. She told him she was trying to clear her head before their interview. They left before I had the chance to ask her when could we talk again. I needed to know why come she knew who Ishmael was.

Kingsley Plantation - 1828 - 1829

There was excitement in the air. The massa was coming home from another one of his slave buying trips to West Africa. He could have bought slaves offa the block here like must the men around these parts, but he say Africans straight from their homeland made better slaves. More efficient slaves. So unless it was a really good bargain, he stayed away from the auctions.

He say, you never know what you getting from a slave from offa the block. They could know different parts of the country, the land and the way white folks worked. They came with too much knowledge. Nothing better than a dumb slave, I hear him tell Henry once.

We all knew the massa was coming home, so missus Zola had us slaves working hard getting the plantation ready. We had to clean up the big house from the chandeliers to the shine on the wood floors and all in between. The men worked extra time on the land, while Roscoe cooked the massa's favorite meal; fried chicken, whipped potatoes, and yellow squash with biscuits.

The only time we got to be a family, Ismeal and me, was when the massa be gone, so's we weren't too happy to see him come back, even though we tried our best to look like it.

While massa gone I was busy sewing for the house and working out on the Buckner plantation giving missus most of my earnings. We was saving up to buy the boys freedom. Massa finally tell me that if I give him \$400 he would let them go free. Since they was his chillun he should have freed them from the start. I didn't believe him, but I had to have faith in the Lord that he would make sure my boys see freedom.

Us slaves stood at the riverbank to watch the boats come in with the new slaves. Even though it had only been three years, I could barely remember the day I arrived the same way as they did.

Missus sat on the porch in the new blue dress I sewed from fabric that came all the way from New York. She was in her usual foul mood with us, but looked to be glad massa was coming back.

Massa's boat came first. It was full of stuff he brought back from Africa for the missus. There were colorful fabrics, jewelry and spices in it. Then the boats with the Africans came to shore. You could smell them before they got there. When the first one landed they had to force them off the boat. One of the white men hit a big African in the head with an oar cause he would not move. The man fell into the water and almost drowned before Ishmael went in and helped him to the shore.

All the slave men lead the Africans who looked scared as could be, in a line before the missus to look at. I recognized the Africans as Ibo's from my part of the land. They were from a village not far from mine. Most of them were almost naked with scraps of cloth wrapped around their privates. They looked real uncomfortable without their colorful robes, necklaces, ear pieces and head scarves they wear in our homeland. They tried speaking to us in our native tongue of Ohuhu, until overseer Henry told them to keep their mouths shut.

About five boats with about ten Africans on each landed. They was mostly men, but massa was sure to bring

about fifteen young gals with them. I took charge of the women folk and led them down to the slave quarters to get them cleaned up.

"Asalamalakum," one pretty African gal named Adisa said to me.

"Walaikum Salam," I responded

"What this place be? Why they bring us here?" Her sister Kamili asked in Ohuhu when we were by ourselves.

I didn't want to be the one to tell them they would live the rest of their days as slaves. So I went about finding them some clothes for them from straps of missus's and me, and the other slave women gave them all some beans to eat. They ate with both hands, stuffing food in their mouths like they hadn't eaten in days. I tried not to remember when that was me. There was no telling when the last time them white peoples fed them.

After they were all cleaned and fed, we found a place for each in our cabins. Since Ishmael be gone most time I picked the two sisters to stay with me. I knew the massa would be making a nightly visit to the cabin soon cause



both gals be young and pretty. One be twelve years old, the other thirteen the same I be when I got here.

"What village you be from?" I asked Adisi.

"We come from Onitsha," she said.

"Praise be. I come from your neighboring village. Who your father be?"

"Our father is Duna, he with the men in the other cabin."

"I need to talk to him first thing in the morning," I said.

After their bellies were full the two went to sleep on the pallet that Ishmael had made for them. While they were asleep I met him in the back of the cabin.

"Massa, bought a mighty lot of slaves with him this time," he said.

"Yes, I know. I feel sorry for them. I'd rather be dead then live this life we be living."

"Don't talk like that, Violet. You and the boys be free soon enough," he whispered.

"They come from my next village."

"I know I talked to their father, when we took them to the barn. He be a priest from their village."

"That's good," I said. "It be late you go on to sleep in the men's cabin I stay with these younguns."

"I love you Violet."

"I love you too. Now go."

The next morning massa put the two new gals in the cabin at the end of the slave quarters. After I finished my work with the missus, I went to the barn to talk to Duna, the priest. He was stacking hay in the loft. He was older than the men that massa usually bought back as slaves, but looked to be able bodied. He also had the line marks of Ibo carved on the left side of his face.

"Duna, my name be Violet," I said to him in Ohuhu.  
"You know my father Chinedu?"

"Violet? What kind of name is that for a Ibo?"

"It be my slave name, my African name was Fatima. Your name will be changed too. I want to know did you know my father."

"Yes, I knew him. He big man in the village," he said.

"We were banished to another village down river," I said. "We didn't live with him. So I never knew him."

"Then you don't know that Chinedu is your mistress father too?"

"What? That can't be true. You mean missus Zola?"

"Yes, her."

"No not true. You telling lies. You get away from here with those lies!" I said pushing him away from me.

I came back to the cabin and thought about what he said. If missus and I have the same father then that mean she be my sister and I be her slave. I wondered if she knew it. If she did, she didn't treat me any different than any of the other slaves. She was mean to all of us. Only thing she did for me and not the others was to let me

sew clothes for the other slave women so they wouldn't have to wear sacks.

After my talk with Duna I went back to work in the big house. Ishmael was in the field so I couldn't tell him what he had told me. I finished sewing a new quilt for missus's new youngun. I was in the workroom when she came stomping in. I thought oh no, she in a bad mood again, but if only it was just a bad mood.

She came over to me and slapped me hard across the face. "Why you telling lies about my father?" She screamed at me, and then slapped me again. I knew then that Duna must have told one of the other slaves what we talked about and it had gotten back to the missus.

"He's not your father! Your mother was the whore of the village, anybody could be your father you little wench," she said.

Then she snatched off my head rag and stared at my hair. It was like hers, long, thick, and wavy. I usually kept it covered up, but that day I just wrapped it around my head under the rag. Before I knew what she was doing

she grabbed the pair of scissors I was using to sew and started cutting off my hair.

"You are a liar, and I will punish your nigger behind for this!" she said as she chopped at my hair.

I was crying and shaking, but what could I do? She be the missus, I be the slave, I had no power. What I really wanted to do was grab those scissors and stab her with them. Instead I sat there terrified until she cut off all of my hair. All that was left was little clumps of hair, with holes in between.

"Now get out of here and I better not hear anymore of your lies. I'm not finished with you. You will get six lashes for this."

I ran from the room, passed the mirror and screamed when I saw my head. I looked like a porcupine.

That afternoon, she told overseer Henry to give me five lashes. I told you before she was quick to give us slaves a whipping for even the smallest infraction. It made her no never mind that it slowed up the work we would have to do.

Like she always did, she ordered all the slaves in front of the barn where the post was that I was tied up to so they could watch the lashing. I turned my head around and saw Ishmael crying. The first two lashes stung badly. The third and fourth lash cut into my skin opening up old sores. When I felt the fifth lash I fought back the need to fade away. My will to not let her see how much I suffered, is what kept my bruised, but straight back erect.

I only got to rest one day after the whipping before massa called me into the parlor.

"Violet, I hear you been telling lies about the missus," he said.

"No massa, I not telling lies. The chief of the village be Chinedu. He be missus father and he mine too. That makes us sisters."

"Shut your lying mouth! I know Chinedu, he's a friend of mine. He's the one who sold me you Africans from the

neighboring village. Why would he sell you, his own daughter?"

"I can't say massa."

"Well, this is the last I want to hear of this. Anymore talk like this and you will get more than just five lashes."

"Yes, massa."

I went back to work at the spinning wheel. I was thinking about the old ways as I made fabric for missus's new petticoat. I had to keep taking breaks for Anne to rub salve on my back where the welts were festering, seeping through my dress.

It got me to thinking about my times with my mama and brother in the village. I would sit under the papaya tree where she would braid my hair. She would paint henna on my face, and then I would do hers. After teaching me how to make millet stew, we would go down to the river to fetch water for when the men came back to the village from

herding. Even though we were banished to the village, they treated us like one of them.

For big celebrations like a birth of a son, we would gather in front of the chief's hut, eat goat meat, and then dance. The men would beat the drums, and play the hoddu which be like a banjo and the rili, like a violin. The men of the village would dance first. Then the women in their long blue, gold and red robes would dance. Us little ones tried to do like they did, but we weren't taught the right way to dance until we entered womanhood and manhood.

The night before we were taken we had a big gathering for the medicine man of the village. He was an elder, with a long grey beard that almost dragged to the ground. He said there was a curse on the village, and we had to cast away the evil. He danced and chanted around the fire, throwing dirt into it after each chant. Then to ward off the evil he gave my mother a small bag of dirt, a handmade tool, and rooster feather.

My mama put the things under my pallet that night. The next morning they raided our village. The griots bag saved me. Living on the plantation I never saw anyone



again from the village where my father was the chief until Duna came and told me about my father and the missus.

About a week after telling missus she be my sister, my life took a change. Massa come into the sewing room and said I would no longer be the seamstress of the house. He brought in with him a new slave he bought from the Smithy plantation, who he said would be taking my place. You can tell she was used to being a house slave. Her blue calico dress was clean, her nails were neat, she had on a new pair of shoes and her hair was pulled back.

"Where I'm going? What I'm going to do for the missus now?" I asked massa.

"Don't worry about it you little lying wench. She doesn't want you anywhere around her. She wants you working in the fields from now on."

"But, massa," I pleaded. "I been a house nigger ever since I been here. Sewing is all I know. I don't know how to pick no cotton." I showed him my hands. "These are hands for sewing fine fabrics, not for working in the dirt."

"Well, it's time for you to learn. Get out there now. Tell the overseer to give you a sack of seeds."

"Please, massa don't send me out there. I can cook. I'm real good cook."

"Don't back mouth me. Do as you told. You will be working in the fields from now on!"

Something told me I knew missus know she be my sister because she was treating me so bad. I started working in the field the next morning with the field gang. It was hot under the blazing sun. It was hard out there; I got to see how field niggers work. We would work straight without stopping. Until dinner time, then back out to the field.

Sometimes I would pull the plow, or I would drop the seeds in the troughs. The worst part was picking the cotton, which pricked my fingers so bad they would be a bloody mess. I would have to wipe the blood off with my apron throughout the day. Finally, I figured out the right way to pick, and began making my daily allotment.

Bending down all day, at night I would fall into my pallet too tired to fix Ishmael and the boys something to eat. I got to wishing I had never told missus she my

sister. Telling her made my life harder than it already was.

Then one morning a new man, Dr. Ringhold from a plantation way from Savannah came to visit massa. Us slaves found out he was selling off some of us. We were all feeling low not knowing who it would be. Missus called me onto the porch and told me she would be selling my Emanuel.

"That's for telling all your lies," she said.

"Missus, please not my baby, not my baby. Not again," I cried, thinking there was no way I could survive having another one of my chillun being sold away.

"Shut up! He will be sold in the morning. Be glad I'm not selling his bastard brother too. So go ahead and say your goodbyes now."

She pushed me hard against the door. I ran to the cabin, this here cabin, and grabbed my son and held him real tight. They had already sold my baby girl I thought I would die if they took my boy too. He was just one and wouldn't know what was going on. Ishmael was gone again working out the Smithy plantation, so I couldn't talk to

him. I was distraught, out of my mind. I couldn't let them take my baby boy. I stopped massa as he pulled up on his horse from making his rounds.

"Massa," I said, grabbing hold of his boot. "Please don't sell my Emanuel. He your son too." For once he seemed to be sad.

"There's nothing I can do, Violet. She wants him sold. So he must go."

"Please massa, don't sell my baby. I'll do anything you ask me, anything, but don't sell my baby."

"It's too late he's already been sold to Mr. Ringhold, along with Anne. She will take good care of him."

There was a fire in my belly when he said that. I was tired of begging. I was as mad as a bull cow.

"I hate you. I hate you and your evil wife," I said.

He got down from his horse, took off his riding gloves and back handed me twice across the face.

"I can have you whipped for that," he said. "Now get out of here before I change my mind."

It was one of the worst times I had since my mother died and they sold Jane away. I just wanted to die right then and there. If they took Emanuel, I didn't have a reason for living. My insides felt all twisted up. I vomited until there was nothing left in my stomach. That night I prayed to God to protect my son, to keep him with me. I heard God tell me to run. "Run where?" I said into the night air. "Run, just run," he said to me again.

So, I grabbed a quilt, some biscuits from the kitchen house, and my sleeping boy from the cabin. Benjamin was sick with fever, or I would have taken him too. Then I ran into the woods heading upstream along the river.

I walked a couple of miles until I got to the Smithy plantation, where I hid in the barn. A slave found me there, I told him who I was and that I was looking for a slave named Ishmael. He left, I wasn't sure if he was going to tell his massa I was there or not, you never could tell with a nigger slave. Some of them were loyal to their owners, they would tell on another slave to make themselves look good.

I hid in the barn for a couple of hours; you could hear an owl hooting right outside the door. Finally, Ishmael came in and I told him the story about the missus wanting to sell Emanuel and that I was running away. He be a strong man who although not African still had the strong spirit of my people.

"I come with you," he said.

"No, you ain't going. The first thing they do is look for you. You stay with Benjamin, Emanuel and me going. We heading North. You come to us later."

"I'm not going to let you go by yourself, Violet."

"You can help me. Find someone to meet me upstream with a boat about five miles from here at the fork in the road. They can take me over the river into Georgia. Then we run from there up North."

"No it's too dangerous. What kind of man I be to let you run by yourself?"

"You be a living man. We can't make it together, apart is the only way now."

"Alright, I knows you, and I knows how you be when your mind made up. I'll help you. Let me get you some clothes for you and the boy. Take those off so I can burn them. The bloodhounds will be after you come tomorrow morning when they find you missing. Go wash up in the horse trough and get that stink offa you."

I did as he told me to do. He found some slave men clothes for me to put on. We wrapped a cloth around Emanuel that fit him like a dress. We was sure to keep our shoes, we would need those.

Around midnight, I held Ishmael real tight. We kissed and lay down together for the first time as man and wife, and then I said goodbye. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do, but I couldn't let them sell my boy. I had to run.

I stayed off the main roads when I got to the St. Johns River. At the tip of Ft. George Island I swam across holding Emanuel's head above the water. I knew when the dogs came after us they would lose our scent at the riverbank. When I got to the swamps on the other side, I carried Benjamin on my hip and stayed high up in the thick

brush. Gators and snakes swam all around us. We walked further when a big snake slithered towards us. It was about to bite my leg when I killed it with a big stick I kept with me.

When the morning came I had to stop and feed Benjamin. We had been walking all night and covered many miles. We still had lots more to go to get through the swamp before we made it upstream to the river where the boat was to meet us at. I was tired but I had to keep going. Finally, I couldn't go any longer so I found a dry spot big enough for us both. I fell asleep with all those snakes around me.

I woke up to the sound of the dogs in the distance. I used some cloth and made a pouch around my shoulders and put Benjamin in it, and ran faster. I made it to the riverbank but I had to make it upstream, so I waded in the water hoping to lose my scent from the dogs again.

The hounds were getting closer and closer, I lost my shoes in the muck in the swamp and was having a hard time running in the water, cause it had big rocks on the bottom. I thought there must be a God when I saw from a distance a



black man with a small rickety boat waiting for me around the bend.

I was almost there when the hounds got closer to me. They were just a little ways away, cause I could hear them running through the swamp. Then one leapt through the air and got a hold of my dress. He kept biting me. I fought hard and kicked away from him, and then hit him with the stick.

Finally, I reached the old man in the boat. I kissed Emanuel then handed him to the man and told him to take him, to just go. I knew it would be the last time I kissed my baby, but I had to let him go I couldn't let the dogs get him.

"You sure you don't want to come," the man said to me.

I looked back and saw the men and pack of dogs heading towards me again.

"No. look after my boy for me, promise me."

"I promise my Margy will take good care of him."

"How will I know he will be alright," I asked him.

"I will make sure to send you a sign. Now run! I got to get up river away from the dogs and the men."

You could hear Overseer Henry and the other men behind the pack of dogs shouting for me to come out. The old man laid Benjamin down in the bowel of the boat and rowed away quickly. I just wanted to lie down and die right there, but I didn't have time before the dogs were on me again.

There were about three or four of them tearing at my clothes and flesh, I was covered in blood. The men just stood over me and let them eat at me. I guess they wanted me to die like that.

I woke up after being under for three days with my Missus slapping me. The dogs had scratched and bit me all over my body, even my face. The massa didn't think I would make it. He had Ishmael to dig my grave for me to be buried in. He must not have been too concerned about me dying cause he had my feet chained together in case I woke up and started running again. I was so sick I could barely sit up; there was no worry in me running anywhere.

Cook Anne nursed me back to health. Ishmael knowed Travis, the man I turned Emanuel over to at the river bank before the dogs got to me good. He say he was with good peoples that were free. Missus threatened me with another whipping if I didn't tell her where he was, but I don't think she cared too much. At least she didn't have to look at him and see Massa's face anymore.

## Chapter Four - Prophecy

### Kingsley Plantation - 2009

Roaming around the plantation during the day, I looked and looked for that Kara gal to come back. I wanted to know what she knew about Ishmael, and why come she knew about him in this time. I also wanted to know iff in she could help me find out what happened to my baby girl Jane.

With no one to talk to besides ole Roscoe, I started tending to the slave gardens again. I reckon those park folks didn't care much to show what it really be like for us slaves on the plantation. We had no choice but to get most of our vittles from our own gardens iff in we wanted to eat. I plowed over the dirt behind each cabin and planted some collards, tomatoes, and turnips.

One day I found a newspaper that one of the diners left on a table in the kitchen house. I took great pleasure in reading it without fear of the white folks catching me and having me whipped or sold away. If the best slave a massa

could have is a dumb slave, than the worst for him would be an educated nigger.

The paper be from the Jacksonville Times-Union. Reading it I become mighty sad with the way things be in this time. It seemed like niggers started being the highest in numbers in everything that be bad.

The news got worst the more I read. It went on to say that the African-American family was becoming extinct. I had to talk to Roscoe about all's I was reading cause it was just a aching my heart.

Whilst I was eating he told me what was happening to my people. Between bites of tasty possum stew and corn bread that he made specially for me, I asked what the problem be. Why come the nigger family was dying off.

"The nigger man no longer head of his family," he said. "It be the woman that take care of things."

That kinda confused me cause that's the way it always was in our time. The nigger man never in charge of anything as far as the white folks could tell. But Ishmael and I and folks like us, tried to make a family even though the massa ruled the plantation, inside the cabin he be the

man in charge. Cept for when the massa came a calling for his woman, then he would have to take leave.

"You think maybe with the nigger man having to watch the massa bed his woman, have something to do with what's happening with the peoples of this time?" I said.

"I'm almost sure of it," he said.

"Why's it so hard for them? They can love who they want to love now, be with who they want to be with? Why's so hard for them to make a family?"

"I's don't know, Violet."

"What about that new nigger president, you think it will get better with him?" I asked.

"Only time will tell. You go on now, I got's to get some vittles together for dinner. Them park folks be having a big meeting in here this afternoon."

"What they meeting about?"

"I hear tell it be something about what that reporter gal going to be writing about the plantation," he said.

That got me to thinking. I needed to be at that meeting so's I could see her again. Maybe we could find somewhere to talk at, where nobody would see us, like in my cabin.

To pass the time I sat on the riverbank and watched the fishermen work on their boats. They pulled in their catches one by one. The river had always been full of the best grouper you would ever taste. Sometimes massa would let us slaves fish for our dinner.

Since the swampland met up to the river there be a lot of gators in there too. We were always on the look out for them. Ishmael was a good catcher though, and it was always nice when we got to eat some gator. Sorta taste like chicken and fish.

After sitting there a while, I started walking through the brush. Thought I might find Kara sitting on the stump waiting for me. But when I got there she wasn't there.

So's I kept on walking till the brush got thicker and the weeds got higher.

Even though it was a pretty day, I felt a sense of gloom as I walked down a path that led me to the two graveyards. One on the right was for the white folks. On the left was for the slaves. Someone had cleared out the land for the white folks. But the slave graveyard was a mighty fine mess.

Standing in front of the biggest marker in the white section I felt relief when I read who it be for. "George Kingsley, Our Beloved Master, 1800-1838," it read. Next to it sat the missus grave. It say she died in 1831, the same year as me. I thought I would feel something close to peace looking over her grave, but all I felt was mad. I spit on her grave and walked over to the slave section.

It sat in the middle of dense brush and swampland. Weeds brushed up against my thighs as I waded through the thick maze. I heard it before I saw it and jumped back. A big snake slithered through the grass away from me. When I reached a clearing, still thick with brush, I saw about thirty small graves. Only bout five of them had markers on



them, the rest was just stones sitting in the grass. Some of the graves looked like they had been disturbed. Like someone had been digging in them.

I knew there wouldn't be no marker or graves for me, Sarah or Benjamin, cause we all burned to death. Couldn't have been much of our bodies left once the barn burned down. But I walked the rows of graves anyhow. Then a storm cloud covered the sky casting a shadow over the graveyard. I stood over a small stone marker when a large raindrop fell on my head. The storm broke quickly, soaking me wet. Just a bit a ways from me, lightning struck a tree. I wasn't worried none. Us spirits didn't have to care about such things. Nothing could hurt us.

As the rain fell all around me I kneeled down and used my apron to clean offa the dirt on the marker. A shiver went down my back. It read, "Cook Roscoe Kingsley, 1830." I pulled up weeds as my mind went back to that time.

Kingsley Plantation - 1830

Cause I didn't have Emanuel anymore the missus took to having me back in the big house with her, sewing her pretty dresses. It seemed like that gal they bought from the Smithy plantation didn't know how to sew a lick.

Both my babies be gone, but I still had Benjamin and Ishmael. I was big with chile again. Didn't know who the pappy be, cause of the night I ran I bedded down with Ishmael. Right before that the massa had his way with me again. All's I knowed was we would have some troubles iffing it came out a nigger.

One night overseer Henry and some patty rollers came into the cabin. They said they was looking for Roscoe. They took Ishmael behind the cabin and tried to beat it out of him where Roscoe be. He didn't know nothing about him, but that didn't stop them from hitting and stomping him. Didn't bother them none either that he be a free man. I looked out the window and watched them as they throwed him around like a rag doll. I wanted to help my man, but what could I do? They would just beat me too, or worse.

When they got done with him, he came crawling back into the cabin. Both his eyes be swollen and blood ran down his mouth. I cleaned him up real good, and then he told me what the fuss was all about.

The white folks say Roscoe whistled at a white lady on the road to the plantation, and they wanted him punished. Massa George came into the cabin as I was putting some salve on Ishmael's cuts above his eyes.

"Look here now nigger you better tell me where that Roscoe is, before they get to him," he said to Ishmael.

"Massa, I don't know nothing about Roscoe. I swear to you I don't know nothing."

"You better not, or they will be back for you and I won't stop them."

Then he went off down the road following Henry and the men on horseback. It was night time, but the moon was full. I could see him riding off the plantation whipping at the horse to go faster.

"We need to go see what they going to do," I said to Ishmael.

"Woman is you losing your mind? They will kill us both. No, we stay right here!"

"But Roscoe be your best friend and mine. I want to find him before they do. You coming with me. If not I'm going by myself."

"You the most bull headed woman I know, gal. Why you always doing this to me? Alright, come on lets go."

Even though I was big with chile, and him hurting from the beating, we ran through the brush alongside the road, being careful not to be seen. We were just a ways down the road when we heard some hooting and hollering going on deep in the brush. We hid behind a big tree and saw Henry and those patty rollers beating up Roscoe.

"That will teach you to be looking at our women!" One of the men shouted as he took a big stick and hit him in the head whilst he was curled up on the ground. We could hear ole Roscoe a moaning and a groaning.

Once they got tired of beating him and it looked like he didn't have no more life in him, they went over to a big oak tree with a rope, tied it to a high branch and put the

rope around his neck. Then they put him on one of the horses.

I began to cry, cause I knowed what they was going to do next. Looking over to Ishmael I could see he was crying too. They took a flaming torch and lit Henry's body, and then with a loud holler Henry took the whip and hit the horse's behind real hard. The horse went off a running, leaving Roscoe burning and hanging on the tree.

It was the worst thing I had ever seen in my life, besides watching my brother Kwesi get killed. My whole body was just a shaking.

"We got that nigger good," I heard Henry say.

Right then massa pulled up and hollered at them to let Roscoe down. By then Roscoe was half burned and dead.

"Come on. Let's get out of here before they see us," Ishmael whispered in my ear.

We backed up real quiet like. When we got close to the road we ran back to the plantation. I was glad massa didn't come into the cabin that night, cause I was so

rattled that Ishmael had to hold onto me in my pallet to make me sleep.

The next morning the massa tell me I was to be hired out for while. Since I done runned away, there wasn't no more talk of him letting Ishmael buy me and Emanuel's freedom. He said I was just lucky he let me still live.

My chile was borned on the Smithy plantation. They had to take us by carriage back home. When I got there missus Zola called me into her chambers. She demanded to see my baby we named Sarah. When I took the covers offa her, she laughed.

"Well, I must say," she said. "It's about time you had a nigger baby. Wait till George sees this."

I was regretting him seeing her, cause I knowed he would make it hell for me. When he came into the cabin and saw her he got all red in the face, and slapped me hard.

"You nasty whore," he said. "If it wasn't for the missus not knowing about us, I would have you whipped."

But that didn't stop him from making Henry give Ishmael five lashes. It pained my heart to see him whipped. My poor man. Freedom didn't stop him from getting beat, or whipped. He was still a nigger.

Southampton County, Virginia - 1831

After the second moon of the new year the missus tell me we was taking a trip to Virginia to see massa's brother, William get married. He was a rich man in those parts with over two hundred slaves. She made me get all her dresses ready and gave me some of her old dresses to wear for the trip. I guess she didn't want her people to see how raggedy her slaves usually looked in their dirty, torned up clothes.

We rode a ship that docked out of Jacksonville up the coast to Virginia. I didn't like the ship, it reminded me too much of my journey from the homeland. The slave quarters wasn't much better either than the holding areas they had for us Africans when they bought us over. The rough waters made me sick and I vomited the whole trip to Virginia. Through my sickness I still had to tend to the missus.

When we got to the port in Norfolk we was met by massa William. He be a big man. Older than massa George he didn't have a lick of hair on his head. I saw the look in



his eyes that the massa gave me and prayed that he wouldn't want to bed me.

We rode on horseback a couple of hours till we reached the plantation. The land went on for as far as the eyes could see. The big house was much larger than ours. It was grander too, with crystal chandeliers, and imported stone floors. Never did get to see their seamstress, but her work was well done. The tapestries, curtains, and bed dresses had fine workmanship. She was almost as good as I was. Only the missus could never have enough money to buy such fine fabrics for the whole house.

We were there just days when magic happened. Sitting on the front porch one fine afternoon it began to get darker. The moon came out and would you know it it covered the entire sun. It was a pretty sight to see. The white folks called it an eclipse, but it sort of brought to mind the stories that my mama would tell me which were passed down from her mama.

I shared a cabin with a nigger gal named Josie. She was borned on the plantation. Her father be the massa's father. We became good friends, she and I. She didn't

have any chilren and lived in the cabin alone. One day I asked her how come she never got big with chile.

"Cause I kill em," she said.

"You what?"

"I said, I kill em dead."

"How? And why would you do that to sweet little ole chillun?" I asked. "It don't matter if their pappy be white."

"I killed them long before they become alive," she said. "I know some roots and herbs that kill them when they early in my belly. I'd rather have a dead baby, then have them a living slave. So's don't you go a judging me."

"Not judging you. Not judging you at all," I said. "I really can't say if I'd of known you sooner iffing I would do the same thing," I said. I loved all my chillun, but I think it was cruel to born them to a life of servitude.

There be two other seamstress there working on the wedding clothes for massa Williams wedding to Missus Gertrude. It felt good to get to know other folks not from

Florida. There be miles between us, but we all lived the same kind of life. We all had a massa to answer too, sides the Almighty. Ishmael always told me the closer you got North, the freer you felt and I was feeling the energy. Iffin I had Benjamin with me, I would have run then.

I had the chance to run when one day missus Zola sent me to town to buy some fabric for the gown she wanted to wear for the wedding. She told me to go straight there and don't go a talking to no one, specially those free niggers in town.

The town was just bustling with lots of folks, white and niggers, slave and free. Never saw such sights in my life. I fingered the paper that the missus wrote for me to carry on my trip, hoping it was freedom papers instead.

Carriages and horses was lined up along the streets. The stores advertised all sorts of things. Looking in the window of a hat shop I saw the most glorious hat I have ever seen. It was red with feathers sticking out around the crown. I wanted it badly.

But it was the dress stores that got me feeling excitement the most. They were the grandest of dresses

that I knowed for sure I could make myself. A strange sensation ran through my bones. I was doing something a nigger just didn't do iffing they wanted to make it through their days. I was dreaming.

I thought about having my own shop to display my own crafts. It went beyond just wanting to be free. I wanted to be free and make lots of money using the gifts the good Lord done give me. Tween Ishmael and his carpentry and me and my sewing we could survive both being free living in the North. Maybe even save enough to buy us our own place.

I walked into the dress store and asked the clerk iffing I could look at some dresses for my missus. She told me to go on, just to make sure I didn't touch none of them. Though they looked mighty fine from outside the window, when I got to looking closer at them with an earnest eye, I saw that the craftsmanship was done mighty poorly. My dresses were so much finer.

I learned two lessons about life that day. I was better at sewing than I ever thought, and the missus would never sell me caused she knowed it. Dreams were meant for niggers too, I learned. I put in my memory what those there

dresses looked like, cause I was going to make them some day. And it wouldn't be for the missus either.

On the road back from town I thought about how my shop would look up North somewhere, maybe even New York. I was so happy, I was almost skipping down the road when this dirty nigger grabbed at me, and then dragged me into the woods. He must have been watching me, cause he jumped out when he knowed the road was empty. I screamed and hit him over the head with my pack. Then he put his rough hand over my mouth. I saw a large knot on the arm he was holding me with.

"Hush, hush now," he said as I was a kicking and a swinging. "I's not gonna to hurt you. I's just wanna talk to you. Hear tell you be Ishmael's gal. My name be Nat. Nat Turner." He took his hand from off of my mouth.

"Who?" I asked remembering the man that me and Ishmael had talked about many moons before. In my mind I saw him as a big man, tall with muscles. The man standing in front of me was almost my height and size. Just a little bitty man who was real light, almost white looking. His curly hair thinned at the top, like he was going to lose all of

it in a short matter of time. He had hair above his lip and chin and a big scar on his temple.

"I's say I be Nat Turner. You Ishmael Smithy's gal ain't you?"

It was a secret tween Ishmael and I, so I knowed I had to be careful.

"He be my man," I said. "What you know about us?"

"I's know plenty. You need to do something for us people. I got the sign from God I be waiting for and He showed me it be time to do it."

"He said you be a prophet, but I have better sense to believe your nonsense. What sign you see? And what you going to do?"

"Its not for you to know, gal. Just be back here same time in the morrow," he said. I told him I wouldn't do no such thing. I'm telling you he was one raggedy looking nigger. Couldn't tell from the looks of him, he be as smart as Ishmael make him out to be.

He told me that I would meet a man named Jacob there. Said he would have something to give me to give to Ishmael.

I told him missus would never let me go back into town alone again. She only did it cause she needed the fabric badly and she wanted to look better than the bride on the wedding day.

Wrestling the fine red silk fabric out of my hands, Nat grabbed it with his dirty hands. He say for me to tell missus I had to go back for the fabric the next day. Then he runned off into the woods before I could get the fabric back.

I knowed missus Zola would be a mighty upset when she saw me with no fabric. I made up a lie and told her that the clerk at the shop told me that the fabric shipment was delayed. That it would be there on the next day.

I was just lucky she was distracted with the news that massa William called off the wedding when he found his soon to be bride, Gertrude, in the barn naked with one of his field niggers. The law was there, some patty rollers and a lot of local townsfolk. Don't know what happed to Gertrude, but Josie told me the nigger was killed on the spot.

Missus say we was to leave back for home two days later. That she could not abide being around such white trash. She still wanted her fabric to take back with her. There was a ball she wanted to go to in Atlanta. She tell me to be at the store when they opened the next morning. I was just a hoping that man Jacob be on that there road with the fabric when I got there.

At the same bend in the road I went into the woods and hid in the brush waiting for Jacob. He was already there. Seemed like him and that Nat man knew where I be at all times. The first thing I noticed bout Jacob was he be a fine looking nigger. There wasn't much of the homeland left in his blood either. He be the color of coffee with a lot of cream. His eyes be green, and his hair was like white folks straight almost falling down to his shoulders.

Yes indeedy, that Jacob man be a fine nigger. Had to keep in my mind I had a man.

"You be Ishmael's gal?" he asked me.

"That's who I be."

"Good, take this," he said handing me the red fabric out of his sack like he knew it be fine material. He give



it to me real light like. I noticed his hands were clean too. Looking up his arm I saw the raised flesh of a J and a S.

"What that be?" I ask him

"It my name. Jacob."

"What the S for?"

"You don't need to know bout that. Give Ishmael this message. Tell him Nat say the Day of Judgment be seven new moons from now. Tell him we need one of those quilts for the first pick up place by the next new moon. This here be what the patches need to look like," he said handing me some drawings.

The drawings be of three different things. One was a pine cone which was to be put on one patch in the center of the quilt. Another picture be of a feather, to be placed a few patches below the cone. The last picture was a hammer. I was to sew it on the other side of the hammer. It was to look like a triangle. With the top of the patches being the North, the promised land. It was like I would be sewing some kind of sign.

"What all this be bout?" I said. You not putting me and Ishmael in harm's way are you?"

"Look, gal. You don't need to know much more bout this. Just go head and do what Nat say."

Then he did the strangest thing. He kissed me right on my lips. Then he runned across the road into the woods and was gone for I could do anything. I was in such a shock I didn't know what to do. I heard a horse coming, so I found my way back to massa Williams place through the woods. For I got back there I took the paper Jacob gave me of the drawings and folded them into the hem of my dress. The next day the missus, massa and, I got on the boat to head back home.

Kingsley Plantation - 1831

I got to feel mighty low when I got back home. I was missing my Emanuel so badly I think my heart be broke. Oh, I was just full of grief and sorrow. I figured he had growed some since I had left him with that man Travis on the river bank. Don't know where he took my chile, but I knowed in my heart they be treating him right. Anything was better than him being sold away. At four he was looking more like his pappy every day. Course everyone knowed massa be his pappy. No one spoke the words out loud in fear of being whipped, sold or worse.

Cause Ishmael was working for Dr. Murphy, this here cabin was empty a long time while we was gone and full of cobwebs and restless spirits. I swept both of them right out that door.

I wanted badly to be able to tell Ishmael what Jacob and Nat told me. There wasn't no one else I could tell, so I just kept it to myself along with my new dreams whilst I sewed the quilts.

Since we had such a bad winter the season before, where one of the slaves got so sick with the fever and cold he died. I asked missus iffin I could use the scraps from the garments and curtains and such to make quilts for us poor nigger slaves. Of course she didn't care none about us, but she couldn't have her crop dying off on her. So's I reckon I caught her on one of her good bad days, cause she told me go ahead take them then get otta her face.

Anyhow, I got all the scraps I needed. Jacob say to make five quilts. I only had enough for bout three. So's I went to cutting table cloths, sacks, anything I could to make the rest. Chile, those quilts was made from most every bit of fabric on this here plantation. They was mighty pretty too. Mighty pretty. I made a feather out of the scraps from misses blue dress. I did the pine cone out of patches from Anne's red calico summer dress. The hammer was from Emanuel's grey winter pants.

The summer was bout to leave when Ishmael came back from South Carolina with Dr. Murphy. I was so happy to see my man. He brought me back some fine things from his travels. Bought me a pretty comb for my hair, said he be from St. Simmons Island Georgia. From Charleston he give

me some fabric for a new dress. Dr. Murphy be a kind man towards niggers. He paid well, and treated us like people, not property.

One night bout midnight or so, Ishmael and I sneak off to the swamp back there behind the cabin. A crescent moon shined brightly, so's we had to be careful. I told him everything what happened and what Jacob told me. When I showed him the quilts he got real quiet like.

"We have to leave tomorrow night," he said. "If we is to make it before the next moon."

"Go where?" I asked him.

"I can't tell you where, Violet," he said. "You my gal you knowed I take real good care of you. Won't let no harm come to your head. Make yourself a pack tomorrow so we be ready."

"You mean we running? What about Emanuel? We gonna get him on the way?"

"Stop asking so many questions. He be fine where he at. We have work to do for our people first. We get him sooned as we finish."

I wasn't too set on leaving Emanuel with that man, but if I was going to save some of my people from the misery of slavery, I figured I better be a good servant.

It was a mighty good thing we had made plans to leave. Early the next morning, Missus called me into her room.

"Take your clothes off," she said.

"Missus, what you want me naked for?" I asked.

"Do it now!" She shouted.

I unbuttoned my dress real slow like, cause I didn't know what she wanted, but I knew it wasn't going to be anything to my liking. I stood in front of her bashful like, with my arms crossed over my breasts.

"Turn around."

I turned around. I remember looking out the window watching a small boat come in. It looked like massa was back from Sepelo Island, Georgia.

"Oh, my God," I heard her say behind me. "This can't be. No it can't."

I didn't know why she was going on 'bout my back side, but I'd seen her do stranger things.

"It's true you are my sister," she said.

I turned to face her, forgetting about my nakedness and told her, "Missus I told you that and you whipped me for it and threatened to sell my Emanuel away. No. No, mam. We's not sisters."

"It's right there," she said as she pressed her finger hard against the purplish shape I had right above my left butt cheek. "We have the same mark."

She took her dress off and pulled down her petticoat to show me her mark, which was shaped like a strawberry. My brother Kweisi had the same mark.

"Hurry up! Put your clothes back on before George comes in here. I don't want you to tell anyone about this do you hear me? I will have you whipped until you fall over dead."

"But you be my sister, missus Zola," I said. "That mean I be free right?"

"My, you're such a stupid nigger gal. Of course not. I mean to have you sold off this plantation before night falls. Stay right here. I'll be right back."

I wasn't nowhere near as stupid as she thought I was. As soon as she left, I took that secret passageway I showed you that led outside under the porch. Then I crawled all the way through the brush to the swamp then ran all the way to Dr. Murphy's place. Ishmael was in the barn, grooming the horses.

"We have to go now!" I told him. "Missus found I be her sister and she selling me today."

He grabbed Benjamin from in front of the hearth. Then went to the barn to get the quilts we hid under some hay, and then he untied a large black mare and a smaller one that be brown all over.

We rode through the day and night to that same river bank where I had dropped Emanuel off at. The man Travis be there again with a small boat. We gave the horses to another nigger man then got on the boat.

I found out Emanuel was safe with Travis and his wife. When we got off the boat on the other side, I kissed my



other sweet boy and handed him over to Travis. We couldn't run with him. We left a quilt with Jacob to hang up on a line on his land, and then stopped in each state to drop off the other quilts. First, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and finally on a small farm outside of South Hamilton County Virginia. Most time we were on horseback. We had us a little wagon for a bit in Charleston. Ishmael and I had some freed papers that he got made while on his travels for me.

We met Nat and that man Jacob in an empty barn in them same woods in Virginia where I first met them at. That's when they told me what the quilts were for. They was a signal to the slaves to get ready. When they saw the quilts they was to start to running. That's what the pine cone be for. The feather be for them to gather up something to eat. I found out later, it be a peacock feather. The hammer mean to tell them to gather their tools.

"I's mean for you to keep running up North," Ishmael said. "I'm gonna stay here with Nat and Jacob." I told him I wasn't leaving him.

"Stop your nonsense," he said. You go up North to New York I meet you up there. I's got it all planned for ya."

Nat and Jacob went hunting for some food to give us time to say good bye.

"Don't fret we be together soon," he said softly in my ear. We be free and we be a family again. Go on now, there's a boat ready to take you to Norfolk. I love you, Violet."

I told him, "I love you too. You be all of my heart."

It would be one of my last times seeing my Ishmael.

## Chapter Five - Rebellion

Southhampton County, Virginia - 1831

A strange sensation ran through my bones, as I thought about Ishmael leaving me. I felt emptiness inside. We had been separate many times for many moons. But we always knew we'd be together again. It felt different that time. Our goodbyes felt like they were gonna be forever.

I told Ishmael I wasn't going nowhere without him. We would go to New York together after him, Nat, and Jacob did what they was planning to do. I wasn't sure what that was. I just knew that I would do anything for my people, but I couldn't let harm be caused to another. It don't matter to me what color his skin be.

The men stood behind a bush whispering. I got closer to listen. I heard Nat tell Ishmael and Jacob that all together they had about seventy niggers, slave and free. They had muskets he said, but wasn't going to use them in fear that the shots be heard. The hammer on the patches of

the quilts were a sign for the people to gather up tools, so the groups of men had already stockpiled hatchets, axes, shovels, and knives.

No, I wasn't going to leave my Ishmael with all that I was hearing. It sounded too dangerous and I wanted to be near him when it was all over, not up North waiting for him. So's instead of heading to the dock I stayed waiting for him in that empty barn.

The first day my stomach was hurting badly. I had to leave the barn when dusk fell to find me some vittles to eat. There was an apple tree not far from the barn. An owl with his golden eyes blinking at me sat on a limb.

I climbed the tree not carrying about it, cept I thought he might make a good meal iffing I could make some fire and not be seen. Leaving there with a few apples in my apron I looked at the owl one last time. He hadn't moved a lick while I was up in the tree. They known to be wise creatures, I was hoping what the men was doing was the right thing.

Back in the barn there was critters crawling round my legs in the dark. Feeling too scared to sleep I stayed up

most of the second night thinking about life and how it always seem to be a struggle, so full of strife and sorrow. The weight of my burdens had me feeling poorly about myself, which was a mighty waste of time, especially for a slave. Finally, I fell asleep out of tiredness.

The sound of gunfire woke me up round morning break. First it was far off sounding like it be coming from town. Then it got closer, so close I thought they was a shooting right outside the barn. I hid beneath a big empty sack, hoping iffing someone came in they wouldn't see me there.

Then it got quiet again. Too scared to move I stayed under the sack for bout an hour when I thought the people with the guns were gone. Pulling back the wooden door I looked outside. The birds had went back to singing. Two deer stood drinking at the creek.

Jacob broke the quiet when he came stumbling through the woods with blood covering his clothes. Once inside the cabin he fell over to the floor. He was hurt mighty badly. A bullet went through his shoulder out the other side. I ripped off a piece of my dress to press hard against the holes. He tried to talk, but I told him to hush, to let me

try and fix him up. His head lay on my apron that I bundled up to make him a pillow. Blood was all over my dress and hands when I finished tying his wounds up.

Whilst I was at the creek cleaning up Dr. Murphy came long through the woods riding horseback with a wagon. Don't know how he knew we was there, but I was glad to see him. Although white, he was always a kind man in my eyes.

Jacob tell me he been our friend all along. He said that the Dr. had been the one to get Ishmael and Nat together the first time for the bible meetings whenever they went to Virginia.

Come to find out that the good Dr. not be white after all, but a free nigger light enough to pass for white. I tell you he was whiter looking then massa. He had green eyes and blond hair, cut short like the massa. Even his body movements be like white folks.

He had all those powerful white men fooled. Like my mama always told me, it's easier for a wise man to learn from fools, than for fools to learn from the wise. All along he living the life of a white man. Getting to enjoy

the comforts of the race, yet hearing others talk about his people like dirt alls the time.

But the Dr. didn't just sit back and pass he committed his life to helping us people get free. He fixed up old Jacob with some medicine, took out the bullets and sewed up his holes. Then he gave us a change of clothes and put us in the wagon, driving it away from town.

On the road we saw white men with groups of niggers they be leading toward the town. I saw plenty of niggers dead long the way. Jacob was too sickly to tell me what happen to Ishmael and Nat.

We was riding bout an hour when we got stopped by patrollers who made us turn around towards town cause we be niggers. They didn't care that the Dr. be white. Jacob and I just be niggers unfortunate enough to be on that road that night.

Dr. told the men that Jacob had got bitten by a rabid dog, but that wasn't enough for them to let us keep on going.

We followed the men and groups of niggers that they had tied up with rope like they used on us on the slaves

when taking us to auction. My mind was a working fast trying to find a way to get us out of the caravan. I could see concern all over the Dr.'s brow.

We stopped right outside of town at a clearing in the woods. There were a mess of white people around with their slaves. The white folks seemed to be in a foul mood. They was mighty riled up. Some was grabbing niggers from the line and punching and beating them for no reason.

We made our way through the crowd of heathens until we got to a tree where all the commotion was centered at. Hanging from the tree be a bloody man. Dead. I looked hard at the man, but I could hardly make out the face it was so beaten. When I saw his shoes I lost all feeling in my body. I let out a scream. It was my Ishmael.

"Someone quiet that nigger wench!" A man yelled in the crowd.

Ishmael's body was barely even there. Those white people got real happy like the closer they got to him. Someone shot at him even though it was obvious he was dead. Most of the slaves just looked ahead like they didn't see a



man hanging from the tree. They be scared they gonna be next.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Dr. Murphy said, turning the wagon round towards the road.

It was the first time any of us had talked since we was caught on the road. No one stopped us from leaving. I was a mighty shooked up for while after that. My soul was tired. My man was gone. He died like so many niggers I know. Just like Roscoe, and Jim who killed a white man after he had raped his little daughter.

When we got back on the road the good Dr. drove us straight through town. I remembered just days before that the town had an air of merriment. On that day it was somber. The free niggers that were the largest number of people in the whole town lived life free yet guarded as they shopped in the stores that would serve them.

As we drove through I saw far less free niggers than before. The ones I did see had pained looks on their faces. I still didn't know what had happened to make things change so with all the people, nigger and white. Why

would they be so mean and to hang a man and then feel good cause it was done.

Once we were out of the town Jacob sat up to talk. He was feeling poorly, but he wanted me to know what happened to him, Nat, and Ishmael.

"We rose up against the white folks," he said to me.

"What that mean?" I said.

"Nat say we would have an uprising of niggers, both slave and free. He say he was given signs from God when the day of judgment would be. That day be day before yesterday. So's about fifty of us met down by the creek as Nat gave us our orders what to do.

All's I had was a knife. Ishmael had a musket and a hatchet. We stuck together with Nat after everyone broke up into groups. The first house we stopped at was bout a mile from the barn. Nat broke us into the house through the parlor window. Just a man and his wife live there. They was scared to wits end when they saw us. The man tried to fight Ishmael who knocked him out with one punch. The woman just sit in a corner crying. It was Nat that

killed them. He shot them both, first the woman in the head than the man who was still out on the floor."

I didn't like the idea of Ishmael being involved with such a dreadful thing. I thought it was mighty harsh for us to be killing white folks, but Jacob say that's what they been doing to us people's souls since they stole us from Africa. Said, they killed thousands of us on the journey from Africa. That still didn't make it right in my eyes.

"Why'd Nat kill them?" I said. "I don't see how a nigger could rise up by killing white folks. He'd be killing all his natural born days. That's not a life."

"Gal, we outnumber whites two to one in these parts. It's not too far a reach to think we can't take over. But you think they would let us lead something as long as they be living? Course not. Nat say he got his directions straight from God, and we believed him. He be a prophet.

Don't be judging, cause you had your hands in this all along. Those quilts you made were put up on lines in each state heading North to give the message it was time to fight. So's we all done did what Nat told us to do.

When we got to the second house it be on a plantation. We get with the slaves first and tell them what we gonna do. They were all happy to kill they master and his family. The slaves did the killing that time with machetes and knives. When we left that plantation we went to a farm down the road from there. Nat and the runned away slaves killed every white person on the farm, then let all the animals loose.

By then it was going on the second day, and the white folks was finding out there be some dead white folks killed by niggers. They started coming after us. They caught our group that was west of town. Our numbers had grown to bout ten by then, so's it was getting hard to hide.

Nat told us it was best iffing we separate. He told us he would hide in the swamp lands on the Brady plantation, where he was once a slave boy at. So's Ishmael and I headed on back to the barn to get you.

We had to wait till nightfall to travel, cause the road had become too busy with white folks looking for any living nigger they could find to kill. They were picking up

men, women and children. We even saw some nigger bodies tied to poles with they heads cut off.

Walking through the woods along the road we were almost to the creek by the barn when some white men caught us from behind. They shot Ishmael through the chest and me in the shoulder, without saying a word. I reckon we's was two niggers running in the dark, so's there weren't no need for words. I saw Ishmael stumble away towards the left. I thought it best we separate so I went running towards the right.

I heard one of the men coming after me and ran harder. When I got to the creek I turned west cause I didn't want to lead him to the barn, knowing you were there waiting for your man. I passed a big tree and saw an owl looking down at me. I noticed there was a hole in the tree big enough for me to hide in.

The man came a walking right by the tree minutes later. The owl gave out a hoot hoot as he passed by. I stayed in that tree all night giving the men enough time to think I was gone or dead. I was feeling mighty poorly by the time I made it to you in the barn."

The feeling to cry finally overtook me. Knowing what happened to Ishmael before he was hanged and the whole story about all the killing of white folks had become too much for me to take. My whole body shook with the cries.

I thought my mind would fall into some black hole I was feeling so low. And then for some reason I pictured that beautiful peacock arching his wings that day I first got back to the plantation. He was telling me to go on. Not to let my mind or will retreat.

"Well, I reckon I better get it together," I said. "My Ishmael be gone, nothing I can do bout that."

"You be my woman now," Jacob said. "Yes, indeed I'm gonna make you Mrs. Jacob Sloan. Dr. Murphy gonna take you with him to the dock in Norfolk. He gonna take you as his slave on a boat to New York. He promised Ishmael he would take care of you. But I'm a heading down to Mississippi to find my family. Gonna get my girls that were sold away. Then I'm going make my way back up North and marry you."

"No. No, Sir," I said. "I always be Ishmael woman. You go on and find your family. I wishes you God speed, but I'm gonna be on my own from here on out."

He told me he would change my mind once I saw him standing in front of me in New York. There wasn't a possibility in my mind. I knowed I would never have another man after Ishmael. Jacob be a good man who could head North, but instead was going back down South to get his family. But I had on my mind bigger things than him. I was going to start a new life. I was gonna be free! Oh, how my heart sang.

Jacob left us about a mile away from the docks. I let him give me a kiss on my cheek, gave him a long hug and watched him walk away. Then Dr. Murphy give him some free papers and he go.

When we got to Norfolk, the Dr. stopped in a shop and bought me a new calico dress, fabric for my head rag, and an apron. Once we got to the dock a man stopped us and demanded to see the Dr.'s papers for his slave. He showed him the bill of sale. The man never even suspected the Dr. was anything but white.

On the boat ride up North instead of feeling that fear I felt on boats I felt like I was floating to heaven. I had reclaimed the sea. I stood on the deck at night and

explored the skies. Clear skies I once saw when I was a little gal in the village. Bright as daylight in the middle of all that darkness shined the North Star. Always a slave's guiding star it had even more meaning to me, as we followed it along the journey.



New York, New York - 1832

Once we made it to New York, the good Dr. took me to this house not far from the docks. A white lady opened the door and welcomed me in warmly. Said her name be Miss Imelda Taylor, and to just call her Mel. With an earnest eye I looked at her clothing which was sewed mighty fine with good fabric. Her dark blue dress was in a style I had not known, coming from the South which always tried to follow the New York fashions. I knowed right then that I had a lot of studying up to do. I was glad I was gonna be around someone I could learn from.

Dr. Murphy said his goodbyes once I was settled. Like Jacob he was heading back North. He said there was much still to be done for our people. I agreed and made a promise that whatever I did from then on would be to advance my people. I did my part in the uprising with my sewing; it was time to use it again to better my possibilities.

There was another surprise waiting for me when I got to New York. My Benjamin was there. The old man from the

little boat on the river and his wife Margy was taking good care of him.

Whilst in New York I changed my name so the slave catchers wouldn't be after me. Mel was kind enough to loan me the money to open up my own shop. Joy filled my body when the wooden sign went up over the shop; Seamstress Extraordinaire, proprietor Alice Bennett. I got my clients from Mel's friends, all secret abolitionists like she was who loved fine fashions.

I remember when I put my first dress up in the window, how my dreams had come true. But I still had my burdens. I didn't know where they had sold my Jane off to and I missed the boys. I was hoping that Aunty Rae was taking care of my baby gal Sarah.

One day while looking at fabrics in the shop Mel told me she had something to tell me.

"I'm not really white," she said. "Dr. Murphy is my brother. I thought it was time you knew."

"You too?" I asked. Looking at her and seeing nothing but a white woman in front of me. Her hair was light brown with long waves. She had green eyes like the good Dr. Her

skin was pale with not a hint of darkness. She conducted herself like a fine white lady. Seeing another nigger passing had me wondering all along who people really be.

"You could have told me sooner. I'm not one of those niggers that run off and tell."

"I know. But we have to be real careful up here. If one person was to tell it would cause a mess in our abilities to help our people. Please forgive me," she said.

Course I forgave her, with all her and her brother had done for me and my family. It was time for me to give back. So I asked Mel iffin I could go to some of them meetings they be having. That's where they gave me the idea to sew more message quilts so they could use on the Underground Railroad. Something I traveled on without knowing it.

Freedom was just what my soul needed. I had me a nice little business and a home for me and the boys when I got them. My household was run by my order and rules. I didn't have to do anything I didn't want to. It was sorta hard at first getting used to my own capabilities and

making my own decision. When to get up, when to turn in for the night, how to pay for my daily needs, and how to plan for my future.

After the shop be open for bout half a year, I saved me up enough money to buy Emanuel's and Benjamin's freedom from the massa. I was going to have Dr. Murphy buy them for me, so massa wouldn't know it was me who wanted him. I wanted both my boys with me badly. Freedom and success was nothing without my chillun. During my time there my orders for dresses came as far away as Texas. I had mastered all the new fashions, and even designed some of my own kind. I did all the sewing myself. I had helpers do the cutting of fabric, but not a stitch was done without my hand.

I even made clothes for the free nigger women. Those women always got a special price from me, cause I loved to see them all dressed up in my fashions, like the white ladies.

For the cause I spent my free time sewing the message quilts. Whilst in New York I made over twenty quilts that traveled the Underground Railroad through the states heading south all the way to Florida. Mel told me that one

even made it to Kingsley Plantation. It made me feel good to know I was helping my people that I left behind find their way north to freedom.

When I started going to the secret meetings I found out a little something about myself. White folks liked to hear me talk about slavery. At first there would just be a few ladies and gentlemen, then after a time the numbers grewed to hundreds.

My talks were always about how slavery killed the spirit of the slave. Which is what the massa wanted it to do. I always told my own story and how I was taken from my homeland, traveled the middle passage, and how the missus and massa treated me. The people listened to my stories with earnest ears and open hearts. Those abolitionist people was some of the best white folks I ever did meet.

One day I got word from Jacob from Mississippi. He say he found his peoples down there, long the coast. That he be living as a free man. He asked me iffin I wanted to marry him and go back North to be with him. I wrote him back no, I stay put in New York where I could stay free. I didn't know it but my days would be numbered to be free.

Massa had put out papers on me saying me and Benjamin be runaway slaves. Papers say he give any man \$900 to bring us back to Florida. They say I be bout five feet, two inches tall, with a real dark complexion, a small scar on my chin, and long black hair. It say also I have whipping scars on my back.

I knew it not be massa that be looking for me. It be missus, who wanted me back so badly. Don't know why she want to keep her sister as a slave, but I guess that wasn't for me to understand.

It was a nigger named Adam that worked for me that turned me in to the slave catchers. It was my people that put me into slavery; it was my people who put me back into it.

The slave catches came to get me in the shop one fine winter day. They already had Benjamin with them. Mel tried to stop them, but they told her to get out of their way. They grabbed me by my dress and pulled me outside the door, and then threw me into a wagon with Benjamin, and three other runaway slaves.

They put us on a boat back to Florida. It was unlike my journey to freedom. The North Star stayed behind us. I didn't go up to the deck to see the stars like that trip. The only time I went up there was when they made us go up to get fresh air and clean out the slave quarters on ship.

One night I was just bout over the rail to jump in the ocean when they stopped me for I could do it. It was in my mind to die before I be a slave again. It was a long way back. They kept me chained up the rest of the way. It be where the ocean meets the river, when they put me us in a small boat. The boat took us back here to the plantation. Standing on the dock be the missus, waiting for me.

Kingsley Plantation - 1832

They had my feet and hands held together with chains. Blood dripped down from my wrists and ankles. I had no more fight left in me. The only thing that made me feel good was knowing I would get to see my Emanuel. The Missus didn't care nothing bout Benjamin. All she wanted was me back.

Instead of letting the overseer whip me, missus did it herself. With each hit of the lash I wondered how a sister could do another sister like she did. My back burned like fire. It felt like she had opened up some old sores I had from the last whipping. When she got done with me, Aunty Rae and Pauline cut me down from the post and carried me to my pallet.

I'm a telling you, I was half dead. They did like they did the time before and tried to nurse me back to health. Aunty Rae used some roots from a plant in the woods to try and heal my back.

For the first couple of days I laid on my stomach. I find out from the slaves that missus say iffing Sarah wasn't



so young she would have her sold on the auction block. She did it anyway practically giving her away to an old couple from Virginia. Both of my baby girls were sold away from me, my heart couldn't take much more. My burdens had come too much for me to take. I prayed and prayed for peace in my soul every night to the Almighty. Finally, the massa got Sarah back. He really thought I was going to die. When he did that he only made the missus madder.

She came in every day to talk to me. It wasn't enough that she had my body captive she wanted my soul. She was mighty mad that I had runned away and got to spend some months as a free nigger in a city she herself always wanted to live in. She was still ranting to me about how we couldn't be sisters. The more she talked the more I wondered myself how we could have the same blood. She was pure evil.

"Your mother was the whore of the village," she said to me on my third day back. It was the first time she mentioned the motherland to me. As long as I knowed her she pretended that she was somewhere besides Africa. In her mind she was a refined English woman with fair skin, instead of a nigger black as night.

"Father only went to her when he wanted his needs met," she continued. "That's how you were born; a product of his lust."

It was also the first time she said she be my sister.

"It wasn't enough he had my mother and two other wives, he had to have more. Your mother the whore was always at his ready."

"My mother not be a whore," I said to her trying to sit up. She brought her arm down hard on my back. The pain was almost unbearable.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that you daughter of a whore!" she said. She went on like that for about three days. It was like she was trying to make herself believe she not be my sister.

"There's no way I can be related to such an ugly nigger as you," she hissed at me. She got to bringing her sewing with her to sit by my bed and curse me. Then one day massa came into the cabin as she stripped my top off of me and threw brine on my open sores.

"Zola! That's enough!" he said. "I've let this go on long enough. It's time for you to leave her alone and let her heal. Did you bring her all the way back here just so you could kill her? Besides, it just got back to me that Chinedu be the father of you both. That came from his mouth to William's when he took that trip back to Africa for more slaves last month. You can't keep your sister for a slave, it just isn't right. You going to have to let her go free."

"If you think I'm going let this wench free, you done lost your natural born mind, George. She cost us \$900 to get her back here. Let's just try to get our money back and sell her to one of those Frenchmen heading to Louisiana."

They talked about me like I wasn't there.

"She too sickly right now for you to be doing anything with her," he said. "I'm going to town tomorrow to get the freedom papers drawn up."

"You gonna make your little nigger bastards free too? What do you plan on doing George? I bet you got a little cabin somewhere around here ready for her so you could keep

on bedding her and keep your nigger family. Well, I won't have it! Do you understand me? You know I don't give up that easily. This won't be the last of this."

"Calm down, Zola. Of course I don't have a place near here for her to stay in. I will get her and the children steerage tickets on the Anna Marie's next voyage up the coast north. She can go back to New York. Let her pay for her and the children's freedom with that shop she has up there. Don't worry about it we'll be sure to get our money back. That's the only thing you should be worrying your little head over."

I laid there listening to them. Wondering how stupid did he think the missus was. She had already shown that she would do anything to have me back to be her slave. She wasn't gonna let him set us free as long as she had breath in her body.

"Fine!" She said as she left slamming the wooden door behind her.

"I'm sorry for the way we have treated you," he said to me reaching down to look me in my face. "I'm sorry for

hurting you and letting her hurt you." He pulled off my head rag and started pulling his fingers through my hair.

"You always had the prettiest hair I have ever seen on a nigger coming straight from Africa. I don't know how two Africans could have made something as pretty as you."

You know I don't believe in cussing, but it came out of my mouth before I could stop it.

"Rot in hell, you dirty bastard," I said with the little strength I had left in my body.

"You got God on your side, girl. And, you are lucky I already plan to set you free. Make sure you take good care of our son while you are up there." he said and then kissed me on my lips. "Hurry up and get well so you can get on that boat."

I stayed face down on the pallet too afraid to turn over on my back. That night I had dreams about Ishmael. He was still alive. He was dressed all in white. He was waiting for me.

"Come to me, Violet" he kept on saying reaching out to me. I tried my hardest to reach his hands, but I couldn't.

Bout midnight I heard Missus come creeping into the cabin. From the light of the moon I could see she had something in each of her hands. I couldn't make out what they was till she got closer.

I saw one of the cook's big knives, the kind she cut the chickens up with in her left hand. The light glinted off the shiny metal. In her other hand be a pillow. She came towards me real quiet like. If I had been well I would have had the strength to fight her off, but I was so weak. The Massa had said I was gonna be free, but I had a devil in my mist. My soul was tired.

She took the pillow and put it over my head smashing down hard on it. I tried and tried to push her offa me. Then I felt the knife go through my rib cage. I couldn't breathe with the pillow over my mouth and nose, and couldn't see her as she kept stabbing at me. When massa came in he saw her and pulled her offa my body. I turned over to see her standing there with the knife and pillow in her hands and blood all over her dress. I slipped into that black hole heading towards the light and my Ishmael.