Virginia Tell
6561 Ascot Lane
Dallas, TX 75214
(972) 897-8844
VirginiaTell@VirginiaTell.com
www.VirginiaTell.com

Fiction

GEORGE

Based on True Events

Photograph Courtesy of Kevin Kelly, Owner of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens

We had a good slave life. Massa give us 'nough fo' a mule o' our own. And fencin' boards. But not all those men did kindness like Massa did. We had our own gardens. Corn fo' feedin' a few chickens. Oats fo' the mule.

~ George

GEORGE'S STORY

Prologue

I tried all kinds o' ways. We needed Ma'am to see. She been comin' 'round lookin' out on where we stayed but couldn' hear us.

She always in and out her own self when she write words.

We floated 'round in some pictures she made so she knew we was there. Man she live wit' heared us too when we be knockin' on windows and doors. But wasn' 'til we open that door and got her so scared she be wantin' to call somebody to help see wha's goin' on in that house. That be when she call Miss Georgia to help talk wit' us.

Course, now, we done knew Miss Georgia from way back. She know how to hear us and what she goin' tell people be the words most cain' hear.

That first time Ma'am talk wit' Miss Georgia, she tell Ma'am they's a big black man there needin' to be talkin'.

I told 'em I be tryin' to help her wit' that book 'bout where we stayed. Told her we comin' talk wit' her 'cause she know our place and she been prayin' for some help 'cause she cain' find no more words to write.

I tell her it be hard for her to hear me like a voice in her ear but when she write she get in a little bit o' a trance anyway, so it's real easy for me to just come on in. I could tell her my story and I could show her how it looked. Tha's all I could do.

Chapter One

George stepped aside at the front door of the big house. A faint gasp barely reached his ears.

A lady in an immense hoop skirt hesitated before brushing past. That was three days ago.

Today's was the first daylight George had seen since then. Alone in the dark confines of his cabin, he writhed in pain far from the dancing eyes of guests who had sighed so deeply when they saw him exit through the front door. He had brought the cook a bushel of potatoes from the cool earth in the space below the house and was on his way back to work. He knew better.

"You just about gave the ladies a faintin' spell," his master had told him, right before he called for Little Jack.

George had rested on his stomach those three days, his red-back bare and crisscrossed with long lines of drawing salve thick and black as tar. A mouthful of the elixir one of the old swamp dwellers brought helped him sleep, but then George dreamt of Old Man Fryoux crossing The Great Mississippi River in his weathered old pirogue, then trudging back to slave row without being asked but rather because he had come to trade okra for Lyddy's sugar. He saw

George's condition and made a second trip to bring the potion. The slave still wore the blood-encrusted overalls that had been stripped down to the waist, the ones with a strap long ago busted open by the mass of muscles that made this soft-spoken slave the most intimidating presence on The Houmas land, save for Little Jack.

Whereas George's overalls reached only to mid-shin, Little Jack's were cuffed, but overall size wasn't why they called him Little Jack. He got his name from how he looked with his coiled whip. When Little Jack was mounted on Fire Ball, his nearly black, gangly old horse, the coil reached from the saddle horn halfway up Fire Ball's neck, up to Little Jack's waist, and down to his knee. How it appeared in Jack's hands when he stood five paces behind a naked black back, no one stuck around to see.

Little Jack had a fine way of popping that old whip.

He had long ago cut off its tattered tail and unbraided the last few inches of thick leather. So when George returned to his cabin after his thrashing and lay on his moss mattress in the corner of the only room in the dwelling, and his wife returned from the big house and the children from the fields, they rushed to George's side only to gawk at the yawning tears from the part of a whip never intended to lash man nor animal. Its thick fringe now a makeshift cat-o-nine-tails.

Massa had often told Little Jack that such brutality was unwarranted, but Little Jack figured the old white man just wanted others to believe he was a kind old Southern gent, leaving Nigger Jack to carry on his tortures in the shadows.

Living in the shadows. A common enough place, where George's natural male instincts battled with his core instinct for survival.

George reached for pleasant memories while he lay face down on the rough-hewn cotton sheet. Bygone images of Lyddy floated, danced through foggy ethers. *When we was down by the crick, and I told you I be plannin' on askin' Massa if'n we could jump the broom, he be fine. Massa, he a good man.*

George slapped his face to stop the recollection.

That memory had to end there. That day down by the creek had come before his promised virgin was forced to give herself to Massa, and the couple's first-born son came out fair-haired. How could Lyddy stand it. How could she still be so gentle. It was Lyddy's own fine line that made it so. Knowing that what Lyddy did with that child and how she comforted George in his rage, and how determined she was to not be broken…belief in the wonders of his wife always helped George regain his sanity. Most times.

Lyddy had long ago mastered the art of repression. Why lose her privileges at the big house? She never told George about the other price she paid for those privileges, all the images and feelings she could stifle at times even to herself.

Maybe George knew all along, those days his wife came back to their cabin so quiet. George let her be. That fine line sometimes felt like a circle around their lives. Inside was warm and safe. Outside was to deal with Little Jack and face Massa. Lines…lines…lines…can't cross so many lines.

Not crossing lines was a lesson learned early in George's life. He had seen his father's scars. Oko had experimented with lines too many times, and George hadn't seen him since the man stood naked but tall on a slave block, and an auctioneer called him a prime buck who, though he bore the scars of an unruly nigger, had come to know his place. A fine buck. Fine, fine buck.

But that was before George's family lived in Louisiana under the protection of Code Noir and *a nice massa*.

George's mammy had raised him and three siblings, all living together in one of the older cabins with divided rooms. George's mother still lived in that old cabin, still put in a hard day's work. She too had mastered the art of repression. She had lost two children to the fever and one after a fall into a giant sugar mountain in the refinery.

George thought of them every morning when he greeted some of his neighbors. When he heard, "G'mornin', George," after he stepped out his front door each morning, he'd greet, "Mornin' JoJo, mornin' Rob't, mornin' Wil'm," his friends' African names long ago replaced with more *white* sounding ones, the same names as his lost brothers.

Mornings started bright and fresh and clean anyway, no matter the old names he no longer remembered and the brothers always to be remembered.

But by mid-morning, especially on Sundays, George's mind started twisting into slipknots that coiled and struck his insides like a cobra.

Where it be I stand? Locked here b'twix bein' a man and bein' a thing, like a mule or a cart or a shovel. How I teach my sons how to be men. Am I a man if'n my wife ain' my own, all my own. How I teach my fam'ly and set a 'xample for my friends and neighbors when I cain' be a man myself. How that be?

And what do God think 'bout all this?

George had heard the stories of the old African and Jamaican rituals, but nearly all were long gone. Now, all most slaves knew was a Christian god. *Massa even give a free man of color, one they call Preacher, a silver dollar Sunday when he come 'round and spill out his song*

and teachin' and stories, sometimes wit' a finger pointed at the sky. George always wondered why he did that.

It was Sunday again when George heard the rattle of a carriage. Nobody knew this morning would end any differently from the day before, or any days before.

Old New Orleans Slave Block
Photograph Courtesy of New York Public Library

The wide doors of Southern plantation homes were designed to allow ladies wearing hoop skirts to enter on the arms of escorts without mussing their dresses.

Photograph Courtesy of Kevin Kelly, Owner of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens

Chapter Two

Slaves closed their eyes and bowed their heads over interlocked fingers.

Preacher say tha's how it done. Preacher say we be seein' riches and wealth and a beautiful life after we daid.

George didn't know, wasn't sure, if he liked that idea too much, having to be dead before he could be a real man, a full man, protector of his family. Such thinking made him rub his eyes, shake the cobwebs from his head, and stick his head back in the ground and forget promises of beauty and abundance and peace. Ignore the snake. Little Jack was out there and he was real.

It don' make no sense, anyhow. Li'l Jack be goin' listen to Preacher and he got told the same thing. Preacher up there tellin' me and my fam'ly 'bout how they be goin' receive they rewards in heaven, and Li'l Jack, he hear it too. That just don' make sense.

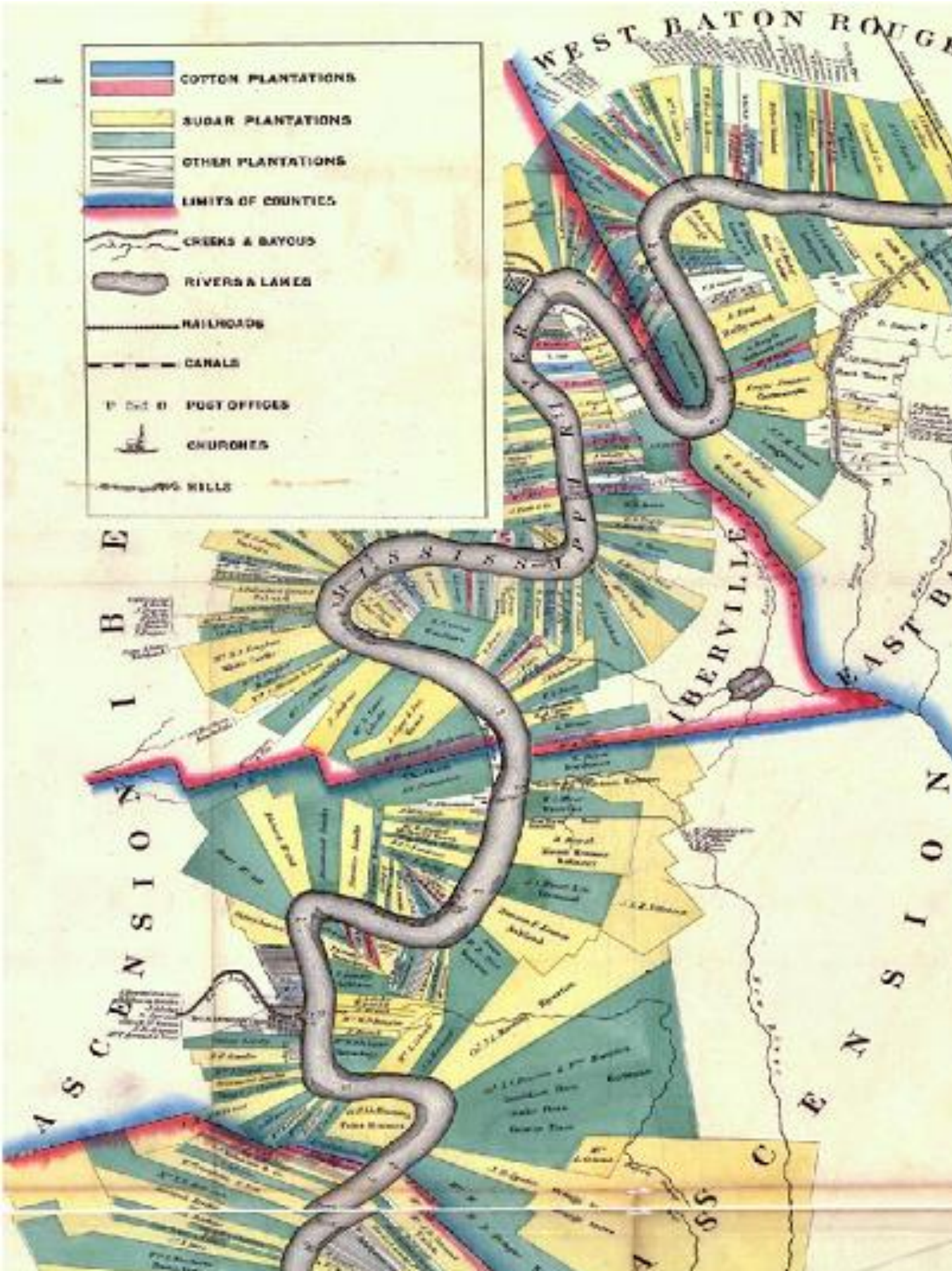
When Preacher started talking things on freedom and forgiveness, George wondered if he'd just miss out on the heaven part because he couldn't see his way to forgiving a black man for turning on his own. He could forgive Massa easy enough, but not Little Jack. No. Not Little Jack.

Sometimes all George wanted to do was run. And keep running. If he ran for half a day he'd reach the southern edge of the plantation, slogging through the swamp to lose dogs on his heels. Fifteen thousand acres of cane. It produced millions of pounds of sugar each year and the fields went on past the swamps.[i]

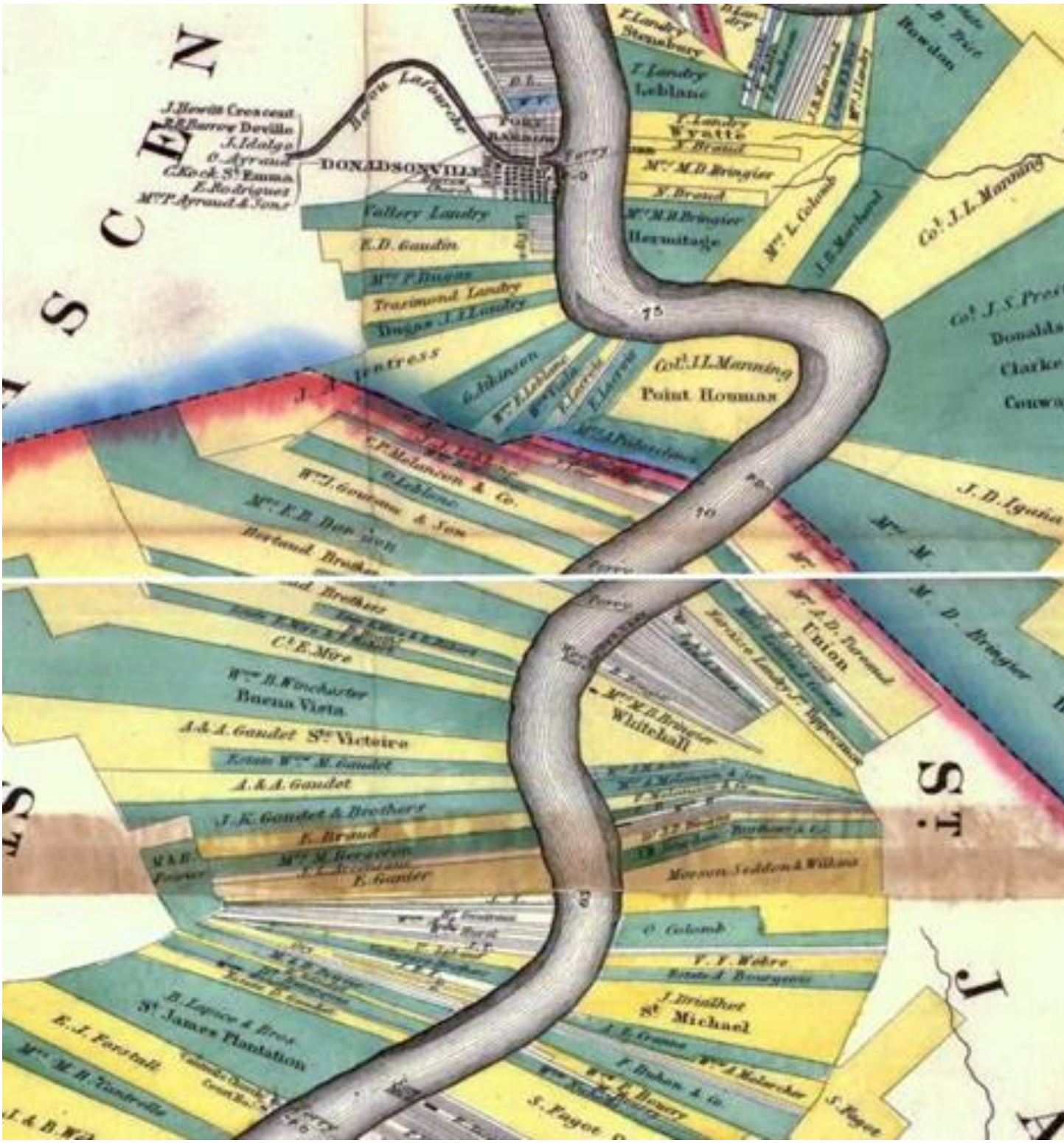
Massa traded dollars for men in the same way the Houmas Indians traded those fifteen thousand acres for a few blankets and knives. Things change. And some things don't. And waiting until he's dead to see change came hard to George, to all the slaves. George could only shake his head, bowed down like when Preacher promised his promises as 350 nappy heads stared down at leathered hands, and Preacher said be thankful for Jesus' blessings.

The 1860 Census reports 753 slaves (including children) on this plantation, many of whom were African- and Caribbean-born slaves who rejected Christianity.

But George surely was thankful for his blessings, and he knew Preacher was right about that being a good and proper way to think because George felt better when he thought about things that way. After all, up and down the Mississippi were plantations owned by free men of color and they too had slaves, slaves not nearly so well off as those at The Houmas. And there he was, George, back to the beginning of this loop of thoughts and wonderings, chewing on how it could be that a black man could keep other blacks so deprived and often tortured.


COTTON PLANTATIONS
SUGAR PLANTATIONS
OTHER PLANTATIONS
LIMITS OF COUNTIES
CREEKS & BAYOUS
RIVERS & LAKES
RAILROADS
CANALS
POST OFFICES
CHURCHES
MILLS
WEST BATON ROUGE
ASCENSION
IBERVILLE
EAST BATON ROUGE
ASCENSION

USGenWeb Archives Special Projects 1858 Map of
South Louisiana Mississippi River Land Holdings



USGenWeb Archives Special Projects 1858 Map of
South Louisiana Mississippi River Land Holdings indicating Location of The Houmas

Then there were all those poor white folk. Massa provided his slaves with a strong cabin with swamp sod to plug the holes, seeds for planting, and hogs for slaughtering. He provided chickens for egging and eating, and mules to work a strip of land for their own gardens. Those white folks who worked side by side the niggers come harvest time had no fine stock or gardens, and no roofs to shelter their children, all of whom were more raggedy than any on Houmas land. Even Old Man Fryoux, though he no doubt had a fine home with more than one room, had no shoes.

Nonsense or good sense, Sunday mornings with Preacher were among the finest. Most days.

In *Old Louisiana Plantation Homes and Family Trees,* author Herman de Bachelle Seebold, M.D., says John Burnside treated his slaves "with great humaneness – seeing to it that they were well fed and warmly clothed…He saw that they had ample seed for their gardens, poultry and hogs for their yards, and he appointed fishermen from amongst the slaves to furnish fish and crabs so that they might have a varied diet."

Come daybreak, Preacher would turn his horse down the oak-draped alley that led to the big house. He'd cut across to the road that led back to slave row. First he'd give worship. Then he'd go to George's mother's cabin and sit on the front porch for a spell. In the spring and fall months, the dew heavy on the old Live Oaks that shaded the cabins, a slight flitter in the wind slid the water off leaves and pinged tin roofs like sheets of rain. Squirrels hopped onto the roof and picked up the night's fallen acorns, some of them almost too big to mouth.

As always when the fog beckoned squirrels to the roof, George's boys snuck into their cabin to get their slingshots. His youngest, Ito, had once asked why the squirrels always showed up at the same time, but George had no answer. When the boys shot at squirrels on the roof for their dinner, George admonished them. "It ain' right to kill critters when they feedin' they fam'ly," he scolded. "It's same as shootin' ducks on the water. Ain' no sport in it." Ito would then lead big brother Ramba back to the pecan grove, where squirrels weren't off limits.

Sundays were also the day Preacher had to marry young couples in the eyes of his god. "Jumpin' over a broom ain't fittin' for a proper blessed union," he warned, along with a speech about hellfire and damnation for fornicating, which is what they were doing without God's blessings. So while Preacher sat with George's mother and shared her pipe, young couples needing to gain acceptance strolled in front of Mammy's porch and let this man of God read the strange words of his Holy Book. They never uttered a word, only stood heads bowed, waiting for him to wave his hands in a cross-like motion to mark the end of the blessing. Then they knew they were married in the eyes of Preacher's god.

Louisiana slave Mary Reynolds, in an interview commissioned by the WPA (Federal Writers' Project), tells us:

"After while I taken a notion to marry and massa and missy marries us same as all the niggers. They stands inside the house with a broom held crosswise of the door and we stands outside. Missy puts a li'l wreath on my head they kept there and we steps over the broom into the house. Now, that's all they was to the marryin'. After freedom I gits married and has it put in the book by preacher."

That Sunday when wind swayed the limbs of the old oaks like giant ballerinas, and squirrels jumped from branch to roof and back again, and the family stood on the porch while grandmother sucked on her pipe and passed it to Preacher, the smoky musk of Lyddy's coffee and chicory made everyone warm and right. A shot rang out.

The big house stood fuzzy in the fog, ominous in the distance.

Fragile whispers arose from the children. The boys gawked at their slingshots, quizzing themselves as to whether they hit something that could have made such a noise. They searched the faces of the adults to see if they were in trouble. But the adults paid them no mind, just stared blankly straight ahead, avoiding others' gazes, others' knowing eyes.

"It was buckshot," George said. "Don' go gettin' all troubled. Somebody huntin' too close is all." He started toward the Big House. When his firstborn tried to follow, George told him, "No, Ramba, you stay here."

* * * * *

George tiptoed through a trail of bright red drops that led through the kitchen door. George couldn't tell whether it was coming or going, but it wasn't the butchered meat kind of blood trail, and it didn't fall in line with the icehouse that stored pigs and sides of beef.

Miss Lizzie stood just inside. "George, go get Lyddy to make me some cheese grits and eggs."

George looked up from the blood and saw black specks on Miss Lizzie's white lace collar. Massa's favorite duck gun rested against the stove, but it belonged in the gun cabinet on the second-floor landing at the back of the big house. His hands trembled.

"George," Miss Lizzie insisted, "where's Lyddy?"

The Houmas Kitchen

Today's visitors at Houmas House Plantation enter Lyddy's kitchen the same way George did the day that shot rang out. They can see exactly where George had to step over the blood.

Photograph Courtesy of Kevin Kelly, Owner of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens

Above: Original house built in the early 1700s is situated behind the mansion and adjoined by a carriageway. It was later used as living and serving quarters for those who served the great house.

Left: Entry to the kitchen, located on the west end of the original house. House slaves had their meals in a room on the east end.

Photographs Courtesy of Kevin Kelly, Owner of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens

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We didn' wants life to be like they was tryin' to make it. We was happy wit' fat bellies and felt loved by our massa if not the black traitor Jack. We didn' know nothin' 'bout no rights or unjustice. We knew we wasn' good like the whites, and ain' no Yankee soldierin' fool goin' make us think diff'rent. We gots to tell 'em what they wants to hear. Some us had to fight for 'em les'n we be branded, yes, branded wit' a big S on our back to mark us, and they told us afta the war end all the other slaves be let loose, and we wasn' goin' be free and we be wit' no food and shelter 'cause the massas was all goin' be ruined and wouldn' have no money for theyself let 'lone some nigger ain' good for nothin' wit' no hundred other ones workin' them fields.

"I was thinkin' bout that big S goin' be puts on my back and then 'bout how I was needin' to be as good a nigger as I could if'n the soldiers be right," he told Lizzie when he reached his mother's cabin. "So maybe Massa take us wit' him where he goin' after the war. And maybe Miss Lizzie put in a good word for us if'n I don' act like I knows nothin' 'bout no shootin'. So I kepts my mouth shut 'cept to tell the Missie I go get you so she could have some cheese grits and egg."

Lyddy went without questioning him. Neither did the Preacher or anyone else ask George about the gunshot. Lyddy made Miss Lizzie some breakfast, and when she went back home to cook for her own children, George told her, "Smoke come along the hall and through the alley b'twix the kitchen and the big house."

Sometime when Massa smoke his pipe a person could tell he be close. Couldn' see no smoke, really, just got the smell, but Massa be right behind it. He come 'round askin' 'bout smoke he smelt upstairs, said he caught the whiff through his own t'baccy. Said he come lookin'

for the gun made that shot. Miss Lizzie went 'bout her bi'ness crackin' some coffee beans and turnin' over the ones in the roaster and puttin' 'em back wit' fire to roast some mo'.

Now, back then was before the soldiers start comin' 'round. We ain' know'd what dat wavin' line be say'n a letter for our namin' as slaves. We don' know nothin' 'bout no letters 'til Massa come say he cain' 'bide by no brandin' a S for sayin' short for slave.

When the soldiers come and the brands got burned, tha's 'bout when my mammy took with the sniffles. Tha's when I truly come to b'lieve Massa ain' no bad man. My mammy was the longest been stayin' wit' Massa and he come see her on her sick bed, and he see'd her shoes on the ground by her bed and see'd they was open 'round the toes, and he sent for Jack and went to askin' how come my mammy got no closed shoes for wintertime. Then Jack said he didn' know nothin' 'bout no shoes, but that just got Massa fit to be tied he was so mad. And he told Jack go get some workin' shoes for mammy and all us so's nobody on his land got to get sniffles so bad they goin' be daid if'n we don' send for Doc. And he told Jack be makin' it so's the chirrins got some workin' shoes that was a size too big so's they could wear two socks inside they shoes for winter and in the summer they feets got room to grow.

Massa had no way of knowin' how much Jack took to punishin' us afta Massa made him look bad. But that was just how it was and, in the all 'n all we got somethin' good to show for our extra miseries.

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Coffee bean roaster and cracker in Houmas House kitchen

Photograph Courtesy of Kevin Kelly, Owner of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens

When Massa came down the staircase, he could only gape at George as George gaped at Miss Lizzie, she going about her business as with any other day. George backed toward the door saying nothing except a faint "Ma'am" as he crossed the threshold. He watched for droplets through his legs before each step.

When he got back to his mammy's cabin, most all the slaves were gone. *Ain' none of those niggers wants nothin' to do wit' no talkin' 'bout guns bein' shot*.

And that was all they was to it that day had to do wit' the shot. Nothin' happened 'til Massa come lookin' for Li'l Jack, say he had some important talkin' to do wit' him. Course, nobody seen Jack but that was always that way on Sunday after Preacher come and went.

Chapter Three

At suppertime, Lyddy went back to doing her cooking at her home down the way from George's mother's cabin, further away from the big house. The lengthy walk had been a source of discontent for Lyddy for all the travelling back and forth she had to do for regular meals, and cleaning she had to do at the big house, plus all the times when the white folks wanted something extra, like how Miss Lizzie wanted grits with cheese and eggs after that shot. Lyddy didn't complain too much but George didn't like his wife going back and forth so much when the weather turned cool. The wind that ran with the Mississippi River kept going straight to the big house and beyond, unwilling to make that sharp turn in the river and making a cold day awful miserable. Summer had passed and the winds long returned, but still nobody saw Little Jack since that Sunday.

George sat on a limb of his favorite Live Oak, feeling the sway of the giant arm, watching a red bird perched on a whitewashed fence that ran the length of the plantation along the road that followed the river. The bird flicked its head up and down, back and forth while George thought on that long-ago day and how *Lyddy let 'em know just how the cow ate the cabbage*.

She had gone up to the big house kitchen and saw the shotgun propped up against her stove. Massa was just standing there, his daughter beside him fiddling with coffee beans, and Lyddy told them just what to do on a Sunday morning when it was Preacher time.

She had told George, "I say, 'You folk knows I cain' be fixin' no eggs and cheese grits when you folk knows that Sunday mornings is self-time for house slaves 'cept when company's to be had, and I ain' seen no company 'round these parts this fine Sunday morning.

"And move that old nasty gun out my kitchen, too," Lyddy recounted.

Wedding party tours of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens stop in Lyddy's kitchen, where guests are served cups of gumbo or crawfish étouffée cooked on the same stove Lyddy used to make Miss Lizzie's cheese grits and eggs.

"And not Massa or Miss Lizzie said nothing, but kept lookin' at each other."

Lyddy had walked back to her cabin chin-high with swinging arms, her mouth curling up on one side as she thought about how she held her tongue about the shot though she was bubbling inside to ask about things that weren't her place to be asking. Of course, that was after she made cheese grits and eggs. Lyddy had never felt the end of Little Jack's butchered bull whip and she didn't intend to. George had counseled her well about the rules as put forth by the plantation slave driver. He too had questions but who to ask?

He couldn't put them to Jack and they surely weren't questions he could bring to Massa, seeings how some were about Massa himself. So he brought his questions to Preacher only to be

told some scripture about the low man inheriting the earth after he's gone. When George called him on that answer, telling Preacher about how he wasn't believing that any good god could be intending for Massa to be taking his wife like in the husbandry way, Preacher told him, "Now George, you best not be rousin' up no trouble talk."

"Trouble talk? What he be meanin', trouble talk?" George shook his head back and forth, didn't know he was on the edge of being a troublemaker. He was just asking about the Lord's position on masters having their way with the female slaves, and then the husband slaves raising half-white children like their own. How did the children feel about themselves once they were old enough to understand their daddy wasn't their daddy, why their skin was fair and hair gently wavy, whether they were outcasts because they looked so different. Everyone first noticed their light, sometimes green eyes even when their skin was dark enough to pass, especially when they played in groups where most of the others' eyes were black, their hair nappy and coal black, their skin almost as dark. And when they were old enough to work in the fields, why they got red skin while the others only got darker, blacker…what did they feel?

George had two of those children himself. He watched firstborn Ramba come out of his wife without a single curl in his hair not too long after he and Lyddy jumped the broom. Then fourth-born Shanda came out almost blonde nine months after that day he returned to the cabin and found Lyddy so into herself, so quiet, and George left her to mend her own soul because there was nothing to be said or done about the happening.

But now George wanted answers and couldn't get them from anyone on the plantation, not even Preacher.

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One day early the following spring, when clouds rolled in all dark in their center but white at the edges where the sun shone through, a white man in a raggedy coat knocked on the front door of the Big House. Lyddy opened the door but before she could greet him the man asked if the master was available to take a visitor. When Lyddy told him no, he said that was fine, just fine. She had to cock her head to the side and scrunch up her eyebrows to ruminate on why somebody would ask about visiting a man then be glad he wasn't there.

She stood there not knowing what to say while the man tucked his thumbs in his trousers and rolled back on his heels with a grin that looked like a smile but curled down at the corners like a carnival mask. He took a sideways gander at Lyddy, his left eye squinting almost like a halfway wink, stood up tall and straight again, and asked, "Go tell your massa I'm here."

"He ain' here suh. Jess me and the chirren."

The words came out so quickly that she tried to catch them midair, drawing her hand to her mouth and almost choking on a gasp. The man gave her a toothy smile, his teeth yellow and coated with tobacco slime.

Lyddy heard Shanda run down the back stairs at the end of the hall so she wiggled a finger behind her back to tell Shanda to go find her father.

Shanda found her father at the refinery. He ran to the Big house thinking about how Houmas slaves had mostly forgotten about that Sunday. Shanda said Lyddy and three other house slaves had been battening down the big house when her mother answered a knock on the front door—that's all Shanda said.

* * * * *

"Now, Mista," Lyddy said, nostrils flaring as she her heart raced blood with the power of the Mississippi, "If'n you got no good bi'ness bein' 'round this here house you best be on yourn way and right quick 'bout it befo' that storm catch you." She blurted it out a little too loudly.

The man chuckled from deep down in his jiggling belly. It rose right up through the base of his throat and grumbled a muffled buzz in his mouth when caught behind his closed lips.

Lyddy released a giant breath when this red-faced man with the deep pocks on his left jaw turned to go but, when he reached the steps, he turned back. "Who's the lead buck?"

Lyddy never knew somebody to ask for the lead buck. It wasn't a thing done. If Massa or the other white folk adults weren't around, people asked for the slave driver, so why wasn't this man looking for Little Jack? Did he know the mean little man hadn't been scene in months?"

Now the thing Lyddy should have done when she answered the door was send the man right down the road and on his way. She would look back on that moment, after the man made that odd smile with his thumbs tucked in his pants, and she would wonder why she stood like she was entranced…not that she knew the word.

This ain' goin' be no ordinary day. Not when no white man come askin' for a Massa he happy ain' home, then askin' 'bout a lead nigger. No, not no ordinary day t'all.

Lyddy still stood at the door wondering what to say to the peculiar visitor when Miss Lizzie's shoes clacked down the stairs, making the day even more different.

While I typed this section, I opened my eyes (I normally typed with my eyes closed) to find I had been typing in a Google® search bar. There were many words in that search bar, but I performed a search on only the last few, "when the time comes."

The first results referred to song lyrics, but the fourth revealed the title of a movie *When the Time Comes*. That entry took me to the movie's IMDb site. The synopsis began as follows:

> Thirty-four year old Kansas housewife, Liddy Travis, is diagnosed with a terminal illness....

To this point, I thought George's wife was named Leddy, so I changed it to Liddy (which would undergo a change of spelling at a later date).

Lizzie's bedroom was at the front of the big house, close enough to hear the goings on. She made it to the front door before the man descended the last step.

Lyddy saw the woman's eyebrows scrunched up above her nose as though she were more curious than disturbed about Lyddy talking so loudly. But then Lizzie jutted out a sharp chin and almost defiantly demanded, "What's going on down here!"

She waved Lyddy away before the man could answer.

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Lyddy met George as he came around the icehouse. "Missie ain' none too happy t'all, talkin' 'bout a man not ought'n been here, then talkin' low like I be still standin' 'round, like she know what she be sayin' cain' be heard. What Miss Lizzie doin' outside her room this time o' mornin' anyhow?"

But Lyddy had indeed heard them. She had left Lizzie at the front door and tip-toed in bare feet to circle around to the ladies' drawing room at the front of the house. She peeked around the corner to see the intruder's face so close to Miss Lizzie's she surely must have had to breathe his air.

"I ain't going to be causing nobody no harm," the man snarled, almost like a growl.

Lizzie looked down her nose at the man, saying, "Go on about your business."

"When the time comes," he shot back, "you'll be doing exactly what I tell you. Your daddy's a fine man and you don't want people to be finding out what really happened."

"Gen'l, I insist you leave!"

The man took a backward step down from the veranda, then a second and third before he turned his back to Miss Lizzie and headed for the cabins. Lyddy ran back through the house the way she'd come, pausing only slightly in mid run to don her shoes.

"George, he comin," is all Lyddy could breathe when she saw her husband.

George cupped her arm gently and kissed her forehead. "'s alright. I know what's to be done."

***

George stood just inside the doorway of his mammy's cabin, hidden. *This man got no bi'ness back here in the cabins. Ain' no way to avoid it though. All I can do is stay ready.*

Pecan trees were planted at the borders of cane fields, some varieties for human consumption, others to grind for horse mash in the winter.

He propped his coon rifle against the wall next to the door, hoping he wouldn't have to use it…*But if'n I do, it cain' be nobody to see it.*

It wasn't the right season for picking, so George could lead the man back to the pecan grove where it would be private, if it got to be necessary. But how could he get there without someone seeing the gun? He reached for his mother's meat knife on the mantle and slid it deep in his overalls pocket. Was this the man?

The visitor strode the dirt path tall and straight-backed. No reason to be weary of nigger slaves if they knew what was good for them.

George watched the man pause momentarily to crane his neck and steal a look inside each cabin he passed. He was peering through the door of the next cabin when George baited him, "You got some bi'ness wit' my sister?"

The ruddy man jerked to a stop when he saw a slave big as a bear with a voice soft as butter. He hung a thumb in his right pocket and rolled back on his heels again. "Not t'all. Boy."

Same old white-man privileges, though George didn't know the word. What he did know was a red-faced white man obviously his junior had called him a boy. George did know the definition of demeaning.

"Sista down by the crick." It wasn't often that George got to needle a white man.

"You hear me, boy? I got no business with no slave girl."

Did the man mean to soothe him, somehow relieve him of some perceived threat he may have brought along?

George remained in the doorway of his mother's cabin. He pulled his hand away from the hidden gun and halfway motioned toward the man's shoes. "Got a string untied there, *Suh*."

The man squatted down to tie a bootlace and, when he looked up, found George's immense toes at the edge of the porch inches from his face. George made himself as tall and straight as he could.

As the man unwound from his stoop, his gaze traveled up the length of the huge slave. He crooked his neck far back and tilted it to the side before he said, "Well, now ain't you a big buck. You the lead nigger around here?"

By the mid 1800s, Louisiana adopted Law Noir, which identified the criterion to be met in the treatment of owned persons. The law prohibited the separation of family members, and set legal standards for their work hours, nourishment, punishment, and medical care.

Slaves at the Houmas knew their master provided much more than the law required. Diaries document John Burnside giving his slaves Christmas presents.

George remained silent.

"Ain't no lead nigger on Houmas land?"

He rolled back in his boots, slipped both hands back to open his waistcoat, and took a moment to glance down at the pistol he unveiled.

George was down on the ground in the stranger's face faster than he could blink twice. Like a Live Oak over a pink azalea, he bent down with his head sideways almost touching the man's shoulder, so close that someone in the distance may have thought George would whisper in his ear. Instead, George inhaled from the bottom of his lungs up to his collar bone, his belly distended like a starving child's. "Massa be back soon," he finally breathed. "You needs to be here?"

"Come with me on down to the creek, if you would please."

Slaves most likely washed their clothes in a stream behind the cabins, about three-quarters of a mile behind the big house.

Please?

He followed this man as he turned to walk toward the back of the plantation, past the rows of cabins, past the wells and the whitewashed beehive boxes, past the field where old equipment went to rust out its final years. They still walked on, past the glistening cane still with morning dew sparkling in the new sun still peeking through dark clouds.

They followed a trail where the land started to dip and sink on its way to the marsh, and further past the treed area that caught the overflow from the creek where women on their knees stopped their washing and held their breath, frozen in their hunched-over squats at the water's edge.

Including the Houmas slaves, craftsmen (Burnside Store clerks, technical positions in the mill, shipping personnel, etc.), plus approximately 150 armed guards, the acres immediately surrounding the house, the mill, and the refinery would have been a very active area, most likely exceeding 1,000 persons in that area at any given time.

The only areas that would have been private would have been those some distance behind the slave cabins or off toward the sides of the plantation.

The two men sloshed through the low-running creek and kept going through the trees that lined the opposite bank. They walked up the incline through the swampy section, and through the fields that extended another half mile toward the back of the plantation.

George stopped.

He looked to his left and his right, knowing exactly where he could step no further. A line of trees edged Houmas land.

George's toes did not pass the imaginary line, the demarcation between home and safety versus desertion and danger. Soldiers or spies could be watching, just waiting to lasso him like a pig and drag him back to the old Live Oak next to the big house and hang him by his ankles for all to take as a warning never to leave their plantation. When George thought such things, he got

all jumbled up in his head. He worked for a Massa that was good to his family. *Would he do that?*

Didn't matter much to think about such things though. George would never risk the safety and future of his family. He himself had been a nigger on the block, almost separated from his family before Miss Lizzie found out Massa intended to trade him. He was barely a man then. For all Miss Lizzie's peculiar ways, her loyalty was staunchly intact and she made Little Jack take the sixty-mile trip to the New Orleans trade quarter where an imprisoned George awaited his fate behind the ten-foot-tall masonry wall that bordered the slave encampment.

In Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul, Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, the author writes, "Of the two-thirds of a million interstate sales made by the [slave] traders in the decades before the Civil War, twenty-five percent involved the destruction of a first marriage and fifty percent destroyed a nuclear family – many of these separating children under the age of thirteen from their parents…And those are only the interstate sales."

Louisiana was the only state that prohibited the separation of family members, but most Louisiana slaveholders already practiced the standards set by the Code Noir, and sold family members only with their agreement. George would not have been auctioned on the block, though he could have been sold privately to take a respectable position with another slaveholder.

Miss Lizzie had told Little Jack, "I'll shoot you dead if you don't come back with George."

Jack tracked down Massa and told him what his daughter demanded, then rushed to retrieve George, who walked the entire distance home behind Jack and his nasty old horse, an iron collar slicing into George's neck with Fire Ball's every step.

Still, it didn't matter much to think of such things. He had been saved, after all. He wondered, though, what would life had been like if he'd been sold as a trustworthy house slave as Massa intended.

He wouldn't have Lyddy had he left Houmas. Maybe he wouldn't have had to live those days when he found his wife unwilling or unable to speak or look at him straight in the eyes.

Back then, he decided that if she could bear it, and the other wives, then the men would have to be stronger than they thought they could be. They'd have to stuff their rage and let the days pass until their wives were theirs again, when they were themselves again.

Lyddy herself had been torn from her family in South Carolina in 1850. One more reason, George figured, why she didn't resist Massa when he came calling, her desperation too fierce to not lose another family.

No! Ain' no man goin' make me lose my good life and go scratchin' for my younguns food. George repeated it to himself over and over again. He toed the line.[1]

[1] To follow events in chronological order, read the transcript of the second channeling session with Georgia O'Connor in Appendix B before proceeding. You may also use your smart phone with an app such as *Scan* to utilize the QRs (Quick Response codes) to the right for Part I and Part II and listen to the actual recordings on YouTube®, or access the YouTube® videos at http://youtu.be/3MbnS763UAs for Part I, and http://youtu.be/QW0yyxhOMfE for Part II.

Digital Library on American Slavery

Details for Liddy ([Lyddy]) in Petition 21385018

Name:	Liddy ([Lyddy])
Petition:	21385018 filed in South Carolina, 1850
Role in Petition:	
Color and Gender:	black female
Status:	slave
Identified Immediate Family:	
Economic Profile:	ASSESSMENT - 1851 - Commissioners' Report
Age:	
Birth:	
Death:	
Owned slaves?:	
Occupation:	
Skills:	
Diseases:	
Physical Attributes:	
Moral Attributes:	
Plantations	
Literate?:	
Urban?:	
Runaway?:	
Punishments Received:	
Term Slave:	
Freedom:	

I first thought George's wife's name was Leddy, but later it felt more like Liddy. On January 14, 2013, I found Digital Library on American Slavery details for Liddy ([Lyddy]) in Petition 21385018. I then changed the spelling to L-Y-D-D-Y.

Chapter Four

George still toed the property line when the white man whistled through his front teeth and two brown-haired men with long mustaches appeared from their hiding places behind cypress and oak trees George had just passed. A third light-haired man came out from the brush on a horse, a whip on his saddle horn. George knew he couldn't and shouldn't run.

He watched.

The man on a horse strode right up to George. He looked down at the whip, then over to George, back and forth. The whip's blunt edges and wide strips of unbraided leather looked like a cat-o-nine tails The Houmas slaves hadn't seen in months.

They stood in a small clearing, George nearest the red-haired, rosy-cheeked fellow he couldn't quite figure out. He didn't know if this man on a horse was good or bad, a leader or follower of this small group who formed a perimeter around George. Hands and feet always at

the ready, George waited bent-kneed and -elbowed, feet and hands spread and ready like a cat waiting on his prey's next move. Or was he the prey?

On George's right, the ruddy man still smiled. To his left and now behind him were the mustached men, one much older than the others. The white specks in his hair glistened like the dew on surrounding trees and the shin-high grass.

The rider with Little Jack's whip faced George, but the whip remained on his saddle horn as he dismounted. He threw the blackened leather reins over the horse's neck, rubbed the knob behind the animal's ear, and faced George. He popped his mount on the rump so the horse could go nibble on the tall grass, then he smiled at George, one side hiked up more than the other.

Why were they smiling? And where were the tell-tale signs of aggression? The creases between their brows? Now surrounded, George flexed his gut to feel the weight of his weapon.

The older mustached man cleared his throat and all three drifted toward the ruddy man. George waited, silent, his eyes glued to the men's feet. Now he could run back toward the big house if any man took even one quick step his way. The man with the horse, still with that crooked smile, gave George a quick nod to join them, but George stayed where he was, his toes gripping the soil like a deer readying to flee.

When the older man began to speak, George flinched. He had assumed either the ruddy man or the one with the horse was the leader. "We need you, son."

This man wasn't lanky and wasn't muscular, not tall nor short, hair neither light nor dark. He wore a long-sleeved shirt with buttons like balls, maybe polished pieces of a very light-colored wood, though George didn't know what kind of wood that might be. George knew cypress and Live Oak, magnolia, pecan, and pines, but the buttons were too light for those woods.

The leader wore a vest and a gun hung on his hip but both were old with grease and dirt. None of the men looked wealthy, nor did they appear to be drifters or thieves. The one with the ball buttons looked more like he had once lived a life of privilege, but that time had passed. How else could such a man have such buttons, or those fancy-stitched boots, though they were now misshapen, sun-bleached, and frayed.

George glanced down at his own bare feet. The tops still showed some black-man pigmentation, but the sides and toes and heels and soles were encased in the thick layer of calluses that shown white and protected his feet same as leather.

When George looked back over to the smiling ruddy man, he tried to gauge the situation a little better, but that didn't help. He stood as tall as he could and threw back his shoulders.

"Now, boy, no need to be frettin' about us boys just 'cause we white," the leader said. "We don't mean no harm to be comin' to ya."

Somehow, George believed him.

"Boy…" The ruddy man lifted a foot but stopped in mid-step when George recoiled. "…we think you can help us do some figurin' out, here." He stayed put.

The button man set a foot forward but he too stopped when George slipped into a runner's stance. He withdrew is foot and showed George his palms. After a moment, he said, "That's right, son. See ol' Red here," he pointed to the ruddy man, "Red here's from up north. Damn Yankee if ever was one but a man with a fine head, a smart mouth, and a good heart most times. Now, Red, he come down here from a place up in Lincoln's back yard."

George flinched. Most slaves couldn't read—not the older ones, anyway—they relied on Preacher to fill them in on whatever The Houmas owner chose not to discuss, and that certainly

included any news that might not advance Massa's personal cause. Make money…keep the peace…business, business, business.

But slave-talk about Lincoln had made its way to Houmas land. He was a friend? Scuttlebutt couldn't be trusted.

He say something 'bout how man oughta not be ownin' no other man, talkin' 'bout how bad the slave owners be. Massa be a good man. Good indeed. And ev'ry soul on the place love Miss Lizzie. Massa coulda drove Jack off his land if'n he'd'a catched his laughin' when he crack that ol' whip on some slave's back. Not likely though. If Massa be such a man to be good to his slaves, not so much likely he cause distress to his driver.

George had figured the man called Red was another of what the white folks in town called agitators, *come to cook up a fuss 'bout injustice and ungodliness what the slave owners be doin'.*[ii] *White folk in town say somebody need to set them Yankees straight*. The rumor had circulated throughout the region and George was not in their camp. The very last thing he wanted was to see his family and friends homeless with no way to fend for themselves. Life at The Houmas left the slaves healthy and more than fat enough. And if these agitators were trying to get George on board with their own ideas, they were sadly mistaken.

But then the man with the horse said something that caught George off guard.

"Boy, Red here wants to hear it straight from the mouth of a strong, unfree man like yourself.

"We been 'round these fields and swamps for a few days now, wantin' to find just the right nigger to talk with. Tell me, boy, how you get them scars on your back?"

Instinctively, George shot a glance over to Jack's whip, still hanging on the saddle horn with the horse now halfway across the clearing.

In the smoking room at Houmas House stands a statue many consider to be a somewhat peculiar item to find in a Deep South plantation home.

In 2005, Jim Blanchard, The Houmas historian and friend of current owner Kevin Kelly, browsed items at a third-level estate auction (*Christie's* auctioned the finer pieces in the first two). He came across this solid pewter bust of Abraham Lincoln stored in a garage, black with filth and covered with mud daubers. He bought it for the opening bid.

Jim later stripped the statue of its thick tarnish only to find that it was 1,000 troy ounces (about sixty-eight pounds), of solid silver, inscribed by Gutzon Borglum, sculptor of Mount Rushmore.

Photograph Courtesy of Kevin Kelly, Owner of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens

"I know that, boy," the man acknowledged George's unvoiced words with a lilt of apology. "Can you tell Red here how come Jack beat you like he did?"

Could be spies. Maybe these be the men white folk send 'round to plantations to figure out what niggers might be the cause for worry when them Yankees start askin' 'em to rise up against they massas and fight for they freedom. He had to decide what to say, and decide quick-like.

Outside agitators in this part of Louisiana would have operated discreetly, as large plantation owners hired guards to patrol their properties. Slaves would have been suspicious of anyone who approached them with discussions concerning their well-being or opinions, as they would not have been able to identify such persons as agitators resisting the abolition of slavery, or outside agitators hoping to recruit slaves to fight for the North when and if the time came.

Of particular concern at The Houmas were neighbors who resented how John Burnside had raised the flag of Great Britain in order to claim his Irish heritage, which precluded any actions taken against persons or properties of Irish citizenship. Though Burnside was Irish, he was not a citizen thereof. The bluff worked, and Burnside's plantation was spared from the hostilities his neighbors faced.

Additionally, Burnside may have been resented by his neighbors who knew the majority of his equities were held in the north, including Northern banks, whereas his neighbors were more vulnerable to devastating financial losses.

"What time?" George asked.

Perplexed, Red asked, "What you mean, what time?"

"What time I got whipped you wantin' to know 'bout?"

Red's gaze fell to the ground.

He had been standing tall before he looked down in shame, or sympathy, or disgust, or whatever it was that made him turn so sad he couldn't stomach the slave nigger who had just said he had been beaten so bad so many times that he couldn't say what scar came from what whipping. And these men had Jack's whip. *Jack ain goin' be 'round no more…meanin' something done become of Jack that left him separate from his pride and joy, the one thing he had to make him feel bigger than the scrawny man he was, that thing he wield with love, that make him feel big, forcin' down his fellow black man and beatin' him down for even a small wrong-doin'.*

George would take a hundred beatings from Jack or anybody like him, black or white, before he'd give up his home.

The white men remained quiet for some time, then it seemed like they didn't care anything about the answer.

"Boy," the round-button man said, "See, what Red here's tryin' to find out for hisself is if you niggers is ready to fend for y'self."

When George shook his head, the white men nodded to each other.

"We got no quarrel with you," Red said, "none t'all."

George heard the grass swish and turned to face the lead man fully. His shoulder and arm muscles went softer and he allowed the man to walk right up and put half an arm on his shoulder, his hand a reassuring *tap, tap* at the base of George's neck where it met the fat muscles of his back. George listened to his breath wheezing through his nostrils like a horse on the run. *Better now, better now,* he kept telling himself, then *no, no, no*. Outwardly, he had only shook his head so fast he made himself dizzy. *Ain' no way you gettin' me to say nothin' 'bout Massa. Ain' nobody goin' make me say nothin' goin' put my fam'ly on the road like them poor white folk goin' farm to farm lookin' for work but settlin' for slave leftovers just to get some food in they younguns belly.*

"This nigger ain't going nowhere." The man who had been on the horse still smiled. A moment later, he tipped his head in the direction of the big house.

Could it be that Red and these other white folk be decent? They know Massa? That why he come to the big house first? To talk to Massa, not to make sho he ain' home?

He had seen something in their eyes. Something almost kind.

Long chains of sweat flowed through George's hair and down his face and neck, but his heart beat slower and his shoulders came down from his neck.

He took two steps backward and bolted.

Chapter Five

George ran faster than he thought a big man could.

He thought of his family. Lyddy would be waiting. She'd be cleaning in and around their home with brisk motions to help keep her mind occupied. What if the ugly whitie brought some ill will to her husband?

Lyddy was in her little garden clipping herbs and heard George panting behind her. She stayed on her haunches and without looking up, told her husband, "S'pose you be headed on out to the mill for some sawdust for Massa's ice be comin' in tomorrow on the rail. You know how that ice be needin' a fresh coat befo' it go in the bin."

"Yes ma'am," George replied. He inhaled a giant breathe of rosemary aroma then said, "It's a good day to haul in some sawdust. Fine, fine day."

He heard his wife exhale a lungful of relief.

No worries, my sweet magnolia. But they would all be safe now. When the Yankee soldiers came around The Houmas, Massa wouldn't have any worries about his niggers being

* * * * *

At dusk, George went to talk to Mammy about the day. He pulled a long piece of nut sedge and crunched the stem between his molars to release the rummy sap while he thought and

talked, and thought some more. He held the grass in place with his teeth, twirled it and wrapped it around his fingers, and examined its frayed end, all quiet.

"Now, what you goin' do, boy," his mother finally asked.

He threw the long stem beneath the porch and looked to the stars.

"Seem like you got two things you could do. You could go tell Massa 'bout them boys, make yourself sure to be on his good side, what with reportin' the happenin' right off the end of it. Or you can be keepin' it to yourn own self if you thinkin' on how Massa might not take to strangers comin' on Houmas land, and you could stay right clear of gettin' involved with them men sos not to have Massa have questions tumblin' 'round his head makin' up stories 'bout what you might be listenin' to if'n it was somebody wantin' to cause him and his some harm. Lawdy, Lawdy, boy."

George swayed side to side. All he could do was watch a mongrel dog that came sniffing around the side of the cabin, her teats hanging long, low, and only half full.

* * * * *

The sun had already set the next day when George went to say goodnight to Mammy. She was shelling peas on her front porch when she told him Massa came to talk a bit. "Massa come by, sayin' it's a good time for family to be family. Didn' much know what he talkin' bout. Say somethin' 'bout some men friends you been talkin' to."

"Ain' nothin' need be done," she told her son. "Massa be sayin' how he be so proud of his niggers, not callin' nobody out by name. 'Yes ma'am, proud as proud could be,' Massa say."

"I'm goin' home," was all George said when he hopped down off of Mammy's porch.

Some historians believe one reason John Burnside was so good to his slaves was because he immigrated to America with only pennies in his pocket, and therefore had a core understanding of the day-to-day realities of living in severe poverty.

Also, Burnside was known to have been a man with a very strong sense of commitment to task. It didn't matter what position a man held, as long as he took care of his responsibilities.

He would never have to make that decision. When Massa got back home from his trip to town the next day, he handed off his horse to Ramba and strode to George's cabin.

When Lyddy answered the door, George saw her shudder. He did the same when he realized this was likely the owner's only nighttime visit with some business in his mind other than carnal, so George stepped out and sat at the edge of the porch with his master, their feet dangling in unison.

"You done good, boy." Massa gave George a strong double-pat on his back. "You know, boy, it's not too much of an easy thing, running 150,000 acres of slaves and cane. I invested real heavy in you and yours, all these niggers out here got put on this here place and my pockets were about emptied. I bought the best niggers I could find. Healthy ones. I figure myself quite a learned man when it comes to picking good niggers, and I always get the best.

"Now, if them Yanks come in here trying to tell me I got no business owning another man, I'd have to tell 'em niggers ain't no men. Hell, George, Miss Lizzie cares about what her niggers are feeling. Business is business to me, but my daughter would sure hate to lose Lyddy, George.

"Y'know, some fella came see me in town a while back, wanting to know if I heard something about Little Jack. Course, I just shook my head real easy like. I straightened my jacket, standing tall like you know I do, George, and told the man outright I had no information at all.

"George, I can't have no nigger driver of mine making my investments so they're laid up, or just waiting to find a way to run or steal. Understand me, George?"

When he stood to leave, George couldn't look in his eyes. "Yassa."

George puffed up with satisfaction in knowing he had been the kind of man and slave that his owner could take some pride in. He headed home to tell Lyddy but when he opened his cabin door Shanda ran into his arms. "Miss Lizzie give us nine dresses! And underskirts, too!"

Lizzie had taken Lyddy by the hand and pulled her upstairs to her room, jabbering away about how she wanted to go shopping for some new dresses, so she had to make room, and she was so excited about a blue dress with crimped sleeves she had seen in New Orleans a few weeks prior, and another blue one with a spider-web-thin lace around the neck, blue like midnight, and another green one, and a red one that looked sinfully wicked with a plunging neckline that Lyddy would have to fix up with some taffeta to keep so much bosom from showing.

Miss Lizzie and Lyddy were small like the adolescent girls, delicate of frame and not too meaty. Nine were enough to go around for a good number of slave girls.

Both women gathered up all the fine dresses and walked back to Lyddy's cabin. Shanda was more often with Lizzie than not—had been since the day of her birth—so she followed with two petticoats Lizzie draped around her. They all laughed at the short ghost with the black face and glowing teeth.

Lyddy pulled George aside. "Lizzie done grabbed hold of me real tight and she say, "Oh, Lyddy, you just can't ever *ever* leave me. Say you won't, Lyddy, say you won't."

She nodded and George took her in his arms to tell her what all happened that day.

George and many other men slaves had no misgivings about how Massa felt about them. They knew Massa didn't love his slaves like he loved white folk. They knew Massa was all about business. Just business. It was Miss Lizzie that made him take on some softer feelings, he now a mature man running immense plantations. But even before then, Massa was not a bad man, and because he took care of their every need, the slave men had made a conscious decision

to stuff their anger about the taking of their women. They stuffed it so deep that, if ever it were unleashed, they would find themselves and their whole family homeless, the men hung or shot for an uprising borne from a lifetime of resentment. George couldn't help but think about Lyddy that last time when she stayed to herself for two days. And the first time, before they were married, and the day that first fair child was born. Even the molasses-black children were born with light skin that sometimes took weeks to color up, but only George and Lyddy knew they hadn't shared a bed before they jumped the broom, or even before Preacher waved a cross over them.

It was the women who were strong as iron beneath ebony skin smooth as magnolia petals, always ready to discolor or fade, but too tough to ever tear. No, George would do nothing that would endanger Lyddy nor any aspect of their lives.

For now, he'd just soothe his wife.

Chapter Six

Lyddy cringed days later when she went up to dress Miss Lizzie and she wouldn't get out of bed. These pitiful phases came and went and though Lyddy's heard bled each time, she knew why Lizzie withdrew from the world and now muttered unintelligibly though she had jibber-jabbered up a storm when she pulled Lyddy upstairs, then giggled in glee as she cleared her armoire of nine dresses.

In Mary Chestnut's *A Diary from Dixie*, Chestnut described her visit with the daughter of the owner of Houmas land:

"There is a gentle dignity about her which is very attractive; her voice is low and sweet, and her will is iron. She is exceedingly well informed, but very quiet, retiring, and reserved. Indeed, her apparent gentleness almost amounts to timidity."

That gay, happy world no longer existed not for Lizzie, but for Lyddy's ostracized daughter, a crushing blow for a child so accustomed to being the curly-blonde lady's girl doll.

Lyddy lamented about what Shanda faced but couldn't help but be proud of her own position, proud to be the only person black or white that Miss Lizzie allowed into her room these days when she soaked her sheets

with sweat and tears from dreams that relived haunting memories of years past. It warmed her insides to know she could console Miss Lizzie with a gentle stroke to brush away her drenched locks, a hand to hold, a soft hum when she rested her head on Lyddy's lap. Once in a while, Massa would send for Lyddy to come up to the house and tend to his daughter at night and even on Sundays. Lyddy was happy to do it, ever since it started the day after Lizzie's first menstruation. Lizzie was older now, past her debut season and old enough to be married—old enough in years though not in emotional capacity—still, when she or her father beckoned, Lyddy jogged to the house to be at her side.

Sometimes Lizzie would be just acting like a spoiled brat, like that day she called for Lyddy to come make her some eggs and cheese grits, and Lyddy told her and Massa to best not be calling on her for such a thing at such a time. But at other times, Lyddy left her own family for long periods, left George to tend to the young while she stayed at the big house. Sometimes Miss Lizzie continued with those phases on into weeks and Lyddy found herself cooking up one of those double-butter pound cakes with caramel icing. Miss Lizzie could eat a hog's piece of that cake, little though she was.

Times like now, when Miss Lizzie needed her so truly, Lyddy counted her blessings. She had a good family led by a proud man held even higher in esteem by most slaves after word got around about George's talk with the white men. But that Red, she still didn't like him. It wasn't until suppertime that he had come back from the tree line. She had watched Red from the kitchen in the big house, watched him approach from the direction of cabin row. She continued to cook until her curiosity took over and she snuck through the house to keep an eye on the man as he came around the side of the house, then mounted his horse to leave. *That man mean trouble.*

What trouble might be coming she didn't know. She couldn't quite wholly believe everything George and Mammy said about everyone being safe now. She had a feeling. She searched her mind. Was she missing something? That was all Lyddy could focus on, all she could think about until she smelled Miss Lizzie's cake burning.

* * * * *

After the day's work was done and George's younger children were asleep, Ramba came home and motioned for his father to come out for a talk. When Massa had returned from town earlier, Ramba had taken his horse around back to the stables and started untacking him. A long tube had been tied onto the saddle, and Ramba left it alone, didn't want to mess with it. He dried the horse, combed him out and picked his hooves, and then fed all the horses before he returned to Massa's saddle to retrieve the roll. Just as the leather strings released it and the paper started to unwind, Massa came asking for it.

It was a map of the State of Louisiana, but unlike any other. Census data was printed on it—who owned what plantations up and down the river, their acreage, and the population of each, divided into three categories: White, free men of color, and nigger slaves.

Massa took the map from Ramba, rolled it tight again, and tapped it against his thigh as he told Ramba he had a job for him. Ramba was to get his father after the others were asleep and go to the mill to fill a few burlap sacks with cypress dust. Then they were to bring the sacks and the map up into the attic of the big house, bury it in the rafters, and cover the entire area with sawdust.

"It's very important now, Ramba. I know your pappy raised you right, raised you to be a damn good worker, and now you're an honest young man who has to do his part to keep his family safe."

Ramba nodded and fetched his father.

George knew the map must have something to do with the men he talked to in the clearing and what Massa told Ramba in the barn. It occurred to him that these might be good times for black men to be slaves, not free. If Yankees had ill intents for slave owners, a black man enslaving his own kind could be in a very dangerous position.

George and Ramba headed back to the cabin and, again, Lyddy worked on her cabin solemnly.

"How Miss Lizzie like her cake?" George asked. Lyddy gave him one shallow nod.

If you ever get a chance to visit the grand home on the grounds of what was once the land of the Houmas Indians, you will see the map George and Ramba hid.

When current owner Kevin Kelly bought the neglected plantation in 2003, he returned the house nearly perfectly to its original style and condition. During that renovation, construction workers discovered the map. It was hidden in the attic, covered in a thick layer of sawdust.

As you enter the front door of Houmas House, with your first step past the threshold, you will see it hanging on the left wall in the main hall.

* * * * *

Next day around about middle of the morning, Massa rode out to the fields for George. "Come on up for a ride."

Together they road in Massa's cart, both men on the seat, side by side. Strange, George noticed, how nobody on the road or in town raised an eyebrow to stare at a nigger riding elbow-

to-elbow with a white man. Nobody gawked. A couple men gave Massa a half-smile and a touch to their hat. One lady even smiled.

Massa guided the horse back behind the general store. He hopped down and told George to follow him next door to the livery stable where Old Mac, the blacksmith, stood in a tack stall with three other men George recognized as owners of plantations between The Houmas and the spot where traders met beside the river and auctioneers jabbered their fast talk to sell cattle.

George had never seen Mister Mac anywhere but near his anvil, where he always continued his work through visiting sessions with customers and friends. From the back of the shed-row, George watched the wavy heat lines above the coals, how they made things on the other side look like they were wiggling.

Massa was talking now, one foot propped on a hay bale, one hand tucked in his pocket and the other continuously adjusting his pipe between his teeth. "It's all right, boys," Massa told Old Mac and the three men, "George here's a fine buck, ain't got nothing but the best wishes for the people at The Houmas. Black or white, right, George?"

George nodded and stared at the top of his feet, away from the glares.

"It's George here that took care of that paper for us, ain't that right George?"

Another nod.

"And his boy, Ramba, he's a good nigger, too, ain't that right, George?"

George glanced up to see the men exchange brow-lifted looks, but then their jaws relaxed a bit. He smiled at the thought of his master having influence over other landowners.

The sun was still rising above the buildings behind the livery stable and cut a ray through the open doors and onto the men, making them squint. Raising his hand to the sun like a salute, the man nearest George announced, "High time we get going. Gettin' late."

The man led Massa, George, and the other two landowners out the back doors, down the alley, and through the rear entrance of a building some fifty yards down. A short, dark hall ran in front of George as he stepped in. He followed his master up a steep staircase to his left. It twisted up to the next floor and when George reached the final few steps near the top, scantily clad ladies shot their hands up to cover their open mouths. Then they scattered into their rooms, all the time clutching bare bosoms and corseted waists.

The white men entered the room nearest the staircase and George followed his master, so he wouldn't look like be the big black man he was in a room full of whites.

They all waited, saying nothing. George stood silently behind Massa, he the only man with a big nigger standing behind him. He hunched down, trying to look smaller, and lifting his gaze high enough to look the white folk straight in the face. Little Jack had beat that insolence out of him long ago.

Minutes passed before other men trickled in. Massa thanked them for, "Coming to discuss this issue that was going to determine our fate." A familiar voice said, "Surely," and George jerked up his head to see Red, the man on the horse, and the two mustached men from the clearing. They gave George a chin-out hello, then talk about ransacking and looting, and other unspeakables to the women folk, filled the room, heavy as the pipe and cigar smoke.

"They wouldn't dare."

"Heard it with my own two ears."

"Not here, though, not in this land…we're too far away for them to come!"

"That might be so," Massa mumbled through his front teeth, still biting down on his pipe stem, "that may surely be true."

A man who lived across the river pointed to a tall fair-haired man who looked too young to be a plantation owner. "Wilshire here, he got a plan, ain't that right…tell 'em, Wilshire.

Wilshire, almost as meek as George, cleared his throat three times before he finally spoke. "Seems to me, seems to me, seems we don't have a great deal of choice in the matter, gentlemen. None of you men want to see your sons go to battle, don't want them to leave their mothers, fathers that need them to stay and protect their holdings but, if those Yanks come down past Georgia, the Florida lands are right there, and they may well push westward past West Florida and right into Louisiana."

For an hour, the men did their best to convince each other that scenario would never come to pass. Massa finally gave a short cough and said, "All right. Then the question of what to do in the face of what we believe to be an unlikely potentiality will remain on the table until if and when West Florida is impeached."

The men shook hands, slapped backs, and tipped their hats. A couple even gave George a pat on the back and nodded "Boy" on their way out.

* * * * *

George and his master drove back toward their home in silence until they were quite far out of earshot. "You understand?"

George wasn't really sure if he did understand. He wasn't as confused as he was perplexed, but he wasn't at all sure if he understood. He believed he had passed some unofficial test, and he was also sure that Massa hadn't meant his experience on the back acres behind the woods to be the heart-throbbing scene it had become. George had reacted exactly as he should have, had been ready to fight or flee if the men in the clearing tried to make a move toward him or tried to solicit George to make Massa look or sound like an unfair or even evil slave owner.

He couldn't quite put things together yet so he shrugged to his owner's question and rested his chin on his chest, occupying himself with wonderings about how deep the sink holes and gullies on the road might be. He didn't want to think of any of these white folks' business at all, except he knew that this white-folk business was also slave business. It was, George was coming to realize, the very essence of the slaves' existence. Again he thought about the raggedy children of the whites who followed the harvest season from Louisiana on through West Florida, picking cane here, cotton and onions a little north, and citrus in Florida.

The pittance they gets cain' give they fam'ly even a roof over they heads. Sure they free, but what that cost? No…better to accept we be property and have full bellies, warm beds, shoes on our younguns' feet, and the little raucous us slaves do down by the river late Saturday nights, kickin' up heels, singin' happy songs—not what all they sing in the fields, no songs of woe.

George found himself shaking his head.

"Never you mind," his master told him. "Just as well you don't know. You don't know, you can't tell. When this thing that's happening comes, you'll know how important all this is. Just promise me one thing, you must promise me that you will protect Miss Lizzie like you protect your own folk."

Of course, George didn't need to be told, and there was no need for a promise, other than to soothe the worries of a father.

"Precious thing," Massa said half under his breath.

"Yassa, precious thing." George agreed partly because Miss Lizzie really was the sweet thing she was, though she was certainly privileged and had every ingredient that goes into spoiling, but also because Lizzie had been true to herself. It wasn't Miss Lizzie's sweet disposition that kept George and his owner's minds so focused on her wellbeing. Miss Lizzie's

tortured soul left her withdrawn and so despondent that not even Lyddy's pound cake could help sometimes. That concern haunted them all.

Owner and owned travelled the remainder of their journey with no other words. George stared at the road until he heard Ramba greet his owner with what George knew would be a big-toothed, "Yassa." The smile would be wide and contagious, and exactly what George needed to see. The visit to the bordello had been one of great mystery with some measure of excitement, still uneasiness rumbled George's gut. The men he met in the clearing were on good terms with his master, George had already understood that much, but it was what he *didn't* know that ricocheted in his head like billiard balls.

George thumped his head with a soft fist. Billiards. No one spoke the word around Lizzie. The mention of it triggered that awful memory that plagued Miss Lizzie and everyone close her.

George was not yet a man when it happened.

Chapter Seven

George was barely a couple handfuls of years older than Lizzie, she still not tall enough to see over the balustrade. Fine, fine day it was. Faraway clouds dotted the southern horizon, but the mass of that deep blue South Louisiana sky was blemished only by a sun so hot it shone white.

It was Easter, and George watched a gaggle of children on the lawn. Holidays at The Houmas meant aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, cousins congregated for at least a week.

Young George watched from his perch on a limb of the old Live Oak that extended from its trunk only five feet above the ground and too fat to put his arms around. The branch looked like a giant arm, its elbow resting on the ground some twenty feet out, making an easy climb up its length to the place George loved to sit.

So George sat in his favorite spot on his favorite tree, watching the children on the lawn between him and the big house, and listening to the young men having a gay time in the garconierre behind him.

Lizzie appeared on the second-floor veranda.

She struggled to carry her load of darts, heavy lawn darts, each with a nose of over two pounds of iron pointy like a mammoth bullet with colorful feathers attached to the opposite end.

George ran as fast as he could. "Miss Lizzie, chile! Lizzie, hold on and wait for George. He comin' help!"

George's tree was only thirty yards from the house, but his great strides could not come quickly enough. Nor did those of the adults who fanned themselves on the front veranda around the corner from Lizzie. They heard George shouting and stood to see him running toward the back door while pointing at Lizzie. "Darts! Darts!" George hadn't yet reached the staircase when he heard one child's brief grunt, then the screams of a dozen others.

The dart had almost missed. It pierced the left of the boy's neck and he had fallen face down on the hidden treat he had sighted, tucked away in the azalea bushes that had just the week before come into bloom.

George slid to a stop. Lizzie was still peeking through the railing posts to see the outcome of her game. The other two darts lay at her feet.

He stooped down, taking baby steps. "Lizzie," he said in his gravelly boy-man voice. "Lizzie. Baby girl.."

He lifted the tiny child in all her layers of petticoat and taffeta. He cradled her. Such a beautiful child. Golden locks. Cherry lips. She smiled up at George, eyes twinkling. "It be okay, chile. But it be time for yourn nap, see?"

The white folk had turned the corner of the veranda and frozen in their tracks. Now they watched this black boy take the child into the house. They followed George into Lizzie's bedroom, where he lay her on a tiny bed and removed her shiny white Easter shoes.

* * * * *

Massa heard the screams from his library and rushed out onto the lawn, falling to his knees at the site of the boy. He looked up to the second-floor balcony just in time to see George's arms scooping up his daughter.

The iron bullet protruded from the boy's neck, yet only a single red dribble had found its way to the ground. It seemed so innocuous that Massa held his breathe and closed his eyes as he turned the boy over. When his lids lifted, he saw eyes clouded over with the gray mist of death.

* * * * *

Earlier in the day, while the sun was still low in the eastern sky, Massa had placed a half-barrel of water and apples on the ground where the boy now lay so they could take turns dropping darts from the second-floor veranda, hoping to stab a sweet red apple for a late-morning snack.

Lizzie, the older children would later tell Massa, had been fussy about not being allowed to play the game. "You're too little," they had told her. She had begged for a while and then sat on the edge of a nearby chaise longue, where she tapped her feet and watched with a pink bottom lip poking out.

Had the children returned the darts to their proper place? Yes. Had they left Lizzie in the game room alone? No, she followed them outside, where they appeased her with one of the unstabbed apples.

* * * * *

It had been no one's fault, yet the scene had replayed itself in George's mind every day for years. Even now he often recalled it when he saw Miss Lizzie in the distance, when she appeared so small and defenseless.

George figured the incident was remembered too keenly for Miss Lizzie as well. She started having those bad spells the summer before her debut season. It wasn't until then that she truly comprehended what she had done as a child.

Lizzie had always believed what her father said when he replaced George beside her little-girl bed and she asked what game the children were playing. After George called out to her on the balcony the other children had scattered.

"Hide and seek?" she had asked her father.

"Yes, sweet child," her father said. "Hide and seek."

View from veranda on the east side of house to the 425-year-old Live Oak. In the background is one of two identical octagonal garconierres that flank the main house. The boys George heard would have socialize there because it was improper for young men to fraternize in the main house with young ladies there. Tour guides at Houmas House Plantation escort guests to the second-floor balcony where the accident occurred.

Above: View from second-floor veranda on east side straight down to azalea bushes.

Below: View from 425-year-old tree to east veranda.

Chapter Eight

Most of the visitors had packed up and were long gone before Lizzie awoke from her nap. Massa cuddled her and she asked where everybody went.

When I first wrote this section, I became confused. My first impression was that George was telling me Lizzie's mother had died, but it didn't feel right. I was also feeling like I was being told that Lizzie's mother had left her family and returned to her home in South Carolina.

In the end, the words I settled on felt best but not so much that I was wholly certain. George had not included all the residents of the big house in his story. George implies this when he describes the scene at the front door of the big house, when he explains how Lyddy told the ruddy man that only the children were home, which most likely tells us at least one child other than Lizzie resided there.

"A boy had an accident and they all had to leave," he explained.

"Can I see his booboo?"

Massa held her tight. "Naw, child."

When Lizzie buried her face in her hair, her father knew what to expect.

"Why won't Mother come home?"

Master wrapped her in the *duvet* and rocked back and forth in the way parents do to soothe their children.

"Why won't my mommy come home?"

"Well, now Lizzie girl, remember how Mother had to go to South Carolina? To manage our home there?"

"Papa make her come manage wif me," she pouted.

Massa hoped many years would pass before she learned the word *desertion*. For now, all he could do was cuddle little Lizzie until she drifted off, then sit beside her to gaze as her chest rose and fell.

When Lizzie's breath deepened and slowed, he patted his breast pocket. It was another of his wife's telegraph messages.

Though Massa allowed his wife to return to her former life, her departure was more a banishment. She would leave The Houmas without her daughter, Lizzie would not go with her father when he traveled to Charleston for business, and Elizabeth would see her child only if she returned. But Lizzie didn't know her father was managing the situation as he was, never telling the child of the many telegraph messages Elizabeth sent for holidays, birthdays, or for no reason at all except to beg a response about her child's welfare. She had been back in Charleston for two years without a word to know her child was still alive when Mr. Poche told Massa he had seen Elizabeth while in South Caroline.

Elizabeth had lived at The Houmas for less than three years before she announced the mosquitoes and sweltering August heat were too much for her. Really, though, Massa had known for years that his wife wanted to return to the home they had made together as newlyweds. Elizabeth needed Charleston, its parties, visits that lasted no longer than a single evening. The remote locations of the plantations to each other, as well as their distance from New Orleans, necessitated visits often last for over a week, sometimes a whole month. Elizabeth

relished the debut season, but it was just too difficult to manage with such distances to traverse for parties. And Charleston was the hub of Southern society.

Even before the newlyweds left South Carolina, Elizabeth was unsettled, unable to remain quiet. The only reason she practiced the fine tufting and feathering required for the makings of the elaborate needlepoint creations, the only reason she practiced any type of art at all was to fulfill the expectation of Southern ladies.

While in Baton Rouge, Mr. Poche, owner of a nearby plantation, had collected this new message and delivered it to Massa.

Massa's hands were still trembling as he unfolded Elizabeth's standard Easter greetings and pleas.

Chapter Nine

After Lizzie had settled down for her nap with Massa at her side, George hustled back to the boy. Someone had turned him almost fully onto his back—as far as the protruding iron dart and its stiff feathers would allow.

Lyddy and the other house-servant girls collected linens and wrapped the boy like a cocoon, and George placed the limp body in the laps of his bereaved parents. By the time servants finished packing their carriage, red had already soaked through the layers of linen. Sticky, drying blood saturated his mother's dress, cool as it touched her skin.

When George returned to his own home in the late afternoon, his younger brother had brought him a cloth to remove the boy's blood from George's forehead and the tinged nappiness at his hairline. Sticky red…sticky red…sticky red…

Inside the game room, guests may actually handle the darts atop one of two identical chests. Their checkered appearance derives from a mosaic of marble blocks the owners collected on their journeys abroad.

The river wind blew heavy in the trees that morning, a spring day that celebrated the death and rising of the white folks' god. Carnival season's life had ended abruptly with Ash Wednesday, the beginning of a period quite the opposite of carnival's abandon. Since Ash Wednesday, the tone of Catholics had morphed into one of the solemn penance of Lent, then, rather than allow Easter to bring its normal relief and joy, it brought only grief.

George had watched Lizzie closely since that time, as did many others, including her father and Lyddy. Lyddy had been the servant who awoke Lizzie from her nap and took her into the kitchen to keep company. From then on, Lizzie allowed only Lyddy to tend to her. George shrugged his shoulders at this new dependence on Lyddy, the only appreciable difference in Lizzie after the accident. When would the reality of that Easter Day settle on her soul?

A deep crevice filled with black haze. She became a woman. The red again. Scenes once forgotten.

* * * * *

After that Easter, George's responsibility had shifted. Those at The Houmas knew Massa fetched his most trusted slave from the cane fields when someone in the house needed muscle or a talking-to, but to the town folk George was sub-human until the day he took Miss Lizzie to see her dress-maker and stroll through the shops.

George heard a tiny squeal when Lizzie saw a purple velvet hat with an ostrich feather in the milliner's big window, heard her giggle as she passed through the shop door, reached for coins in her handbag and pointed to the hat. But then her face drained its joy and she could only stare at the coins in her hand.

Once she exited the shop, George saw she had lost the pink in her cheeks. When he scrunched up his forehead, Lizzie answered, "Not for me."

In George's pocket was almost two dollars, tips from taking care of Massa's guests' peculiar or extraordinary requests. When he pressed the coins into Lizzie's hand and she threw her arms up high around his shoulders and pulled him down to her for a hug. The white passersby pulled George off of Lizzie in an instant and tackled him to the ground.

Lizzie screamed. She beat the men on their backs and shoulders and George melted with horrid pleas of *stop* in the voice of that child at Easter, the one that asked for her mother.

George fell to the ground. The kicks now hard, the voices so loud and their disgust so consuming that the men didn't stop until Lizzie wedged herself between the brutes and screamed, "Nooooo!"

Her body slithered toward the ground at the sight.

George caught her crumbling body as it sank down toward him, watched her eyes roll upward before her lids closed. He cradled her as he stood, scooping her up as he had so long ago and laid her across his lap on the front bench of their carriage.

* * * * *

Later that evening, Massa summoned George to the big house. George found him at Lizzie's bedside again. "Laudanum," Mass told his trusted slave. Then he pulled two silver dollars from his pocket and extend his hand. George shook his master's hand but then stepped backward and shook his head.

There wasn't much for a slave to spend his money on, and the money he got for those peculiar tasks and errands wasn't earnings he could really brag about. George didn't even share those experiences with Lyddy. The only reason he told Ramba about a few was to help him in his dealings with guests after George passed down that part of his job, when he fetched or put away their horses and carriages and such requests might be made.

One guest required his shoes to be shined with olive oil. Another had his horse readied for a gallop into town in the middle of the night. (He always returned with a strong odor of cheap perfume.) Another tipped George, and now Ramba, with a bottle of whiskey, having sent him to retrieve a full case that was to be quietly slid beneath the guest's bed.

And at least three of the young male guests, those relegated to sleeping in the garconierre, were generous with tips to keep secret their trips down cabin alley. George often trailed them to make sure their concubine were willing. George wondered if they had been paid, if so how much, and whether they had to be convinced.

But George always heard the sounds of a woman's pleasure. He would wait under windows until he heard a masculine groan, then circle back around and greet them at the front door. It was wasted effort, George knew. Had any of the females struggled and cried out for help, George could have done nothing to help and nothing to let Massa know a slave had been abused in such a way. Massa himself was a gentle man, even with the female slaves, even with Lyddy, and supposed other Southern gentlemen were as kind to his female property as he.

Chapter Ten

"Union folk from up north comin' down to free slaves," George had told his fellow slaves after his trip to the bordello. George loved his home, and knew his fellow slaves were content—content in the only way a slave might understand—and felt grateful—in only a slave sort of way—that they lived at The Houmas. But did others feel that way?

Their replies had been slow at first. Then concerted gasps followed by a barrage of questions.

"What we goin' do?"

"Run! Tha's what we goin' do!"

"Where?" was the last word, and it came from George's own lips.

William Howard Russell's *My Diary North and South*:

Each negro gets five pounds of pork a week, and as much Indian corn bread as he can eat, with a portion of molasses, and occasionally they have fish for breakfast… On the borders of the forest, the negroes are allowed to plant corn for their own use, and sometimes they have an overplus, which they sell to their master.

"You ain' goin' be needin' to run," George continued. "Ain' goin' be nobody chasin' niggers no more. We all be free to walk and goes anywhere we wants." He winked at Ramba.

He had prepared his son, told him what he'd heard at the bordello, and needed his son to play his part to help The Houmas niggers fully understand what they faced.

Ramba said, "Us here at Houmas could walk right on out of here, leave our homes behind and go find jobs like any free white man, own they own home, farm they own land."

George smiled.

It was then that the females spoke up. "What jobs?"

"Buy land? Wit' what?"

"What we goin' buy food wit'?"

"What you goin' buy seed wit'? And shoes for yourn chirrins?"

No. No. No. The women shook their heads fast and wide. They pushed the children toward home, and husbands followed. They would remain on Houmas land and work just as they did now. They would not reap the financial reward for themselves but for the owner. What would they call Massa if he were no longer their master?

When it came to big decisions, it would be the women's level heads that prevailed. The slave population though appearing patriarchal was guided by the womenfolk, strong slave women who endured what to men was unthinkable, women who could just as well get a lashing if they refused a white man, if they rebuffed his advances, if a wife thought a pretty black girl cut her eyes in too friendly a way to a husband or son, if a female slave *acted* like a woman.

Of course, there was no Houmas woman of the house. Ma'am Elizabeth had long ago fled and now in her stead was this child-woman incapable of taking her proper place in her own home or chastising a slave woman.

Chapter Eleven

But George needed more. More agreement. More determination. Something that would make the decision to stay one that couldn't be challenged.

It was late October, the river breeze strong and chilly when Mammy got down with a cold and George made his plan.

He waited for Massa to return from town. Daylight was fleeing and Massa would be home soon so George waited with Ramba to settle Massa's horse once he returned. Again he prepped his son.

In the darkness under Old Gentlemen, George and Ramba watched as Massa turned his horse from the river road and posted down the shadowy lane, acorns crackling under the animal's hooves.

Before he could lift a leg to dismount, Massa saw the deep creases in George's forehead. "George? Everything alright?"

George hung his head. "Yessir, just comin' give Ramba a bit o' help so he can go visit wit' Mammy."

When Massa lifted a brow, Ramba said, “She down wit’ the cold.”

That long-ago time when Massa had gone to see Mammy on her on her sick bed, and he saw her shoes were open around the toes, he had reprimanded Little Jack for not providing the slaves with proper shoes. Jack had hauled in the Boudreaux family to measure feet and every slave got two pair, but now those were worn and loose at the soles.

Massa wrapped his reins around the hitching post and nodded toward the slave cabins.

George and Ramba followed. They watched Massa again kneel beside Mammy’s bed and say, “George, see the Boudreaux’ and have them measure feet again.

George returned with the Boudreaux’ the following morning and found the free- and slave-born shoulder to shoulder, just as he had hoped.

As before, slave men again watched their women weep and children hoop, holler, and squeal at their good fortune. Near the front of the crowd, George saw a free-born woman jab a finger at her husband’s face. “How you goin’ get shoes for yourn chillins? And clothes and coats for wintertime? How we goin’eat?”

* * * * *

When the time came for the slaves to decide what they would do if the Yankees came and told them they should leave their master simply because they could, just as in the world of the whites, the men were the only to vote. Lyddy and George had seen for years the puzzling chain of command among privileged whites. Through closed doors he had heard the muffled words of wives wielding great power but never in public.

Much different from the motivations of white men when making crucial decisions regarding the wellbeing of their families, the slaves did not come to their decisions based on financial advancement. Theirs was a decision that reflected the wisdom of their women – the

heart-string endeavor to provide their children with the protection they needed. Though no one voiced their deep-seated fear, just under their skin lay the vision of those white migrant workers sometimes with only a skinny mule to carry a raggedy chest and rough blankets when they came to help with the cane harvest.

Slaves in South Louisiana had also heard the rumors of folk that lived around the swampland, their skin not white and not black. The men could barely provide for their families and depended on the generosity of nearby whites to buy the linens their women sewed, the mullet fish they caught for crab bait, the vegetables from their gardens. And they relied upon the pity the rich felt for them…or maybe it wasn't pity; maybe it was guilt for having too much and wasting more. The gratuities came in the form of favors asked: one of "too many piglets for a hog to feed" was given to the man who carted in fresh vegetables from his small plot of land cleared in the woods between where the river runs and the bayous connect; an entire bolt of linen was delivered to the seamstress who required only a few yards to make new aprons, the extra fabric to be sewn into clothing for their own use or to sell to other rich white folk.

To the slaves on Houmas land, those dark white folks had it no better off than themselves, and it was improbable that rich white folk would practice such benevolence with niggers even if one could somehow obtain a piece of land to work and a house to shelter his children. How would they feed their children, where would they sleep, would they be worse off than the migrant workers, now that hordes of niggers all needed the same jobs?

* * * * *

It had been only a week ago that old man Fryoux had come with more elixir for a slave who'd fallen from the refinery rafters and sank into the edge of the sugar mountain. Only the

toes on one foot had broken in the hard earth, but the large sugar crystals had stripped his legs and arms of their skin.

When old Fryoux brought the elixir, he also brought Francois, who had shown up a week earlier after being freed from a lead mine in southern Illinois and made his way down south. His ancestors came from Saint-Domingue, so Fryoux asked if he wanted to visit with his fellow Africans at Houmas.

Francois, like Paw, was more French than anything, but he wanted to go anyway, as long as he didn't have to stay on the plantation. Paw Fryoux' son, Jules, had rescued Francois from the woods after he saw the teen staring at Paw's fat cucumbers, giant purple eggplants, and crimson tomatoes that weighed down their vines.

Jules had taken him by the hand and led him home, hollaring, "Come, Paw, come quick!

Paw had run out from his afternoon coffee in the kitchen and waved the two inside. "Maw, we got some comp'ny."

Francois wouldn't be the first ex-slaves she cooked for. Shrimp stew, fried eggplant, *couche couche,* and *cayai*, the man ate it all while Paw and Jules went to find Cousin LaFleur. He a widower, Cousin's children were all grown and he had a room to spare.

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Paw and Francois had walked to the nearby bayou but before they could step aboard, Paw had to scoop a black water moccasin out the pirogue. Paw told him is wasn't nothing to be afraid of, patted the boy's back, and paddled down a secluded bayou to trade half of his stash of Houmas sugar for the elixir a deep swamp dweller conjured up. Gators and snakes slivered through the water as though to guide them through cypress knees a man could hardly see was so dark in under the trees.

Francois didn't want to get out at the medicine man's hut, didn't want to feed the swamp monsters, so he hunched down under an old tarp until Paw returned, paddled down another dark bayou, and crossed the Mississippi to The Houmas.

"A fence lined the river road so far I couldn't see the ends. Walked on past a house three floors high and fields of sugar cane as tall as the barn. I 'member how I wanted to ask Paw why ev'ythin' was so big, why they had a long fence like that… Just kept getting' more things to ask though. Big pulp piles, giant sugar pots wit' slow fire where the Negroes was sweatin'. Stirred that thick syrup wit' wood paddles. Sugar house taller 'n the house eve. Paddocks wit' horses of more shapes, or girth I ever saw. Then they was real fine ones."

PawPaw shook his head. "Then we walked in a cabin. Just one room. Window barely let in some tree-mottled sunlight. The sunny outside felt like a icehouse compared to this place." He looked over to Joie. "*Cher*, our barn be cooler. Even the deep swamp dwellers had better cabins. Wasn' nearly as afraid to visit these poor creatures though.

"Anyhow, by the fireplace they was a slave. Back all mangled. Oozed blood out o' crisscrossed lines of drawing salve thick and black as tar. Giant Negro never opened his eyes, but I'll never forget him. Voice was like cotton when he thanked Paw for medicine to break his fever.

"Gets me to this day, now, near-on sixty years later, how I couldn' look away, couldn' stop staring at the big slave. Still wore the blood-encrusted overalls stripped down to his hips.

"I ask Paw how come that slave got beat. Paw say, 'Just the way things is, son.'

"Few years later, just before the war come down south, a few owners started freein' some slaves. Saw that slave's brother and his son starin' at Paw's fat cucumbers, giant purple eggplants, and crimson tomatoes be weighin' down they vines.

"I run up the steps, hollerin', 'Come, Paw, come quick!'

"Paw come and seen 'em. Told Maw we got comp'ny. Weren' the first ex-slaves she cook for.

"Tha's how William and JoJo come to be on the peninsula.

"They was eatin' shrimp stew, fried eggplant, *couche couche*, and *cayai*, and me and Paw went to find Cousin LaFleur. He a widower. Kids all grown. Had room for two.

"I used to ask Paw how come JoJo couldn' ride to town wit' us to sell vegetables. He just give me a pat on the back. 'Just the way things is, son.' Same thing when I ask how come he cain' go to school.

"Course now, I didn't go back to school after long. Too many workers. Had to work. Cut rice 'til them crops failed. Still too little to thrash pecans from the ground so I climbed them trees, cracked 'em. JoJo helped. We built some mighty fine chicken coops. Last one stood 'til that nineteen-aught-nine hurricane, one what hit Grand Isle. Kilt 350 souls. Didn't ask Paw no more 'bout why a Negro couldn' ride in town or visit plantations wit' us.

"Anyhow, William long gone, but we promise him we take care of JoJo, on account he slow. He mong'loid, *bebe*. Tha's how come he so slow. Tha's how come he ain' got nothin' better to do than come 'round here ev'y night. Sit on the porch and close ev'y day wit', 'I'z sho worn out.'"

PawPaw let out a deep sigh, then walked on over to the barn. Joie went back to her weeding until he came back with a hoe. He churned up nearly a whole row before he began again.

"Paw, he work side-by-side with the blacks, drink from the same ladles at the end of long rows they turn wit' single-claws. Blacks and whites, we share meals and roofs… Maw birthed black babies and white, nurse the old wit'out regard to skin color.

"But the Highlanders here by then…"

* * * * *

PawPaw's voice trailed off. But Joie knew the rest of the story. Baton Rouge became the capital of Louisiana, and Plaquemine the Iberville Parish seat, governed by Highlanders. But the uppercrust Highlanders were not Europe's aristocracy, were not men who grew up understanding that their duties to the commoners were as important as their familial obligations. *Noblesse oblige* was a burden—Cajuns lacked education and social position due to lack of intellect; they remained impoverished because they did nothing about it; their ancestors had preferred to leave their homes and belongings rather than pay taxes. Highlanders chose not to remember Cajuns were the brave ones who refused to give up their religion. It was easy to resent and hate.

PawPaw watched his own family endure, watched the Negroes, to whom the Highlanders' charity was rarely extended, barely subsist. He watched the Highlanders distance themselves further and further from the Lowlanders, and when he finally asked his father why people in town didn't want to talk to him, heard for the last time, "Just the way things is, son."

Chapter Twelve

Massa sat at his desk in the smoking room, hands trembling as he again unfolded Elizabeth's new message. "Please come. Moved to country house. Lost town house to Yanks."

He dipped his pelican quill in ink but it never touched the paper before him. How could he now write to Elizabeth after ignoring her these many years?

His gaze fell to the paper. A dribble from the quill splotched the paper black so he crumbled it.

The first soldiers had advanced into South Louisiana six months ago, though not at all in the manner expected. They came on horseback—a few Yankees in a hotel near the red stick, another handful in New Orleans. They melded into the population like any other visitors. No wagons of supplies and ammunition. No tents to pitch in long rows. No demands.

But now they called on the influential. To *introduce ourselves*, they said. Baton Rouge politicians, retailers, and upstanding citizens could only nod.

They solicited invitations first for dinner, then to parties. Each time Massa went to Baton Rouge, his friends told of the disgrace, of their disbelief. Why would these men frazzle their congenial Southern manner and hospitality? How ever could such men relate to the sentiments that drove the ways of the South, particularly the cultural demands associated with being a Southern woman.

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Weeks later, talk of disgrace morphed into panic. Soldiers had commandeered one of the mansions of an absentee owner just upriver from The Houmas, and when their organic line of communication spread news of the Yankees, slaves saw for themselves what was transpiring in nearby towns and cities. They knew the white folk were being pressured into socializing with these men they despised, and the men knew they were despised.

About a year after the Yankees first arrived, Miss Lizzie strolled the boarded walkways in town, window shopping while her father tended to his finances. As a soldier walked in her direction, she showed him her back shoulder as to avoid the possibility of having to acknowledge his presence. The soldier slowed, staring at Miss Lizzie. She saw his reflection in the shop window. The image stopped an arm's length away. Head tilted somewhat down and away from the man's gaze, tiny beads of perspiration showed themselves on Lizzie's forehead and temples. Long seconds passed.

The man finally man tipped his hat and said, "Morning, Miss."

Lizzie shifted her gaze down to the man's shiny boots, then back to the handkerchief she fiddled with in her cuff.

"Good morning, Miss," he repeated.

Lizzie turned her head to face the man but couldn't raise her eyes higher than the waisted gun he donned. She squeaked out a tiny, "Yes."

Although Lizzie's response to the man was not far removed from the manner in which she might have greeted any stranger, the man, being blind to Southern etiquette, took offense to her behavior and reported to his commanding officer that his simple greeting had been refused. In fact, he really felt he had been rebuffed by the blonde beauty he wanted to meet. Over time, the situation repeated itself. Eventually, more soldiers arrived and town leadership was gradually forced to relinquish their powers to the insistent men invading their land.

When the commanding officer had his fill of the *nasty behavior* of so-called Southern ladies, he issued an order that any female who did not greet a soldier with eye contact, a smile, and a reciprocated good wish would be held in contempt and charged with the crime of insubordination.

Such an inappropriate acknowledgement on the street would never be offered even to another Southern gentleman wholly unknown to a lady, let alone the men who had formed a dictatorship. To these ladies, their behavior was disgraceful. And to Southerners, lack of grace was intolerable. Such forward engagements with strange men on the street were left to the boa-draped ladies of saloons and houses of ill-repute. It was a major blow to their sense of self, their sense of self-determination, and their lives of calm and judicious freedoms. Without their culture and refinement, Southerners felt uncivilized.

But they had no choice, and from then on ladies remained in shops and spied Yankees through the windows to wait for them to pass before venturing out. When they were unsuccessful in their avoidance, they raised toothy smiles and offered a greeting with their

typical soft, Southern manner. But their eyes were dead, and there was nothing the Yankee commanding officer could do to change that.

Lyddy had greeted Miss Lizzie at the front door after that first time she encountered a Yankee on the street. The child glowed white so Lyddy administered a dose of opium to settle her nerves.

When her father sat beside her on her bed, he wept just as had Lyddy.

Chapter Thirteen

The sun pulsed in and out from the clouds. Rainy. Wet turning to slushy mud on the main road that passed through Houmas land.

Today's visitors of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens can observe the remains of the original sugarhouse chimney, far beyond Lyddy's kitchen.

It stands alone, a skeleton long abandoned by the wooden house that once sheltered it.

Unusually cold. It was already December and George was still harvesting cane along with twenty other slaves. Others were pressing cane, some hauling deep vats of juice to iron sugar-pots that hung over eternal flames.

George directed some to haul the spent cane to the pulp pile, so to take turns churning sugar pots, others to heap sugar and load sacks at the bottom of a hill of molasses-rich sugar five times the height of any man. Work had not been progressing as efficiently as it had when Little Jack stood guard over their every move, and this weighed heavy

on George's mind as he tapped his mules with reins to push them through the mire. A rift was developing, dividing the salves into two: the African-born and the slave-born.

The old Africans kept telling George and the other slave-born what it meant to be free, to go where they wanted when they wanted. To run through the fields, to swim in a river any time one wished, to climb trees and watch long-armed monkeys squawk and swing, and play warrior games with no worries. But their insistence to separate from everything they knew frightened the slave born so they went to George. "Don't you got 'nough scars wit' no *S*?"

Many weeks had passed since that long-ago meeting when George tried to help the slave population decide whether they would stay or go if and when the opportunity arose, once the Yankees invaded Houmas land and enticed them to leave their homes.

A stray Yankee occasionally made his way into the fields and told the slaves they could leave at any time and join the white Yankees to fight for freedom. Said they'd give them papers so they wouldn't be sent back to the plantation if they were caught on the roads without Yankee soldiers to protect them.

George pondered how that kind of freedom wasn't really free. He could explain the answer to the slave-born, but not the African-born, who were fast coming to despise the weak niggers, excluding them from private meetings they held near the creek where wives washed their family's clothes.

How could they *not* understand that a red-back was the least of their worries. A small price to pay.

But what good was freedom with no food in their bellies, no roof or warm clothes. Their new shoes would take them only so far.

George and Ramba kept up Massa with the current goings-on of his slaves, and it was an upcoming update with Massa that was on George's mind when he noticed Red and his friends had stopped their mules in the sludge of the cane-field trail.

He was helping Lyddy cook up some candy. Miss Lizzie had finished her double-butter pound cake and now she wanted the smooth, creamy pralines Lyddy made with double pecans.

At Lyddy's side in the kitchen, George maintained a steady fire at just the right temperature for the syrupy concoction in the hanging iron pot. With a long-handled wooden spoon that more resembled an oar, Lyddy stirred and stirred, stepping from one side of the hearth to the other to allow George to stoke the fire and replace wood as needed. George had retrieved seasoned oak from the woodhouse rather than the more abundant cypress; it held a steadier flame, burning slow and right, unlike the more plentiful cypress cleared from Houmas land, groves near the swamp from which slaves hoisted cypress trunks onto flatcars that road crisscrossed rails through the cane fields to the mill for a thriving lumber trade.

George was halfway back to the kitchen with a second armful of oak when a frantic slave by the name of Stevens called to him a hundred yards out, running so fast George heard his lungs and nose wheeze and snort in the way a plow-mule rumbles when pushed too fast too long.

Stevens pointed east-northeast toward the fields. "They here. They here," was all he could utter between gasps.

George set down his load of wood and clutched Stevens by the shoulders. He didn't need to ask who *they* were. "Run, go get Ramba."

Stevens stood as through dumbfounded, continuing to stare up at George, some ten inches taller.

"Go now," George insisted, "he in wit' the blacksmith."

Many blacksmiths would have been employed for such a large operation. They built parts for steam engines, over a hundred miles of rail, wagons, and tack and shoes for over a hundred mules.

Stevens found Ramba with a hoof in his lap, fitting a shoe on Lizzie's favorite mare.

He gave Ramba the message just as Lizzie approached in her riding habit, short crop in hand. "What's going on here, Ramba? What y'all doing just lollygaggin' when you know I'm here waiting on Lady?"

"Miss Lizzie, ma'am, I ain' so sho you be wantsin to take yourn ride just 'bout now."

"Nonsense. I'm exactly ready for my ride and don't you be making excuses for you not getting done with Lady when I give you more than enough time to do your job."

"Ain' dat, Miss Lizzie." Ramba reached to touch her forearm and dared to look her straight in the eyes when George said, "Come on, Miss Lizzie, let's go wit' Ramba to go find yourn pappy, please ma'am?" He motioned toward the path to the big house.

Lizzie had been lightly tapping the crop's tip in the palm of her gloved hand. Now she grasped it and almost pulled the leather loop from its handle; she kept that position the entire way back to the house.

They found her father in the smoking room. Though it was the time of morning when Massa would normally be looking over papers, he sat in his favorite wingback chair and stared ahead blankly, his cigar emitting a solid stream of smoke that danced in the rays of sunlight passing through the east windows. Ramba wondered if Miss Lizzie was noticing the same as he. The room was not smoky other than the highest few inches at the ceiling, as if Massa had lit his cigar but hadn't blown a single puff to fog the room.

"Massa, beg yo pawdon, suh."

Massa didn't move his blank stare even an inch.

"Pappa?"

He looked up as George walked in. "Suh, could be Miss Lizzie better to take her ride when things get a bit calm."

"Calm? Pappa, what is going on here?"

Massa faced his daughter but spoke to George. "Maybe you'd be so kind to see to it Lizzie entertains herself in her room."

Lizzie's father had never before related to his daughter so impassively, like she wasn't right in front of him. She took a step back, watched her father's gaze drift along the rug, the ember of his cigar fade behind a long tube of ash.

"Yes, Pappa."

She turned toward the hallway just as Lyddy entered, having left Lizzie's candy half still in the pot and half laid out in rounded lumps just now clouding up.

"Come on now, chile, we goin' get you some warm pralines and take 'em to cool up in yourn room whilst we get you in some better clothes right now."

They were halfway up the circular stairs at the back of the house when they heard a shot just like the one that long-ago day when George ran to the big house to find Lizzie in the kitchen, shotgun leaning against Lyddy's stove, Miss Lizzie asking George to go get Lyddy so she could have her some eggs and cheese grits.

Houmas House is widely known for its part in the 1964 movie *Hush, Hush…Sweet Charlotte*. Bette Davis watched her beloved's head roll downstairs step by step.

On that morning they had ignored the stench of gunpowder that still hung heavy and hazy even after Massa came down the stairs pulling on his sweet cherry-tobacco pipe.

Today, Lizzie and Lyddy continued up the stairs to the second floor. Through the windows they saw a man on a horse. He held reins with his right hand and his left pointed a shotgun to the sky, its butt resting on a thigh.

Lyddy pressed her charge into her room. Thumps of heavy boots got louder as they approached the back of the house.

Many men were invested as heavily in their cause as Red was to his, and to an equal and opposite degree. Yet it was these men, foreigners, who wanted to destroy plantation life, who

could hurt George and his family more than those who enslaved them. Theirs was a reasoning most of the slaves would never understand, even after the effects of their deeds were long done.

And the Africans, well, George and all the others born into slavery would never understand them either. They had it in their minds that if only they were free they could go back to the life they had lived decades prior and George was sick of hearing talk about how they could select a piece of land, build thatch-roofed, mud-walled homes, and call that land their own. They could fish the river and bayous, catch wild game, and cultivate a few acres and be set to live the wondrous life of blissful freedom they remembered.

They wouldn't hear the slave-born niggers tell them that fantasy could not and would not happen for them. Even if they gained their freedom, they would still be niggers – African or otherwise.

Africans not born in captivity would not believe – could not believe – that a land of free men, colored or white, could not just go about their business and live in peace.

They did not believe the slave-born elders' explanations about how the whites would only hate the niggers more than they did now. And they would never stand for blacks taking any piece of land anywhere. They had only to look at the lives of the plantation owners up and down the river – one out of four of the river plantations – owned by free men of color. They had to drive their own niggers harder and more ruthlessly than the whites because they never got full price for their crops, and they always paid more for their seeds, more for their equipment, and more for processing their sugar. They were not men with the means to build their own mills; profit came only from the increase in their slaves' output.

The man on horseback behind the big house said niggers should be free just like any white man. They would have a better life. But how could that be?

Scouts. That was what Stevens first said the men in the back fields were. He had mistaken the identity of a man who only resembled Red. "Scout come tell the darkies they be freed. Just wait for our word, you darkies. Wait and see. We be givin' y'all guns to fight these Southern oppressors. Just wait."

Soldiers from up north would free 'em all. Their job as scouts was to see how many blacks would stand up for themselves. Their time was coming.

In the back fields, Africans punched the sky with clinched fists. The slave-born crouched down low and eased their way out of the fields to the safety of numbers on slave row.

Another shot rang out, this time from the fields.

Behind the house, Massa, George, and Ramba watched, their feet glued to the ground until a scream came from the fields near the slave cabins. Massa matched strides with the two slaves for over half a mile before they saw.

Africans would later insist they hadn't seen what happened. The slave-born leaving the fields would say it wasn't an accident.

A field-worker's young son, Alex, had heard the gunshot and thought he was under fire. He ran as fast as he could but, unable to see through or over the ten-foot cane, he ran into the path of one of those men's horses.

"It ain' no accident he got trampled like he did," Ramba insisted, "Ain' no horse in the world ain' goin' see that chile, tall as they is. They gots to be *told* to drive through a thing in they path, else they jump it like a log or goes a other way. That horse foot hit that chile head so bad it jump clear off his foot."

Mitzy, the boy's older sister, hadn't been far from Alex when it happened. Neither could she see through the cane five rows between her and her brother, but she heard the horse screech

and a low-pitched grunt after it plowed through the child, trampling him under a thousand pounds of horseflesh and the couple hundred more on its back.

"They just rode on," Mitzy said. "They just road on. They just road on," she repeated.

She held her little brother's limp frame in her arms like an infant, his head resting on her shoulder.

The death of this second child on the plantation sent Lizzie even more into herself. She didn't leave her room for many days. And for just as many days, George sat in his tree just where he'd sat more than two decades prior when he saw Lizzie on the veranda, come out to play an innocent game of darts. Shanda often accompanied George in his tree, more so during those many periods when her beloved Lizzie needed alone-time. Ramba and Shanda, George's light children, were more attached to their father, while the middle two, Riza and Ito, remained steadfastly independent and preferred the company of friends their own ages and shades.

George's meeting with Massa, scheduled for the afternoon when Alex died, never took place. Instead, Ramba took Massa around to all the nearby plantations, one after another until all the white landowners knew what had happened in the cane field at The Houmas.

Did no good, though. A week later, the men who professed their desire to give her freedom defiled "a fine winch" from the Poché plantation.[iii]

The brutality of the white Yankees made no sense to blacks or whites in the community. These devils had their own agenda, but neither George, nor Ramba, nor the elders, nor even the Africans understood why.

Even more confusing was the Africans' continued support of the Yankees after their womenfolk were raped, their bodies sometimes mutilated with foreign objects that left splinters inside.

Still, when the Yankees came around, the Africans nodded and punched the sky with tight fists.

Sugar production continued to decline. Massa didn't want his niggers out alone, no females without a male, and no one after dark.

They all, whites and blacks, worked and tended their business during the daylight hours. Children no longer had the freedom to run through the fields on back to the creek to play, and the only time the adults went out at nighttime was when they went as a unit to the big river on Saturday nights and did their drinking and singing and dancing.

That lasted for nearly a year.

The image of simmering praline candy Lyddy had been cooking for Miss Lizzie that day Alex died chilled George every time he entered the kitchen, but he was hardened just as the glob of candy and the bottom of the black-iron vat, now drowned in winter's cold rain. Only half of the batch had made it onto buttered paper when the shotgun made the war real, the remainder left in the pot to harden in one solid mass, the pot set outside the back door to rust in the South Louisiana breath like a grave marker. Miss Lizzie never touched the warm pieces Lyddy had brought to cool on her bedside table. She lay on her side and watched the humidity melt them gooey, sometimes lying on her side in bed to stare at them until she drifted off into a sleep that seared her mind with nightmare after nightmare.

William Howard Russell reported that the Houmas slaves had from noon on Saturday to dawn Monday morning to do as they pleased, as long as they stayed on plantation grounds.

George learned of Miss Lizzie's bad days from his wife, they the only two darkies who knew the full extent of Miss Lizzie's suffering. Her secrets had remained their own, even some Massa didn't know about.

Massa adored his child, but would never have abided some of her behaviors, things though known to George and Lyddy were either unknown to or unremembered by Massa's curly-blonde haired child…nights when the slave children awoke to find Miss Lizzie cuddling with them in their beds, mornings when Lyddy went up to service Lizzie's morning dispositions only to discover an empty bed, George to later find her down by the river staring across to the opposite bank, occasionally waving an arm high above her head as she had when she was better, when she attended the coming-out parties and shouted with glee across the river as debutantes arrived or paddleboat passengers waved.

Bedside steps that open to ceramic pot.
Neither residents nor guests ventured out
of doors for their morning ministrations.

George had comforted his wife so many times when Lizzie bled her heart, and though they told no one, the Africans knew when both Lyddy and Lizzie didn't leave the house for days. He was thinking about how the Africans now hated his wife for her love of a whitie, and his mind churned with how to find consensus, his brain looping again with how a black man could turn on his brother.

It was Saturday night. Music-Maker Joe picked his fiddle and strummed its strings. Others thumped drums and ran polished oak sticks against wash boards. Children fished.

Music drowned out the thuds of heavy hooves. A moonless sky and river fog concealed the horsemen until an African felt the ground shake, shouted, "Run," and headed up the levee.

Machetes slashed arms and legs, gashed heads. Iron horseshoes crushed torsos. Bullets splattered flesh.

Twenty souls lost their lives that night.

George was helping Mammy cross the river road when he heard the buffalo rifle. He rushed up the levee.

Arms and heads had been freed.

He ran down the levee.

A man on a horse aimed a pistol and shot but missed.

* * * * *

The vision would be the second to plague him in later years. He taught the young about their heritage, this the only story the slave-born blacks held as their own, one that identified who they were, said something about how they lived. Funny, how he had turned up his nose when he heard the Africans tell their stories. Having never known anything about his past, a man slave had little to be proud enough about to deem it worthy of teaching or even repeating for that

matter. The slave-born suddenly had a history of their own to tell, and, when he told it, George wondered whether it drew his people together in a sense of unity, a family, or if it more tore them apart, feeding irate young and old alike with an anger that festered until one day after a lifetime of injustices stuffed and unattended, it could surely petrify their souls.

And why weren't any of the Africans down by the river?

* * * * *

The week after the mass murder on the riverbank, Massa called George, Lyddy, and Ramba to his smoking room. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, the massive doorway behind them, their hands cupped and heads down.

"Should I return Miss Lizzie to North Caroline?"

Each of the three yanked up their heads, their lower jaws not making the entire trip.

"Awww, nooo, Massa," they sang in unison.

"Massa, we watch baby girl like she our own." George breathed.

"We ain' goin' let nothin' happen to yourn baby," Lyddy reassured him.

Ramba followed up with, "Nawsuh, ain' nothin goin' come her way and hurts a hair on her pretty head."

So the owner of The Houmas allowed his daughter to remain. All four had been pondering how possibly he could send the fragile thing away from the only home she knew. If they ever had to flee from this home, they would flee to North Caroline together.

Wouldn't they? George, Lyddy, and Ramba wondered, though Lizzie did not.

There it was. The perplexing state of affairs The Houmas slaves were left with. It was they whose lives were in mortal danger if the Yankees shut down the slave operators. Alarming

numbers were already being killed – the niggers with nowhere to go and nothing for their bellies. Now the slaves were burdened with assuring the safety of the privileged golden-haired whitie.

The Africans hated the slave-born even more for their loyalty. They became another threat. That slaves should hold resentment against the whites was a point of fact that George actually agreed with, but that agreement couldn't override the feelings he had for the whites in the big house.

* * * * *

Another week passed and Massa still failed to voice a single word of remorse or condolence for their loss at the river, and didn't offer a drop of hope for their future, a tinge of resentment set in.

The bitterness stewed all that next day and, that night, when he and Lyddy shared their thoughts after their children fell asleep, George looked for a whipping boy. The oversized black man with smooth manners had enough of letting his big heart stuff the white folks' slights. He had lost too much of his manhood from happenings long passed, and his skin crawled with thoughts about the future.

"How you be so likin' Massa word? Do he still be sweet-talkin' in yourn ear in the big house when I be in the field?"

Lyddy had been fluffing their moss mattress when that last bit of cruelty left George's lips. She paused for no more than two or three seconds, then continued her task as if George wasn't even there.

How come she ain' full of all this. Who be this woman? Damn winches stupid is all.

He strutted out the front door leaving it open behind him, stomped across the porch, and jumped off the end closest to his mother's cabin.

It was the first visit with his mother since the murders. He and dozens of other bucks had spent the entire morning digging holes for graves in the nigger graveyard at the top of a slight incline that rarely flooded in the spring.

His mother still sat in her rocker on her front porch, knitting what appeared to be booties for one of the new piccaninnies, and never lifted her head as George stomped up and planted himself on the top step.

He ranted and raved and unleashed every bit of buried anger and resentment, while his mother continued her slow rock, never missing a stitch until her son called his wife a stupid bitch. Then she stopped her rocking.

He had gone too far. His mammy's slacked jaw was more scathing and fearsome than any response he had ever witnessed. It filled him with a trepidation far more scary than any word or sign of disapproval he'd ever seen. A shudder rose up from George's tailbone. It drew his shoulders up to ears and sucked his chin down into his chest.

It was time to go home and apologize to the woman he loved more than his own soul.

* * * * *

Salvation. That was what Preacher spoke about Sunday morning after the massacre. The niggers didn't even know the word, much less its applications. Preacher's god was going to rescue the niggers from their bondage. Bondage. That word the niggers knew all too well. But the niggers thought Preacher was telling them that his god would release them from being a slave. Too much to ask a nigger to believe.

Then Preacher talked about how his god was going to use his all-powerful will to rescue the whities from their ignorance and evil ways. That's when the niggers who had tried to believe

him to that point closed their minds and released a gravelly moan that stopped Preacher in the middle of his next sentence.

"Have faith in you's." Seconds passed. "You's savior."

That was how the slaves at The Houmas started their Sunday, early morning with twenty bodies waiting for their holes to be dug and a preacher wanting his congregation to feel just fine because they should believe in a god who had no intention of saving them from any harm or heartache as long as they walked this earth. This preacher was as, if not more, concerned with the deliverance of their oppressors than their family and friends. Never once did he utter the words that would allow his people to feel sorrow about their situation.

"The Lawd smiles upon you." *Humph, Preacher get them dollars comin' here, maybe that what make him spew out what he say be holy words.*

If this was his god's idea of what could make this almighty and all-powerful god smile, then George had no use for him this morning. He thought about Hot Shot, Little Jack's gangly old horse near black as night. Some of the nigger folk were telling how they saw him standing at the front gates near the river road. Beside him stood Jack, but nowhere did they see that cruelly modified whip of his.[iv]

He only appeared on foggy mornings, the mist eventually rolling out from the river so heavy it consumed the image.

Months had passed since his disappearance, and no word had ever come about his disposition.

George hated that he couldn't control his mind, that his disbelief in Preacher's words made him drift off into memories of the most feared nigger on the Mississippi River.

It only angered him further and more deeply when he tried to fit Preacher's words with Jack.

We s'ppose to be more worried 'bout evil Jack too? Was he to be one for whom slaves had to hope benefitted from this crazy salvation Preacher talked about?

Damn that Preacher!

Damn him for pushin' me and my brothers away from our owns grief to prays for troubled whities and criminal slave drivers.

Damn him, a man of color who never seen a day of muscle work in his life. Damn the words of a man wit' a god wants the oppressed to pray for salvation for men that rape they slaves.

George smiled until his cheeks couldn't move back any further.

And damn the Africans that condemn whities for warrin' wit' each other, agains' they own kind through one side of they mouth, then puttin' Africans' ways high up on a mountain of glory and honor 'cause they don' war wit' each other. And out the other side of they mouths talk big on stories of how valiant African warriors fight to keep they kind safe from whites that try to steal 'em and sell 'em in slavery. And then wit' they next breath talk sad 'bout theyself 'cause they cain' protect they own 'cause of the evil black hunters the whites gets to track down they prey. Tha's they 'xcuse…the white man cain' catch no African warriors 'cause they inferior, but they the very Africans theyself been sold out they brother for dollars they wouldn' even need if'n they be true warriors. A true warrior supply all the needs for his fam'ly and tribe. They grow it and catch it, and trade it for what else things. It ain' s'pose be workin' 'at way. Brothers ain' s'pose be catchin' and enslavin' they own brother. Africans say Allah be frownin' on disloyalty.

The more George thought about it, the more convinced he became that this Allah and the preacher's god were equally mealy-mouthed fakes, and the preacher was nothing but a Pecksniffian fool.

Chapter Fifteen

Lonely days were here to stay for a while, days when the slave-born felt deserted by their African brothers, days when the Africans mourned any understanding their brothers might have once grasped, days when both groups felt estranged from any favor they had ever allowed themselves to believe had come their way from their owner or the white race as a group.

They were also days when the white race felt a building pressure of uncertainty regarding the loyalty of their slaves, but also of each other. Neither black nor white could be certain whether they were communicating with friend or foe.

The massacre at the riverbank continued to tear at the fabric of plantation life and increasingly affect the level of sugar production. Stories of escaped slaves spread through the region and increased in frequency, as only a limited number of folks and tracking dogs existed to fetch them from the swamp and wilderness, which became denser with each mile south into the Louisiana Delta.

As the quality of life deteriorated up and down the Mississippi River, sightings of Little Jack and Hot Shot at the front gates of the big house increased. But old-timers had *a might bit of trouble,* as they put it, figuring out what Little Jack's message might be if indeed he had one; otherwise, what did the appearances have to do with anything at all…until one day when a voodoon woman found her way to The Houmas.

Legend has it that a voodoon woman was the mistress of one of the Houmas owners. She is said to be one in a line of Marie Laveau descendants who all carried the same name.

Southerners recognize Marie Laveau as the most powerful and well-known voodoo priestess.

You can take a graveyard tour of New Orleans cemeteries, including St. *Louis Cemetery #1*, where visitors leave gris-gris (a talisman or offering) on her crypt.

Massa had long held a fancy for Mariel, the house maid of one of the free men of color who owned a small plantation a few miles north of Baton Rouge, near St. Francisville. The man was sickly, and his housemaid tended to him like a nurse when he ventured off his property for meetings pertinent to the farming, harvesting, and refining of sugar cane.

Once each year, the old man road down to The Houmas to negotiate the terms for pressing and refining. Each time, Massa invited the old man into his smoking room just as though he were another white man, and poured him a glass of bourbon with a shot of Laudanum for his achy bones. Massa was as kind to the housemaid as he was to her owner. Lyddy had been telling George about Massa's friendly nature toward Mariel for a handful of years by now.

Gravesite of Louisiana’s Famous Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau

When the unstable sugar market proved to be too much for Mariel's owner, the man turned to Massa for help.

"It be like he beggin'," Lyddy told George. And Massa couldn't abide by it, telling the old man to hush his pleading, that Massa would buy his three cane niggers, his housemaid, and his land for a price that would allow him to find a small house somewhere in town and have a proper nurse care for him.

Massa found a place for the man, as well as a decrepit old white nurse who was too old to draw a decent wage from a decent family, and she took care of the old man all the while Mariel became second lady of The Houmas. Massa sent George with a couple of the Africans to wrap up the season's crop maintenance and, when they returned two weeks later, Lyddy explained the situation at the big house by recounting a talk she had with Massa one day after supper, when he told Lyddy she was to now take special care as to make sure Miss Lizzie remained innocent of any goings on a proper young lady didn't need to be exposed to.

Mariel took the room next to Massa's.

* * * * *

Lizzie still had not ventured far from her room or the big house for any extended period of time since the massacre.

The week after George returned from the old black man's plantation, Massa called for him and Lyddy and Ramba. Mariel, the third in a line of voodoo queens, had some things she wanted to tell the niggers about, and Massa had granted her permission to speak directly to his three most trusted slaves.

Mariel had observed Little Jack and Hot Shot at the gate every night for the nearly three weeks she had resided in the big house. Her bedroom was at the front of the house above the

ladies' music and sewing room; behind it was Massa's room on the opposite side of a giant pair of wood doors and diagonal from Miss Lizzie's room on the east side of the second floor, same place it had been since that fateful Easter dart game.

Mariel could explain right well what was the situation with Jack.

She spoke with slow words that were somehow both monotonous and melodic at the same time. She kept her eyes on Lyddy. "Slow, chile, slow yourn mind." Mariel looked only at Lyddy. "Ain' no racin' goin' help do nobody no good. You a good woman. Ain' no trouble comin' to you and yourn chirrins. Ain' nobody bringin' no harm to yourn man."

George watched for evidence of fear on the face or body of his sweet wife. Massa watched Mariel, as did Ramba, Lizzie, and Lyddy herself.

"Ain' no call for bein' too fearsome 'bout that evil old nigger come beat yourn boy and yourn man here. Now ol' Jack here like a great number of spooks done found theyself daid and got no place to go countin' on even the devil cain' find his way to trust him. See, he done fooled too many peoples, includin' yourn lovin' Massa here. He don' want none of his niggers bein' whipped and gettin' no red-back. Massa here ain' nothin' but 'bout his bi'ness, and ain' no mean nigger goin' be damagin' bi'ness property, no suh not t'all t'all. Naw, Jack ain' had no place to be hurtin' his own folk, no place t'all, but the ol' ignorant nigger ain' come to see his evils ways 'til he be on the other side of life. But now he stuck, see. Ain' nothin' to do but hang 'round here 'less he figure out his bad deeds.

"Dunno, maybe the black angel hisself goin' come fetch him if'n he find out for hisself what he done wrong, and maybe the black angel figure he can trust the bad nigger to do his biddin', but then again maybe Jack goin' be gettin' some power from The Light if'n he come

clean ‘bout his evil ways. And maybe the white angels come down and swoop up that ol’ repentant nigger and carry him on to the end of time in The Light.

“But meanwhile, Jack just goin’ be hangin’ ‘round these parts just needin’ some attention for hisself so he can feel maybe he ain’ daid for true.

“But Jack, he be daid, and I knows he don’ know he daid ‘cause he ain’ goin’ let no prince of darkness suck him down in no deep hole of pain and torment ain’ no human man black or white be goin’ survive.

“Anyhow, that be what Jack doin’ hangin’ ‘round wit’ that nasty ol’ excuse for a horse, seein’ how ain’ nobody goin’ be a better friend to a man like Jack than a horse. Now, I be goin’ tell youz what Jack been awantin’ to know. Jack, he done got far ‘nough in his grievin’ for hisself to know he got some rectifyin’ to do. Jack, he goin’ to keep a lookout for this big house and Massa and yourn boy Ramba here, goin’ be strong ‘nough to stay alone and still by that wood gate up front and he be givin’ youz a warnin’ when he be seein’ trouble be headed this way.”

In my second channeling session with George, he asked for permission to have others tell part of the story. I sometimes experienced higher levels of difficulty understanding what I was told, and I now believe some of these difficulties occurred when my source was someone other than George.

While working this particular passage, I felt that it was Mariel who told the story.

Light no longer shone into the smoking room when Mariel finished her hypothecating, the sun now directly overhead.

“Well now, Lyddy, I do believe we are ready for some dinner.” Miss Lizzie stood, then paused to look back at her father a moment before grabbing a handful of skirt and leaving the room.

Massa, Ramba, Lyddy, and George sat motionless; George put his head down in his hands, elbows resting on his knees. Until now, he had believed that all this talk about large numbers of Yankee soldiers coming deep into the delta could have been denied. Though he

hadn't exactly denied it, he had been able to make the idea a powerless look into the future that couldn't stop him from burying it during most hours of the day, thereby making it somehow less real.

But the words of a woman like Mariel weighed heavy on George. The validation of his people's and the white folks' fears for their livelihood were now legitimized, more foreboding.

Strange thing was, this new awareness could change nothing in what could or would happen. The fact that all the residents of The Houmas would now know exactly what was coming down south didn't really change much in the operation of the plantation.

The lines between the two classes of niggers and between them and the whites was only temporarily softened in the way a common threat makes for strange alliances.

It would go on this way for many months. In the spring, Massa sent George with a couple Africans and the slaves previously owned by the free man of color back to the plantation up near St. Francisville to ready the soil for spring planting. The old man had moved back into his home and was living there with his decrepit old white nursemaid. Massa had called on Ramba and George near Christmastime and had them move back all the man's belongings along with the nursemaid's, citing the *favor* the old man would be doing for Massa if he stayed on at his home to keep the property safe.

George, the slave-born, and the Africans understood his meaning. The lines softened a bit.

Massa had always been a landowner, and knew the value of caring for his property if only as a good business practice. Relative to many other slaveholders, he and his close circle of friends, those who were with Red that long-ago night in the back room of the brothel, provided their slaves with seeds, the use of the plantation machinery for planting, and piglets when the

pigs sowed – he often visited one of the cabins to ask them the favor of saving a piglet's life, as the sow had delivered too many to effectively fatten.

When a cow came to sickness, he sent it to cabin row for slaughtering. When the doctor came visiting, be it for man or animal, Massa always made sure he checked on the slaves and their animals.

Only a year ago, the Africans were arguing about how the whities did such good deeds only because it made them feel good. The slaves didn't know the words, but noblesse oblige was the responsibility of every Southern slaveholder. Even the Africans got to disliking these Yankees who were trying to change the culture of a people. Maybe the Africans understood and sympathized with the whities more than the slave-born. They knew what it was like to lose their culture, and they knew what it was like to have their own people turn on them.

Yankees had no business forcing dainty white ladies to be so forward as to greet strange men on the street. Even the Africans knew that a man's tribe was his own and, unless it was by invitation, other tribesmen did not hunt their land or even set foot upon it without first sending a scout to gain permission.

* * * * *

Miss Lizzie wasn't venturing into town much now because the encounters shook her to the bone, and often she came down to greet Massa's guests only to the extent she was socially required. Otherwise, she remained in her room and away from Yankee men who forced invitations to parties and dances with white women young and old alike. Mariel and Lyddy managed social events for Massa and, on this night, the Africans were in charge of pig roasting for a party – three pigs aboveground behind the big house, and five piglets buried in smoldering coals for a whole night and day. New crystal fly-catchers had been sent for from New Orleans,

along with hurricane lamps tinted in pastel yellows and oranges to make their flames appear larger. Every candle in the house was lit, and visitors turning off the river road gasped at the glowing estate that loomed magnificent at the end of the oak alley.

Ramba, now in his mid-teens, and Ito, twelve, accepted carriages as guests reached the front steps, and George stood on the porch opening and closing the heavy, extra-wide door that allowed women and their escorts to enter side by side without mussing hoop skirts. Every time a lady walked through the door, he thought about how fine his driving suit and top-hat looked, how the ladies didn't stare at him like that day he wore old overalls and Little Jack saw to it he wouldn't make that mistake again.

A free black woman from New Orleans played the Steinway in the ladies' needlepoint room, a gang of nigger slaves – a collection from numerous plantations – played fiddles and gourds, and the Africans tapped their drums under George's favorite old oak on the east side of the house.

The east garconierre was aglow from its fireplace, and rays leapt through the windows and danced through the under-limbs and leaves of the old oak.

Grumbling came from back behind the roasting pigs and coal pits.

A pond home to over a hundred giant Koi now exists
on the land where pigs would have roasted.

Chapter Eleven

A white man appeared, his plaid shirt half out of his pants and bloodied, but not stained in a solid mass as though he'd been shot, and not like a splatter from shooting someone else, perhaps with the pistol that dangled from his right hand.

The blacks all but one formed a shield between the man and the big house and her guests, the one a young slave-born child of the Africans who, by his father's directive, continued to roll the pigs on their skewers, one by one.

Lyddy had been in the kitchen when she heard strange muffled voices not so quiet as a mass. She sent Mariel to fetch George, and he and Ramba collected the musicians to stand behind the Africans in a show of force.

By the time Massa made his way to the front line of slaves, the white man was dropping to his knees, still partially erect, leaning back on his heels, the gun resting its nose on the ground

beside him. Ramba and George herded the guests into the big house amid the delicate gasps of ladies forced to travel more quickly than ladies ought.

Massa took a step forward, watching the man on his knees labor for his breath. He stooped to look in the man's face, then sent the African child and Ramba to saddle horses.

The man began to sway, in slow figure eights.

Massa inched forward, and the man reached out his left arm until Massa grabbed it and told the Africans to bring him to the room near the kitchen where the house slaves ate their meals.

They drug the man into the room and lay him on a long table.

Lyddy boiled water.

Massa sent Ito to fetch Doc Wilson Jenkins.

The man fought for his breath.

The Africans backed out of the room.

Massa held up the man's head to keep him from sucking in his own spit while he started forming words as though a gag held his mouth wide and allowed only his lips to move.

Of the men who had met in the back room of the brothel, most were at Massa's party and, once the ladies were safe, these men found their way to the eating room.

George, Ramba, and the African boy showed up outside the room with five horses in tow – the guests had arrived in carriages, so five would have to do.

George recognized the bloodied man as one he had met in the back field near on a year prior, the one who was on foot behind him in the circle of four who surrounded him.

"Agitators." That's all the men could understand from the mouthing of the man with a face of pulp. He held his side and, when Lyddy opened his shirt, she saw the outline of displaced ribs, where the broken pieces looked to be held in place only by the skin that covered them.

* * * * *

It hadn't been long since those same white men had met at the brothel again. George hadn't been there. He didn't need to be. The only reason Massa took him along the first time was to assure him that the men he encountered in the back field were to be trusted to help preserve their way of life. Massa had taken a gamble by taking him. Though George had proved his loyalty by acknowledging the incident with Red, his owner had to let him see with his own eyes that these men would treat a lead nigger with some degree of respect. George remembered how some of the men patted his back as they left the brothel. Though he hadn't attended other meetings, George knew his master had met the men repeatedly during the many months since. Ramba reported to his father each time he dropped off Massa and waited at the livery stable for his return.

Now one of those men was dying on the table in the nigger eating room.

George had made the right decisions along the way these past years. His people, the ones he was close to, were all born slaves and followed George's lead. Those slave-born who George did not know followed their friends and made a majority, and in recent weeks the Africans had come on board; however, George did not know, was not sure, if the Africans would physically defend Houmas land – taking a stand against a single injured man was a far cry from making war. Had George been forced at gunpoint to give an opinion on the subject, he would die in his uncertainty.

The eating room next to the kitchen today.

He watched the Africans now, some of them holding the horses, others turning pigs, one side now lightly scorched, and still others poking small holes in the dirt above the smoldering coals of buried piglets and sticking in a finger to check the temperature. He couldn't read their faces, couldn't guess at their hearts.

The way Massa was explaining the situation to George and Ramba and the men from the brothel, the bloodied man and his four comrades, including Red, had been scouting out the plantations at night, sort of a patrol to keep a presence known to the agitators. For weeks they'd been out there, but tonight they met the agitators head on. Four of the five were dead, the fifth left for dead and now dying on an eating table.

"They're probably long gone by now," Massa said, "but we'll take the dogs and hunt them down."

The dogs had only been used – to George and the other slaves' knowledge – to track down slaves. It never occurred to them that they would hunt down white folk.

George mounted one of the horses and led Massa and four others to the spot where he'd first met Red and his men. The bodies of Red and three others slept forever in their blankets by a small fire. The dogs had howled the entire way out to the back field, and now they sniffed around the dead bodies, each circling the men and the fire until two held fast on the north-northeast area of the gathering, where the empty blanket of the man on the table lay disheveled and bloody, the surrounding sod torn from angry hoof prints.

Lyddy had told the men that the survivor's ribs, front and back, clearly showed hoof prints.

The unlucky, or was he lucky…the survivor had been trampled at the edge of the fire. Further out, hoof prints marked the path of the attackers, leading to and fro.

George collected the dogs howling and jumping in the trampled sod, and they bayed in unison then took off down the trail. He felt a certain exhilaration in this hunt, and it hurt him deep inside to realize he may well be feeling the same pleasure, hunting for this white man, as the whities felt when they hunted down runaway niggers.

How could that be, he kept asking, himself first, then God.

Is it right, or allowable – he didn't know what exact word really described his puzzlement – *for a slave to have such feelings. It don' make no sense. Maybe it don' make sense for nobody, black or white, to settle on a gratifyin' feelin' at such a time.*

Still, there he was, galloping on a fine animal the likes of which he'd never before mounted, flying through the soggy Louisiana Delta, jumping over downed logs and charging through streams following what would otherwise be terrifying hounds now on the scent of a white man in more trouble than he himself had ever been in.

They galloped past a dead horse.

Will they hang the white man from a tree like they do with niggers who keep runnin' away? Or will a white man catch another and put him through white man's justice, bring him to answer before the law of the white man's world?

Off in the distance the baying became louder. George and his owner were toward the back of the group of five, the first two quite a ways ahead. When George could finally make them out between the trees, he saw them dismounted at the base of an old oak not dissimilar to George's beloved oak beside the big house. The dogs howled and barked so loud George's ears hurt.

Look at all this, I be excited as a boy wit' a coon up a tree.

The man in the tree looked oddly familiar. Like Red and the dying man on the table, he wore a full beard, thick and red though lighter, not the near orange of Red's.

George would later come to know that these were three brothers, one turned against the other two and willing to take their lives for a cause that wouldn't affect any of them in the long run. What did it matter to them whether blacks were free or not? Why were they hell-bent on destroying their homes? Sure, George had heard tell of cruel masters and slave drivers who just as soon whip a nigger half to death as repeat a command, but if the Yankees had their way, they'd all be homeless and hungry.

It don' make sense! If they don' be likin' how some niggers be treated, go take care of they massas, but leave us be!

Leave me and mine where we stay. George turned this fine animal he rode and headed back home. His owner watched briefly, figuring George knew his job was done and it was time to resume his former place. His owner could never have known the notions that vexed George enough to make him explode.

Most likely, white mens don' know niggers be havin' such thoughts. And maybe I ain' bein' s'pose to eitha.

Wernt none of my bi'ness anyhow. White folk'll deal wit' they own like they wants.

The gallop had been long, over quite some miles, and George's slow journey back home lasted an eternity. He passed the dead horse that had caught a bullet.

George didn't know what he'd see when he returned, didn't know what he wanted to see. Didn't know if he wished that the clock hands be turned back and make things like they were before, or that time slip right into the future, far enough away from this night to no longer weigh him down with thoughts unaddressable.

What kind of proud black man hold love for a man make him a prisoner, man that make two chirren I be raisin'? My mammy raised a proud black man. That's what I be. More thoughts to re-bury.

* * * * *

Winter hit the South hard that year, and people black and white kept inside their homes not only for the biting Northern cold that cursed the South, but also because of incidents such as that with Red and his brothers, happenings that were occurring with increasing frequency. At times, the bands of men who collected themselves and prowled the plantations were strong and prominent. Other times, fear rose and confidence waned in waves of befuddlement that kept men home with their families.

Red's brother who survived the shooting and beating on Houmas land and made his way to the party, lingered for many days before passing. The third brother had faced white man's justice, but found his neck broken in a noose same as any black.

The larger plantations with many slaves banded together more tightly than ever – slave-born meant less and less difference versus African-born and their children, and theirs.

Lizzie's father spent a little less time on frivolities in town, and more time with her, now more traumatized than ever and often found carrying around a shotgun if she left her bedroom, once in a while discharging it at a shadow on the back lawn, just as she had that long-ago day when she sent George to fetch Lyddy so she could have eggs and cheese grits on a Sunday, when George saw the black specks on her collar and a trail of blood out the back door. The shadow had been that of Little Jack as he passed the kitchen door. Had George wanted, he could have followed the trail to the deserted carriage house, but it would be Massa who followed it to Jack's skinny black body crumpled and stiff, alone, on a Sunday morning.

While Lyddy made cheese grits and eggs for his daughter, Massa had mounted a horse and galloped the entire distance to the small settlement just north of The Houmas, where Red and a few guards resided. The men entered the carriage house long after Lyddy had gone back to her cabin. They flung Jack's body across Fire Ball's back, and guided the horse some twenty miles into the swamp, where one more shot was fired and two bodies were left to alligators. One of the guards took Jack's old whip with the specific purpose in mind to use it against a Yankee some day.

* * * * *

Mariel had become a part of the family, almost as close to Lizzie as Lyddy. She went to the child woman in the middle of the night to shoo away the spirits that troubled her sleep, but often Lizzie would not be comforted by Mariel or her father, only by Lyddy, who would lie atop Lizzie's bed sheets and cradle the child-woman in her arms. Lizzie laid her head on Lyddy's

chest, where she awoke the following mornings with barely a recollection of having been spooked.

Strong winter gales stripped the leaves of all but the Live Oaks, magnolias, and azalea bushes. Tall pecan trees stood like skeletons against what more resembled a northern snow sky, day after day. And as strong as winter was, it left as quickly. Bare saucer magnolias opened striated pink blossoms, camellia balls seemed to open all at once, and the tiny buds on azaleas showed themselves pink and white at their tips. It was only February and the cardinals and robins returned, the mourning doves cooed, and the squirrels could be found in every tree. Mamma opossums appeared with their many babies clung to their backs, and the dogs often danced at Lyddy's feet with the striped tails of baby coons dangling out the corners of their mouths like a girl's ponytail.

They were running…

Chapter Twelve

Winds swirled around the corners of the plantation buildings like the whirlpools in The Great Mississippi River. That's what George was thinking, how the leaves whipped up and around in circles like a funnel, tight and quick at the ground, wide and graceful at head level, when he heard a commotion.

The makeshift barge was a new one, designed to carry large carriages and four-horse teams. To cross the river, slaves pulled a rope anchored to both banks through slip rings that hung from the posts on the barge's upriver corners.

George's owner had commissioned woodworkers from Baton Rouge to construct the massive rig, and it was delivered to this spot on the river the previous night by horses that drug it across logs laid lengthwise.

Unlike the previous barge, this one was surfaced with thick slices of milled cypress to form a smooth surface. The design would require less maintenance than the older barge, often out of commission when its shell mortar had to be replaced after long rains and many weeks in the Mississippi's murky waters.

Twenty strong bucks from Houmas and the lands whose owners' carriages they ferried managed the barge that day. Slaves had loaded trunks of clothes, gifts for hosts, barrels of liquor, and the many accoutrements of ladies who would follow on the second trip across the river, then two two-horse carriages were packed tightly on the back end.

George and his friends on the grounds near the big house heard screams. First the ladies', then loud, angry men's voices. Lyddy heard them, as did Miss Lizzie, Mariel, and the other staff readying the house for its new batch of visitors.

The river was low, with northern snows just beginning to melt and drain down the Mississippi River into the deep Louisiana Delta.

By the time those nearby made it to the riverbank, they watched in slow motion as slaves on the barge rushed to secure the rope that had been detached from the west bank and now hung slack between the slip-rings. Slaves tried to keep the rope from slipping through the rings, but it burned the flesh from their hands more with each second.

Others on the barge twisted the loose length of rope around their bodies, all of them desperate to secure the barge and keep the rope from sliding completely through. The Mississippi River could swallow an unattended barge.

The west side of the barge swung around and turned downriver.

The rope pulled the men to the ring post on the Houmas side.

Three barrels of rum toppled over, rolling toward the low corner weighed down by the contingent of men trying to save the rope. The barrels crushed those trying to hold them upright, but that only slowed them enough to give those wound in the ropes time to turn and watch the barrels eject them from the barge into the frigid water while still fighting to untwist themselves.

Without the weight of those men and the barrels, the light front corner lifted and the back dipped below the waterline. The swift current caught the underside of barge.

The carriages overturned. The horses reared, struggling to right themselves and enter the water in a manner that might allow them to swim, but they were unaware of the nature of barges and buoyancy and carriages that could twirl into the depths of those whirlpools. They all slipped into the water.

Without the carriages, the horses could have easily swum to the bank, but the wheels melded into the soft silt. The men who slipped off the front rammed into the carriages and harness and many lines of long-reins.

Men whose valor had led them to save a runaway barge that most would have sacrificed, surrendered their lives because a rope became detached from the west side anchor, near the ladies waiting with their gentlemen, all of whom had watched a white man on a horse ride in and ever-so-gracefully swing his machete around his head once and drop it onto the rope, severing it where it was anchored to its post.

Twenty souls lost their lives to the unforgiving waters.

The white man who flung the machete tried to escape, but was shot in the back by an armed visitor awaiting a barge that would never return. He had been waiting in attendance to gentle ladies now horrified but safe, thanks to his single-shot pistol hidden from the view of those who need not be concerned with the mechanics of providing for their safety.

Because the ferry crossed the river at the beginning of a mighty curve, the jumbled mangling of dead rested in the river just where her waters whipped around the outside of the curve, where it road the bank high with a force much greater than in the straight-aways.

George saw Ramba clutch the rope at its anchor and follow it into the water, intent on finding at least one breathing body. George clamped his son with his huge arms and pulled him back. They were all dead by then. Tears streamed from the eyes of George's eldest son, this half-breed gentle as the man who raised him.

They sprinted to the barn, collected the draft horses, their harness, and long ropes, and galloped them full-on to the river, where they secured one end of the ropes to the horse collars and lassoed the carnage with the other ends.

The trunk-legged draft horses tugged the barge to the bank and beyond, until all the men and horses caught in the reins and carriages, and one man who had been swept into a carriage, were all on land, all of them streaked with slick river silt, rancid like compost.

A barrel caught in the wreckage under the barge popped free when one of the carriages hit bottom and folded over on itself. The slaves and the white folk on the riverbank watched it bob up and down in the twisting water around the big curve and out of sight.

Lyddy and Mariel gathered up the white folks and the workers who had been waiting for the barge. They took both black and white to the big house, serving the men brandy and the ladies thimbles of laudanum for their nerves.

Miss Lizzie stood on the riverbank. At her feet were the frozen faces of the dead, the horses' mouths stretched far to the sides and teeth bare as though in battle.

She looked to the sky to see buzzards already circling. *How do they know…how do they know so quickly*?

Massa had been in the sugar mill wrapping up the final cane press. The old blacksmith rushed to fetch him when George and Ramba came for the horses. By the time the master of The Houmas arrived at the riverbank, it was all over. George and Ramba were detaching the long reins from the carriages and dead horses, unable to remove the collars from their necks, now stiff and bent into unnatural contortions and hooked onto the collars like question marks.

Lizzie still stared into the sky.

Those on the Houmas side were just becoming calm enough to shout and ask what happened to the rope. The words *Yankee* and *machete* leapt across the river.

Massa turned to his fragile child to see her staring across the river now, mouth agape and shivering. He wrapped her in his coat and removed his cravat to use as a scarf around her head, then carried her to her bed.

Chapter Thirteen

A late-night fog rolled over the grand Houmas lawns, great surges crept out from the river and consumed all in its path. It crawled up the walls of the house to the second-floor veranda, where Mariel and Lyddy watched it thicken like a solid. Mariel imagined it was the deck of one of those magnificent paddle-wheelers, where they watched a calm river flow by and they sipped on aperitifs. It occurred to her that Lyddy had never stepped aboard such a vessel. She vowed to take her on the *Mississippi Queen* downriver to New Orleans and back, one day, after all this strife ended…*if*…

Massa checked in on his sweet daughter often, thanking his mistress and head housekeeping nigger for their tenderness with the fragile creature.

George was in the stables, his nose almost touching the big gray mare's head, level with her eyes. She stood, silent, as though to mourn the day's events with her handler, blinking long

lashes like a slow fan, then closing them in the comfort of George's solace, protecting her in the way a human might when others could no longer share such a moment.

He patted her neck and rubbed the sweet spot behind her left ear, then went on to her partner, her brother, almost identical in his deep dapples and shaggy white feet. *Charlie and Mabel*. George wondered who chose such names. Charlie would not be calmed by George's presence. Raging hormones coursed through the veins in his neck, fattening and bulging them to where the naked eye could see his pulse. He smelled the death of those of his own species, couldn't get it out of his nostrils from when he drug their bodies back by the creek where slaves dug a single hole large enough for the four fine-legged walkers that trimmed out their fancy black carriages with impeccable style.

One by one, Ramba had detached the animals from their gnarled tack lines, but not the collars still hooked on their necks. *I cain' drag these fine horse by they feets like a pig.* So he had gently bound the horses with cotton swathes to protect their hide from the three rounds of course rope he wound around their abdomens then strung together with their collars so he could pull them in such a way as to give the appearance of them napping in the sweet grasses of the lawn. He drug them past the sticky smell of brown sugar and molasses being cooked out of the last harvest of cane, then over the close-cropped cane fields. The fields over which they travelled were planted lengthwise toward the back creek, allowing the poor creatures to glide smoothly down the rows. *Awful, just awful if they'da been bouncin' over the rows crosswise.*

It was dark before Ramba finished the job. The last horse had left a path in the dewy St. Augustine, and the blades were still stuck together sideways when he returned to the river to haul the carriages to the fire pit behind the house.

Slaves began covering the dead horses with mounds of scooped-out soil, rich and fertile soil that gave them and their families their sustenance, soils that padded their master's pockets and made it possible for so many to stay put on the only homeland they ever knew or wanted to know. These men…Yankee white folk…for shame. Stories came their way almost daily. Tales about how cotton-plantation niggers a little north were homeless and starving in their bellies with no masters to keep them; how elegant mansions were in shambles or burned out, save a few occupied by troops; how black Union soldiers became cowards, and Confederates heroes.

What would the slaves do if the sugar operation was shut down? How possibly could a nigger decide to be free at the expense of his shelter and sustenance? How possibly could a nigger not want to be free to own himself?

After he transported the fourth and final horse to the backland, Ramba had dismounted Charlie and left him to go graze while he helped the other slaves fill the hole and stack the surplus soil higher than a man's head, almost like one of the old Indian mounds. But this hill, unlike those mounds, would slowly sink in on itself as the horses rotted and left behind only a few bones at first, all mixed up together, eventually only some hair, some teeth.

When he finished his job and went to fetch Charles, Ramba found the big gray stud where he left him, hadn't moved an inch and still stood four-square watching the mound.

"It took some doin' to get him to come on back to the stable," Ramba told George, "buckin' and hollerin', kickin' up a storm."

The few human bodies retrieved were wrapped in cloth and salted with lime. The old carpenter quickly nailed boards brought in from the sawmill: One large box for the three slaves to be transported back to their families across the river, one for the only white man retrieved, the

supervisor of horses for a visitor from the west bank at Natchez, and two more for the valiant men from The Houmas.

The men had barely finished their work when time came for daybreak, though no light could be found. The night sky had been replaced with a cloud of fog that buffered fire lamps and forced the men to look at the ground only a handful of feet before them to find their way home.

By the time fog would have normally lifted, the sky was already shrouded with the thick winter clouds that formed from the cold northern air that was meeting the low Gulf Stream. By mid-morning, sleet covered the horse grave in a mass of sparkle; Massa saw it when he rode out with a lantern. The area around the grave glowed. As he got closer, he saw how the sleet reflected the lantern fire in pops of yellow that jumped from the ground up the sides of the mound.

Massa turned his horse to go. He hadn't noticed that the yellow sparkling mound was lit not only from his own lantern, but also by those of the many now gathered behind him.

Ramba had convinced Massa to bring a rifle with him, and he reached for that gun now, but no need existed for such caution. It was his devoted slaves who followed him to the gravesite.

At the sight of them, his eyes welled up. He shook his head. His shoulders shuddered.

His slaves knew he cried not for the horses, but for the six slaves not recovered from the river. How would he get through the trouble intent on making its way to the Deep South?

"What do we do?" White and black asked the same question.

John Reynolds, a slave from one of the visitors' plantations, stood at the front of the group. He had lost three fellow slaves, and the drowned white man had been in charge of his entourage.

"Le's be done with it," Reynolds forced out, low but strong from deep down in his gut. The slave had taken the name of his owner. Unlike the owners of many plantations further north, South Louisianan owners were unashamed of slaves choosing to use their sir name. Many Northerners believed that blacks with the same sir names reflected poorly on their own family name, but Houmas slaves had found no use to have the last name, or not to. To distinguish between multiple slaves with the same first name, they referred to each other by their trade, a descriptive adjective, or numbers. But this slave was different from the others, and George believed he was the type that would have taken his master's name even if he lived in the Deep South.

No one, including George's master, understood what John Reynolds meant. Fearful that he was speaking only to the master, the slaves said nothing.

Massa looked into their faces, then back at John Reynolds and echoed, "Be done with it?"

"Mournin'."

John Reynolds was to his master as George was to his. Massa Reynolds was at the meeting in the brothel – George had passed the time with John while holding horses as the men finished their cigars out back and said their final goodbyes.

The burly black man nearly as dark and tall as George but built more like a runner than a worker, had a plan that could be executed only with the help of many slaves, more than the number who resided on his plantation, though it was over two hundred at the time…less the three lost to the river the previous day.

John asked the master if he could send for George. They waited for one of the children to fetch him, all standing motionless save for the horse, who nervously adjusted his weight and fought for more rein.

When George arrived, he stopped his run near his master, head bowed. "Massa?"

"It be me, George. I be the one sent for you."

George backed up a step and jerked his head up as if to ask his master to confirm this slave's quite improbable claim. Massa nodded, then pointed at John Reynolds.

"Suh, if you be 'greeble, I be likin' for me and George to be goin' in town up by the red stick, and fetchin' back the man who done rode wit' the man done flung that machete. We be needin' use of yourn horses, suh, and then we be needin' all the slaves we could find to be protectin' all us when they Yankee soldiers in town be comin' down to find us afta dat."

That was the first step the slaves of South Louisiana took to preserve their way of life, African-born and otherwise.

* * * * *

The murderer's partner was quietly kidnapped and sliced up with his own weapon. Hours later, three hundred slaves formed human shields down multiple paths they hoped would divert the soldiers onto routes leading away from The Houmas.

Nineteen niggers lost their lives fighting off the eight soldiers, pulling them off their horses while being shot at, some taking bullets and dying on the spot, others surviving long enough to make it home, then die and be buried before anyone in town could know there were shot niggers on nearby plantations.

All the niggers looked the same in the dark without lanterns, and no soldiers survived to tell others in what direction they went anyway. The news of the soldiers' deaths reached the remaining few soldiers in town only after seven men on horses thundered at full gallop and threw burlap sacks into the streets. Those riders could not be identified as black or white, and they were long gone by the time the sacks were upended for one head to roll from each.

Those soldiers tacked and mounted their horses, but by the time they tracked the hoof prints to a clearing in the woods about three miles from the red stick, no less than five groups of hoof tracks and human footprints led in five different directions, all ending up in bayous, creeks, or the river, where none could be followed.

Chapter Fourteen

It would all turn sour after that. Bands of whites took it upon themselves to hunt down slaves who strayed from their plantations. They went on shooting frenzies, classifying any blacks they found as runaways, not in support of the Yankees, but rather for their own enjoyment. Niggers could be found hanging from trees most mornings.

Bands of slaves in retribution hunted down the white killers and met them with the same favor as that first night, though rolling heads into town in burlap sacks became too dangerous. Too many Yankees had arrived.

When the soldiers went out looking for whites who sympathized with plantation owners and slaves loyal to their lifestyle, they often killed the whites out looking for slaves to kill. The new replacement soldiers hadn't been in town long enough to know what side which whites supported. More soldiers died quicker and quicker until they finally stopped hunting the woods. That was the day the blacks became free.

Other than a few straggler Southerners unwilling to accept defeat, the way of the South had met its demise.

Frantic blacks hit the streets and trails up north, but only after nightfall. The sympathizers were angrier than ever. Many of the slaves who successfully left their homes returned weeks later hoping for the plantation owner's forgiveness, begging to return to their cabins.

It would be many months before blacks made it to the North – normally men alone who had gone out to see what the possibilities for their families might be. Those few who did come back for their families promising a decent wage and housing eventually faced the problem of the majority. Too many blacks competing for Northern jobs that were mostly held by whites already.

When blacks were hired onto white farms, the North began to grow its own prejudice against the blacks stealing white men's work.

Many who had successfully made the trip north then back south were not so fortunate with families in tow.

Among those first to leave the plantations on the Mississippi River deep down in Louisiana were the blacks previously owned by free men of color. The black owners of small lands had much less room in their budgets to pay the higher wages blacks demanded on

principal. And they left on principal. One of their own had enslaved them, and such free men of color were more culpable than the whites.

The black workforce needed roofs over their heads and the means to work land, but black owners hadn't the revenues to pay the higher wages, and had lost the majority of their capital investments – assets now free to take their leave.

Many larger plantations had also lost a great deal of their wealth, but most in South Louisiana had been so generous with their slaves that the new wages were often less than what they had spent to support their slaves, especially after migrant workers and other ethnicities moved into the area, all satisfied with the lower wages that were higher than any they had ever seen.

About eighty slaves left The Houmas, most of them young slave-born bucks, many of those the sons of Africans who still told the stories of freedom and peaceful living, of wild game hunting, and rites of passage. The older Africans stayed put.

Some who fled had wives and a single child small enough to carry, small enough to demand little food.

Only a handful of families with multiple children or aged grandparents left The Houmas, and all returned within weeks, having lost at least one family member to the cold, starvation, or bullets of those from whom they tried to steal small amounts of food.

Many more were jailed. Houmas slaves knew nothing of what happened to the families that never returned.

The blacks who did return were welcomed back into the fold. Massa had decided to not keep a record of the names of those who left. He only kept a total number, which George provided every Monday morning. That way, when they returned, Massa would have shielded

himself from the disappointment in their leaving and feelings of resentment for what fields had not been planted in the spring.

Fewer planted fields meant less sugar was sold, less money to support slaves, and fewer extravagances to be had. Fewer month-long visitors, fewer parties, fewer kitchen gardens for the ex-slaves. More piglets sold at market left less gratuity to the benefit of free blacks, less revenue for new equipment, less money for seeds.

Eventually, the number of workers on Houmas land increased as the ex-slaves of smaller plantations became hungrier after their owners returned to Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia.

Then the numbers decreased, as more and more blacks opted for sharecropping but, without the equipment, and with the increased costs of refining, and with mill-owning plantation owners forced to charge more just to stay in operation, more failed.

After one full year, the population of ex-slaves in South Louisiana had already bottomed out and was rising. At the end of two years, it increased. Once the population was greater than before the war, Massa asked George to no longer count.

By the time three years had passed, half of the sharecroppers failed. After three years, Massa's reserves were depleted. After four, no longer able to pay for itself, the big house and the out-buildings fell into disrepair.

Some portions of land were sold off in small tracts at miserly prices.

Cane fields overgrown with weeds and grass demanded little on the auction block for those desperate to sell, and private sales were hardly better.

Chapter Sixteen

George and Lyddy had four children to love, the two not from George's loin receiving a full share. The family would become the last slaves supported by Massa, though many free blacks resided in the cabins on slave row.

The old blacksmith was gone, as were all the carpenters. Ramba filled in for them, while the younger children cared for a few horses and mules that had not been sold off.

Massa said he'd head northeast, though not past the Mason Dixon line. He would remain a Southern gentleman and enter the political arena to try to do right by the Southern states, if

only the chickens and hogs could hold out long enough for him to sell enough property to reenter a proper place in society in Georgia, or South Carolina, or Virginia, wherever he landed.

He had not yet announced who might make the trip with him.

Would he drive his own carriage or would Ramba attend to that job?

Who would drive the wagon with his few remaining belongings?

Could Mariel possibly return with him? But what if he must drop her in New Orleans on his way out, leaving her with no opportunity for providing for her sustenance?

Would Massa want Lyddy to go with him to take care of Miss Lizzie, or would Mariel?

Would George allow his family to be split up, or would he conclude that to starve together would be better than half of them starving alone?

Maybe Massa would find a buyer for the big house and the few fields left in his possession, and the whole family would have abundant food and work again.

George thought about the old free man of color who owned that small plantation just a bit upriver. Who would take care of him without support from Massa? Had Massa continued to support him through these difficult times? Is Massa supporting him now? Does Massa have enough to bring all of his favorite slaves with him? Surely he must. Surely, Massa has a home wherever he's going, or will obtain one, or maybe has more than one, one each in those three states. Could he really? But what if he already has maids and horsemen in those places? Would there be enough room for all of the children. Maybe the young ones could be put into service if the house was big enough.

And when would Massa tell them their fate? Any day now? Could they support themselves on the meager crops and pig runts for months to come?

George stood in the kitchen of the big house. Lyddy rested her head on his chest, and he chastised himself for not thinking more about the concerns of his wife. This was her kitchen, where she spent most every wakened hour. This, her kitchen, where a crack from a shotgun rang out, a gun lay resting against her stove and she was summoned to make eggs and cheese grits, where the gunpowder had still hung heavy, heavier even than Massa's cherry-tobacco pipe smoke. This, her kitchen, where a trail of blood crossed the threshold where Little Jack was last seen, other than the image of him and his gangly old horse at the front gates. The deep scars on George's back tingled with the thought.

This kitchen, which still held the heavy aromas of the double-butter pound cake Miss Lizzie so loved, the crawfish étouffée her master bragged about, the oven that baked honey biscuits so right.

This kitchen that kept her away from her own children many days and nights.

This kitchen so close to Massa that she stayed in his mind all too much just by her proximity, with two light black children made, then raised by a proud black man as his own.

George realized he had never had that talk with his oldest and youngest, the one he planned to explain why they held little resemblance to George and Lyddy's other nappy-haired, charcoal-skinned children. *But Lyddy herself was mulatto, so maybe they thought that bit of white in they mammy's blood could make a child lighter than she be.* George's head spun. Maybe it was common knowledge among the plantation children; many light children knew where they came from. Maybe his already knew, but what was worse? Finding out from outsiders or by their loving father? Had the dark blackies ridiculed the light ones?

George held Lyddy a moment longer, then left without looking in her face to see the desperation she attempted to hide. People would be arriving soon, though not for the grand visits

Massa hosted in bygone years. The farm equipment had been pulled out of the fields and up to the back of the big house. George and all his children had rubbed the rusty parts with sand to remove the orange spots, then with fine river sediment to make the metals shine – almost, but not quite polished looking, as Massa would have preferred.

White men and black from the Northern states had landed like vultures on dead rats when the plantations started failing. Three cents on the dollar, maybe five, that was all they'd offer. But theirs was the only cash to be had, and twenty cane wagons garnered the value of less than one. The Yankees' spirits lifted as they turned off the river road and trotted their horses up the long row of ancients Live Oaks, the *Old Gentlemen*. Their smiles were not for the beauty of the Old Gentlemen, but rather the cracking paint on a big house with overgrown fields past the horizon.

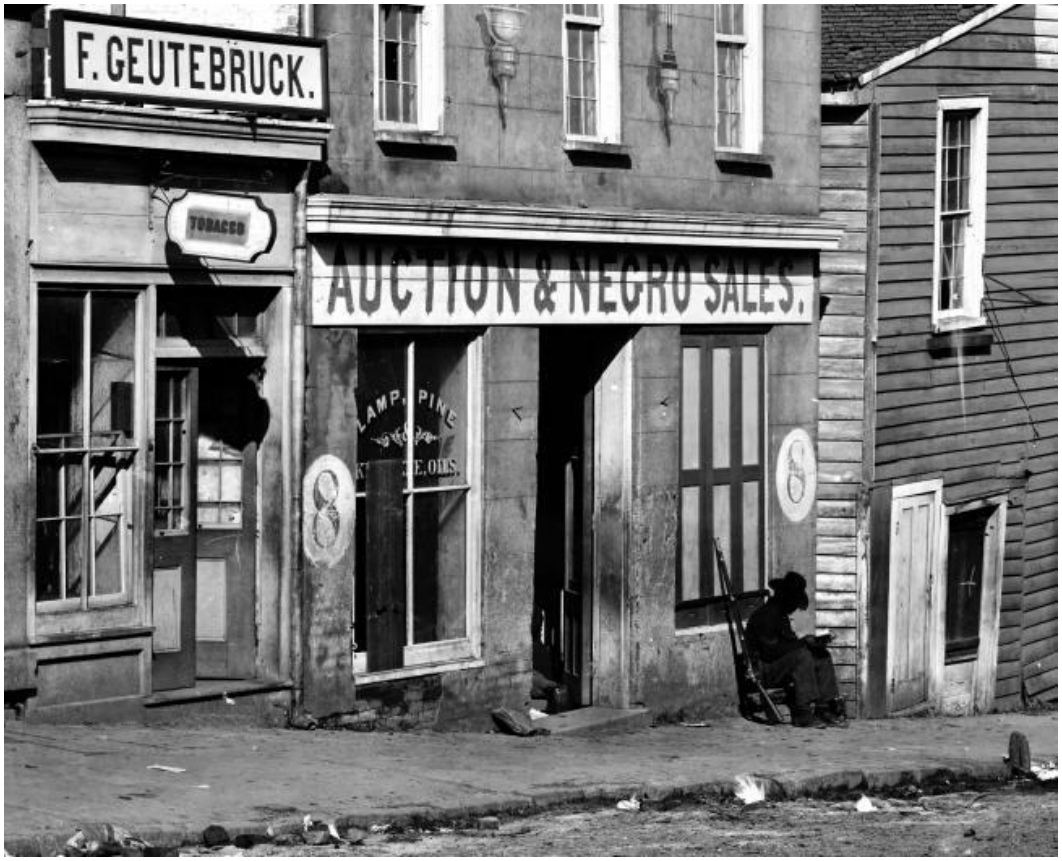
They arrived with barely a bulge in their pockets. Long gone were the money boxes required to hold the dollars and coins needed to purchase a major item, like a slave, like George on that auction block inside those tall dingy brick walls where slaves were stored while awaiting sale, while awaiting the determination of their futures. What kind of master they would serve, would they employ cruel slave drivers.

George still remembered the stench of the holding rooms, their ghastly smell of urine in overflowing pots with feces bobbing at the surface.

Massa had one of those money boxes back then. The men who would buy his farm equipment could keep enough cash in a single pocket.

After The Great Flood of 1927, the WPA built a tall levee, which required cutting down over half of the Old Gentlemen. You can see the remaining Old Gentlemen at Houmas House Plantation and Gardens, and take pictures of the tunnel they form, but this was the view when George lived at The Houmas.

Old storytellers speak of the sixteen workmen who tried to float the desecrated trees to a New Orleans mill. They say the men died in their effort to profit from the defilement, their bodies never again to be seen. To mourn the loss of their brothers, the Old Gentlemen bowed low to the ground for several days.



Slave Auction Site
Photograph Courtesy of Good, Inc. (awaiting permission)

Chapter Seventeen

Sweet, sticky smoke from the burn-off fires hovered low over the fields, remnants of cane and long, dried-out leaves that flittered once and again. Ash covered everything for miles around, as it did every year, but the bouquet that normally left plantation residents with a certain satisfaction – another year come and gone, time to prepare the fields for spring planting – today left them with the deep frowns and burrowed foreheads of melancholy over the events of recent years, and remorse over situations they weren't responsible for. Their quivering insides were constant reminders of their fear of the unknown and grief over the loss of life and lifestyle, both nigger and white.

Lizzie tried to speak her peace to Mariel, but Mariel pat her forearm and hushed her with, "Don't worry yourn pretty head wit' such nonsense." Lizzie only fell into a more sullen state. The prospect of leaving the solace of her room to venture long distances into wilderness on cold and bumpy paths with no rest throughout the day, only to end up in a land where she was sure she would be surrounded by well-meaning visitors and a calendar of daily events she'd have to suffer through…all this left Lizzie in her bed and hiding her head under the beautiful thick quilts Lyddy taught her to make. She had no remorse for leaving her friends and acquaintances, but then, Lizzie had not yet considered that her black friends might not make the trip. Throughout the months that led up to the relocation, Lizzie had not even considered the possibility of life without them.

Lyddy and Mariel did their best to bolster her confidence and courage, telling her how nice it would be *when you live in such a pretty new house on land with hills, not flat like the delta, then you be able to gain a fresh new perspective on life* – the fancy words Massa had told them to repeat to Miss Lizzie.

The few times Lizzie responded to their predictions, it was with her own version of the future, more trying to convince herself that the people who loved her were correct in their analysis of the situation, though never wholly believing it. It was easy for Lizzie to put forth that face everyone wanted to see, the batting lashes and dimpled cheeks so demure and innocent that they could warm the insides. Lizzie hated that she had such an adept ability to masquerade whenever others started with their looks of pity and concern. She was accustomed to it.

Ito and Riza were hardly to be found most days, Ramba stayed close to his father, and Shanda stayed at Lizzie's side now, all too excited to hear her beloved Lizzie tell tale of new adventures, saying *we* will do this and such, always referring to *our* plans and activities in the

new house. She even went so far as to tell Lyddy and Mariel that they too would love the new house because, in city houses, the slave quarters – well, they aren't really *called* slaves quarters, she corrected herself, but their rooms would be just out back of the house, maybe even part of the big house, with smooth polished floors and walls maybe even covered with silk and painted with flowers, like her room at The Houmas.

Still, the only person who knew whether or not *they* were all going was the owner of the now pitiful, rundown big house on the river. He didn't yet have a buyer.

For all the tenderness in his heart for the remaining ex-slaves, and no matter how his heart quivered at the thought of them sharing their small allocation of foodstuffs with those who squatted in the old slaves quarters just to have a roof over their head and a fireplace to keep them warm and a shovel and a hoe to try to bring life to tiny kitchen gardens, he was still a businessman, all business. George's family knew he would not – no, could not – make the relocation decisions from his heart. "It be a point of bi'ness," George explained to his wife and children.

George's eyes nowadays hung a bit droopy below his eyebrow. He had suffered through beatings harsher than any animal ever whipped. His wife had endured rape and twice subsequently birthed babies who started out white, like all nigger babies, but stayed too white to be the son and daughter of a charcoal-black man, their hair not kinky enough to require the oils that nappy heads do.

George had been kicked and whipped with riding crops if a man in town thought he met eyes with a white woman. He had been spat upon countless times for not groveling quite as demurely as a man – or woman – thought he should, often followed by a kicking if he wasn't humbled enough by the spit.

He had been thrown about in his own mind trying to be grateful for a man who owned him but was kinder than many, appreciative of his slaves' hard work, and generous enough to provide all with shoes and seeds and chickens and piglets and the use of farm equipment and honey from the hives and molasses and sugar from the mill and sacks of flower more than they could use and stocks of potatoes from a garden planted big enough to feed hundreds of niggers but, still, George had been property. His children were never allowed to read in public, and their parents never learned. They'd never been to town with a penny to walk into the general store and ask for a stick of mint or a caramel with the smiley faces and exuberance of cute little blonde girls with silken curls that bobbed as they danced their excited jib in anticipation when they watched the gay white man behind the counter reach inside tall jars, pick up one candy, then the next, then finally extract the perfect striped cane and gently stoop down to hand it over and pat a head.

His daughters had never walked into the milliner's shop or a boutique. They had never run their fingers across lengths of fabric smooth to the touch even with their rough and chaffed hands. They had never worn a new dress of their own, save for the youngest, Shanda.

Neither Ramba nor Ito had ever owned a horse, never rode into town to court a girl, never bought one a flower for her hair. They had never enjoyed the privacy of a garconierre, nor fine scotch to sip upon. They had never owned a suit or even a jacket, save Ramba as a driver.

George's children had never enjoyed a conversation where they could stand up straight and tall and look at a white person in the eyes, maybe laugh at a small joke, or receive a kiss on the cheek or the top of their head for a small favor, save for those by Miss Lizzie. Save for Miss Lizzie, they had only experienced such expressions of love and care from blacks. Lyddy had hugged and kissed and held Lizzie in her arms, and at times Lizzie had touched Lyddy cheek-to-

cheek or grasped her hand while in grief, but they hadn't hugged in a greeting since adolescence. Lyddy had held a very young Lizzie in the way of a nanny or loving mother. She had brushed tears from her eyes while looking directly into her face, all cuddled in her arms, rocking a soothing sway to calm her or put her to sleep for naps and at night.

Damn them whites! Damn them Africans who done sold they souls to kidnappers done run 'em down or caught 'em in nets.

Damn them whites that sold they free blacks to disease ships.

Damn the slave traders that strip off they clothes and manhood to get a extra coin on the block.

* * * * *

After the auction behind The Houmas house, Ramba and George stowed the few unsold pieces of machinery in empty horse stalls, and returned the silver and fine furnishings that did not garner a bid back to their former placements…on the floor perhaps, where the furniture they sat upon had once rested.

When they finished, George tacked a horse, slid a knife into his belt up front and one of Massa's pistols in the back, and cut across the cane fields to intercept the auctioneer before he made it back to town.

George pulled him off his horse.

Chapter Eighteen

It was drizzling by then. George noticed tiny droplets standing like round pebbles on the horse's winter coat when the auctioneer reached for the sidearm George had noted earlier this day…and once before. The man hit the ground and George stomped on his right arm, the one holding the pistol, then reached into the waist of his pants and pulled out the knife he used to disembowel deer out in the woods. He slit the man's throat, watched the man watch him, eyes wide with surprise and disbelief, perhaps with a small amount of begging for George's mercy, pursing his lips to ask *why*. But the slash was deep and clean. George had always held his knife

in good repair, a point of pride that he was a slave who was allowed to carry such a weapon at times other than during the hunt.

But today really was a hunt. A hunt for a man George had seen once before. The man rode a horse then too.

It was that windy night long-ago beside The Great Mississippi River, when family and friends, children and grandparents danced around a bonfire, singing a hymn or two the preacher taught them, and others whose origin no one alive remembered.

The auctioneer and his friends came on the fast. George felt the rumble of far-off hooves in the pit of his stomach, then the thunder and accompanying rattle of tack and spurs, then the booming discharge of buffalo rifles and a bullet that whizzed by.

When he was done with the auctioneer, George rode back to the big house the same way he came, through the back fields north of the big house and along the stream where slave wives washed clothes all the while moaning those torturous songs of injustice to their race.

He washed himself in the thin water. He cleaned his knife and threw water on his saddle where smudges of the man's blood told a crazed story of vengeance, of hate, despair, and overpowering injustice to an entire people. He smiled, and he laughed, then he cried for what was to come. He remounted and travelled in the direction of his home. It wouldn't be long, maybe a day or two, before the men in town noticed the auctioneer was gone. But maybe he had a wife who would notice his absence this very night. George had slid the man's body some number of yards off the trail, through the crisp winter leaves, through blackberry bushes that tore his skin like razors. Then he settled it in a hollowed-out pecan tree. Maybe the wolves and wild dogs or a black bear would decimate the body before its stench alerted passersby. Maybe not.

Once the man's absence was noticed…or maybe his horse would return` without its rider very quickly indeed…that would be even faster than George thought.

He continued his trek upstream.

Soon enough, the dogs would trace a scent of death from the trail into the woods and whatever remains could be found. George hoped the only remnants would be shredded boots with scraps of their occupants – only blood, maybe a few small foot bones scattered among the leaves.

Soon enough, they would track the horse back to where it left the stream it had followed back to town. If the hounds followed that scent, George would have more time to figure out what to do. He believed his master (he and his family couldn't find it inside them to call him Mister, though Mariel had always addressed him in such a manner), he knew Massa would not see his actions as criminal, but rather of just punishment. And George knew that, although he would not sanction the action, his master would not admonish him.

The following day, the townsmen collected themselves to search for the missing auctioneer. He did indeed have a wife.

After brothels were searched and word about his absence disseminated, the townsmen became suspicious. The man hadn't even stopped for a whiskey on his way home, and no one had seen him save a few passersby on the river road.

It was evening by then, and the men developed a plan to search in groups of three to five in all directions. Maybe the auctioneer got caught up in another altercation between either the soldiers or the niggers and the sympathizers. No telling where he was.

Then the horse showed up.

Early the next day, the entourage collected their hounds and set off in directions toward the river and away, and up- and downriver. It wasn't long before the downriver team nudged their horses to pick up the pace and catch up with their screaming dogs.

One of the five returned to town to alert others of their findings, one stayed with what little remained of the auctioneer, and the other three continued the hunt.

The three followed their dogs to the creek, then up and down the banks in ever-distant attempts to pick up the trail of whatever or whoever killed the auctioneer. In less than an hour, the dogs found a scent and headed north, only to be deposited at the town's livery stable.

The poor auctioneer had lost his life to a bear. His boots, as George had imagined, were bloody and shredded, one of them actually gnawed through at the heel.

When all the teams returned to town, a group headed back into the woods to find the bear. Their dogs latched on to George's scent where he exited the stream on Houmas land.

Had those men stopped to examine the soil before proceeding to Massa's big house, they'd have found only hoof prints, no evidence of a bear, but, as it stood, when they knocked on the front door, a harsh warning was issued for a bear on the prowl.

The dogs circled the property time and time again, indicating what the men thought was the scent of a bear that had most likely put the residents' lives in great danger, then had gone back the same way he came.

William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South* described the twelve pair of *Old Gentlemen* as "An avenue lined with trees with branches close set, drooping and overreaching a walk paved with red brick."

Massa had greeted them with a smile at the front door, invited them in.

Lyddy brewed coffee with chicory and served it in the smoking room, where the four sat and puffed on cigars while they told the tale of a dangerous predator.

Lyddy's hands shook as she poured the thick elixir. Massa expressed his look of concern…for his daughter, of course…and the little livestock that remained.

"Keep yo' niggers on guard." Then the men mounted the three horses Ramba attended to out front, stilling his quivers until the men had trotted past the Old Gentlemen and turned right onto the river road.

The Houmas Smoking Room

Men’s smoking rooms were painted in dark colors
to help conceal tobacco stains on the walls.

Chapter Nineteen

Lyddy had taken to sleeping on the bed next to George's ill mother in recent weeks. Riza assumed responsibility for the big house, and though she didn't cook as well as her mother, she was certainly competent and Massa said nothing of her slow ways, most evident in the abandonment of long-standing meal schedules.

There weren't that many mouths to feed anymore, and George and Lyddy's two youngest were old enough to help clean the big house, though Ito thought he was old enough to do men's work and Shanda still wanted to stay at Miss Lizzie's side and be her doll.

* * * * *

Something was happening at the big house. Mammy was asleep when Lyddy heard crackles. When she picked up a whif of smoke, she ran outside to see a glow over the north fields. She hollarded "Fire" at the top of her lungs and started running as fast as she could toward her own home, but she wasn't alone. Slaves with blankets were running out of their front doors and headding toward the glow.

It wouldn't be hard to douse the fire, Lyddy thought. It was more the fear of arsonists that made her hands tremble.

She turned around and headed for the big house. "Massa! Massa!" she screamed, then "Miss Lizzie! Miss Lizzie." She threw open the kitchen door so hard that she gasped first at her strength and then the glass that stabbed her feet so that she had to run on her toes, her heart beating so fast and loud that she felt the throb in her temples as she started up the staircase.

She met Massa on the landing and could only point. He grasped and shook her shoulders but said nothing.

Neither did Lyddy until Massa's hand met her face.

Lyddy pointed again and released a barely audible, "Field on fire."

"Go sit with Lizzie," he said, then, "It'll be okay. It's time to burn the cane anyway."

Lizzie wondered why he was so calm. "But them men! They comin' burn this house!"

"They *won't*," he called over his shoulder as she watched him run on in only his gown and house shoes.

Lyddy was picking shards of glass from her feet, dripping blood into a puddle and wondering why her feet didn't hurt when she looked up to see Lizzie gasp and collapse into a lump of frill at her doorway.

* * * * *

By the time Massa reached the north field, slaves had already dug a trough at the south edge of the field.

"Ain' nothin' to do," George told him.

Massa licked a finger to feel for a wind, then left the slaves to stand guard over the trench and headed back home.

He headed upstairs to dress, then to his office. All Elizabeth's latest telegraph read was *Please come*, was all it said so he saddled his own horse and made a fast gallop to town.

He met a posse on the way to the sheriff's office and, after assuring them the fire was contained, went on to pound on the door of the telegraph office. "Meet at Ashley House. Three days."

* * * * *

Ashley House, some thirty miles upriver from Charleston, was set aback from the Ashley River, thin and far enough up into the hills to be safe from the few remaining troops trafficking the waters. After Charleston had fallen. This would likely be Massa's final trip without his family. He'd take the rail west to Texas before going north toward the Mason-Dixon then east through Arkansas to approach North Carolina without incident.

Ashley House had been built by Massa's ancestors before the Revolution, somehow knowing the hills would be safe for many generations. Massa often let his father's words float through his mind…*It is incumbent upon patriarchs that we provide not only the physical requirements of their lineage, but too the moral fiber that constitutes the very character we espouse*, the mantra handed down through those many generations.

Was he doing the best he could not only for his blood family but to all in his care?

* * * * *

Lizzie stayed behind when Massa took trips to Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia to make deals with his remaining funds and – *George and his family hoped* – to find a home for his family and slaves. It was hard for Massa's newly freed blacks not to perceive of themselves as slaves. Their lives had changed almost imperceptibly save for the killings since the War and its conclusion.

Each time he returned to his beloved Houmas land, he found George's mother weaker, and each time he returned to his big house, he received updates from Mariel that his daughter left her room less and less, eventually to the point of venturing out only to care for Mammy so Lyddy could tend to her own family.

Lizzie sat in a chair beside Mammy's fireplace near the bed George had moved close to the warmth, and read stories to the old woman as she dozed on and off. She read stories from a thick book about great men in velvet suits, some kind and gentle, others powerful and ruthless. They abused their women and slaves, and they adored them as well, including the slaves – though those situations were rare in this big book, and their adoration was limited to that of the finest of nigresses.

The book made no reference to children born of such encounters. George's mother wondered if maybe she had slept through those passages.

The old woman's fatigue was soon met with a yellowing of the whites of her eyes and pain in her lower parts. Doc had no cure. Time, he said, just that one word, time.

Neither Lyddy nor George nor his mother understood what Doc meant, and they were afraid to ask, the old slave ways of never questioning those in positions of authority keeping

them from understanding whether the doctor meant the frail thing was at the end of her time, or that time and waiting was all that could be done, or that perhaps in time she might recover.

When she weakened to the point where her bodily fluids leaked, Riza, George, and Ramba took turns helping Lyddy clean her and, eventually, as the old slave's strength further deteriorated, to turn her into different positions. A slow, unwelcome realization was surfacing: Her time on earth was indeed limited to most likely a number of short weeks if not days.

* * * * *

George was fast asleep in the wee hours when a pounding on the wall of his home shook him awake. By the time he reached the door, he saw Lyddy waving for him to come.

Dew had already set in and the hem of Lyddy's skirt was soaked some five inches up. *How much dew could be on the ground this time of year to soak her skirt so bad in that short walk?*

He threw a pair of shoes tied together by their laces over his shoulder, then ran to catch up with Lyddy on back to the cabin where his mother had lived alone for decades. She would live alone no more.

When George opened the door, he realized why Lyddy's hems were wet like they were. She had first walked to the big house and awakened Mariel, who in turn awoke Massa and Miss Lizzie. They had been the first to know of the passing.

Now George wondered why the dogs hadn't awakened him. *They not happy when nobody traipsin' 'cross the way in the middle of the night. Maybe they still sleepin'.* He had to keep thinking about such things. He had to. He would force himself to. He was a strong black man accustomed to all manner of death. He saw his friends murdered beside the river. He had watched a transgressing slave die from the fever that followed one of Little Jack's beatings. He

had known the death stench that came with Lyddy's stillborn and miscarried babies. He had ended one life on his own. But nothing such as this.

* * * * *

Lizzie left to awaken and dress Shanda so they could fetch some flowers from the rose garden, and Ramba, who had been at his grandmother's side when she passed, walked with Lizzie so he could have Ito help him select only the most beautifully striated planks of oak for his grandmother's final resting bed.

The old carpenter was long gone. Ramba was thankful that he did not live to see the entire demise of The Houmas, nor the construction of this box. He planed and sanded, and hammered and sanded until his nostrils filled with that fresh and musky scent he loved. When he finally stepped back to inspect his creation, he accepted that, though his work could not rival that of the old man carpenter under whom he had apprenticed, he had to admit that it was certainly handsome. What concerned him more were the ragged edges of the cross he whittled into the top of the box. Although his grandmother and their family still had a very limited understanding of the Lawd Jesus, Ramba knew it would please her to know the preacher would be pleased with such a tribute. He decided to char the relief with an ember from a burning stick of pecan, hoping the black smudges would hide some of the unevenness.

It was well into the afternoon when Ramba applied the last coat of oil. Ito hadn't said a word since Ramba told him his grandmother was dead, and had fallen asleep in the wagon after his brother had finished with the hammer. Ramba had to awaken him to help load the box.

He hitched a mule and led him with one hand, his brother's limp hand in the other.

When they returned to their grandmother's cabin, they found Riza and their mother had already cleaned the woman's body, and were waiting for the box so she could be transported to

the big house, where she would be dressed in one of Miss Lizzie's finest white gowns, now too large for the woman's emaciated body. It was a fine, fine dress she would have loved to wear, but not laying on fresh white linens on a couch in the ladies' drawing room, waiting on her mourners.

George had retrieved the preacher from town and stopped at the plantations along the way to inform them of the loss of his mother. Ramba had watched his father closely since his return, stoic, in a corner, expressionless for some time as he watched the steady flow of mourners, both black and white, stroll past his mother's body.

Massa and Mariel had brought him the fine shirt and pant he once wore when he drove his white owner to formal events, the proud clothes of a proud man who once stood at his post in front of the finest house on the Mississippi and received Massa's many sophisticated visitors. He did not wear the velvet coat, nor did he wear the top-hat, but he did wear a fine French cravat pinned with a pearl stud by its owner, Massa himself.

Chapter Twenty

George's fourth child was still so young she could barely be counted as a slave…ex-slave…worker worthy of her keep, still too young to completely comprehend the goings on of recent weeks – why an auction, why so many new faces squatting in not such secrecy, why goodbyes to little black girls not so jet like she and one sibling, both so much lighter than the other two.

Little Shanda was not as pretty as Riza, she knew that. Her lighter hair was like half-pulled cotton, not tight curls, and the oil her sister used to make it shiny and soft to touch only flattened the less curly spots and left her head looking like a cat with big wet splotches.

But Shanda had something her older sister did not: Miss Lizzie. Lizzie doted on Shanda as if she were her own little china doll. At eight years of age, Shanda was old enough to understand Miss Lizzie's behavior toward her was different from that with any of the other children on the plantation. Did she guess this little light nigger was her sister? Shanda knew the chiding by the dark children must be true. Even in her black-child mind, it made sense. She had seen how two dogs of different colors birthed dogs that looked a little like both. Either that or they had some like one or the other parent. Must be the same for folks, too.

Lizzie and Shanda's love affair had begun mostly when she started helping her mother with chores in the big house, though she'd been told that Miss Lizzie had been there at her birth. She had also been there for the birth of Ito, Shanda's brother just a little older than herself, so she was told, but Shanda reckoned Miss Lizzie liked her more because she never turned dark in the weeks after her birth, not like Riza and Ito had. Maybe because she looked more like a white baby. Maybe that was why.

Troubling thoughts for a child too young to comprehend the goings on of such delicate situations. Shanda hadn't lived enough years to be able to grasp the meaning of her mind, its ability to evaluate and apply logic so adeptly. What she did know was that she felt like an outsider, even among the light plantation children, even in her own family. And being doted upon by her beloved Lizzie was a knife that cut going and coming. Such pleasures to be had under Miss Lizzie's wing, such guilt and pressure because of her *specialness*.

What if Massa goin' separate us?

Lyddy's sweet daughter lay asleep on her lap while her mother fingered the fine lace of her frilly dress, one of many Lizzie had sent off for in the mail. Lyddy knew Miss Lizzie could not buy such dresses in town, not with such a high price to pay for doting on a nigger child, yet the fact was no secret in town, as Shanda had often showed herself near the big house when guests were present. Lyddy wondered if they realized these were actually new dresses on her daughter's back – there was a small chance they considered, probably only briefly at best, whether these dresses were passed down from white girls in town as they grew. Could be, Lyddy rationalized, but those scrunched-up noses and foreheads would have been the result whether they were convinced a nigger child took to wearing white girls' clothes, or she had worn them new. No one wanted to see a darkie dressed up in a clean, frilly dress and satin ribbons tying back her wet-cat hair.

* * * * *

New Orleans had fallen long before the end of the war, but Massa told his niggers they were free before the first cannon was fired in Louisiana. Blacks could now look straight into the whites' eyes, though they didn't dare. Mariel seemed to be more willing to step back from the exercise of the small amount of power she previously possessed. Shanda was proud, imagined she was one of the fancy ladies pulling thread in the needlepoint room in the big house.

Fortunes could be made, Shanda thought. At only eight years of age, her mind more open than those of her older siblings and parents, unencumbered by those many years of subservience, powerlessness.

Charms would come her way, charms, Shanda believed, that would override her blatant aesthetic handicaps. She would wear ribbons of silk in her hair, and that was what people would notice, not the raggedy, mismatched locks it adorned.

She would rely on Miss Lizzie to teach her manners, she'd watch her hold cup handles with only her thumb and first two fingers, the other two fanned out like the delicate wing of a thrush so rare, so xx that she dreamed about it for weeks. She was already starting to clean her nails every day. This was one more disadvantage of being light-skinned – the lighter nails were more translucent so as to reveal the dirt more plainly. Every few days, she retrieved her hidden handkerchief, the one with little roses and lace, one she received from Miss Lizzie. Filled with her few treasures, Shanda drew out the slim strips of hickory she used to clean her nail undersides.[2]

[2] To follow events in chronological order, read the transcript of the third channeling session with Georgia O'Connor in Appendix C before proceeding. You may also use your smart phone with an app such as *Scan* to utilize the QR (Quick Response code) to the right and listen to the actual recording on YouTube®, or access the YouTube® video at http://youtu.be/-PEkk3pf-es.

Chapter Twenty-One

Near the Carolinas, things seemed to change yet somehow remain as they were before the War. Big black studs still wore tails and velvet top-hats as they drove their employers' carriages. Blacks were treated no differently from before, though the seething whites, especially the ladies, no longer bothered to hide their disdain.

More and more Yankees relocated into Southern cities, but the whites despised them so deeply that they would unwittingly set an example for ex-slaves who took their lead and found themselves hating the unwelcome invaders perhaps more than they were hated. It was the slaves

who lost their homes, they who must give the appearance of conformation to whities, they who must continue their subservience.

Possessions now looted, busted into thousands of pieces studded with shrapnel, or incinerated, Massa's entourage watched sobbing Southerners cry over the loss of belongings as though they were among the hundreds of thousands of brave lives downed on the battlefield.

Graveyards and battlefields spread more widely than the towns themselves, oceans of whitewashed crosses rolling over the hills like whitecaps beautiful and alive, but where bones rotted inches below the surface.

They covered their faces from swarming flies, their noses to the stench of decaying blood now putrid saturating the soil. The horses swished and shook their heads from the onslaught in ears and eyes, kicked out in protest to bitten loins.

* * * * *

George's sons were strong like their father, but the strength of the women amazed him. He watched his youngest, watched her just as he had watched Lizzie at the same age. His wife had grown up almost like an older sister to Miss Lizzie, and Riza had grown up as a playmate with this girl-lady of the house, but to George's youngest, Miss Lizzie extended a mother's love.

George and Lyddy took to sitting with Lizzie when they were alone and she read her bible, defending their minds from memories best left untended. It was a time of transmutation from questions silenced, those stuffed deeply within their souls but for the questions occasionally blurted out in behalf of an entire race.

"You see the nigger wit' both his hands chopped off?"

"You see how that man wit' one leg chopped off down by the knee done stop in his tracks and follow us wit' his eyes 'til after we pass him on the street?"

"You see how the man at the store don' offer dark chirrins no stick candy?"

"What we tell our chirrins, how we goin' 'xplain how they same as befo' they was free?"

"What we tell our chirrins 'bout how some white folk up north say they was helpin' us, when so many done lost they home?"

"How we goin' make our chirrins keep from hatin' whities?"

"How we answer our chirrens when they be askin' if theys goin' have good cabins likes befo'.

"How we tell our chirrins they goin' have a better life than befo' if'n they got no roof if they in the woods, when they ain' got no fire when theys in barns?"

"How we goin' tell our old chirrins how we goin' earn our keep when they's more of us than the whites, more black mouths to be feedin' than white, and ain' a penny nowheres to be earnt?"

"How we goin' make our chirrins stop cryin' after leavin' they friends, they pet goat, they pretty li'l hens wit' the spotted feathers?"

"How we goin' 'xplain to our chirrins how come they done had to be leavin' they pigs and chickens to be had by squatters?"

"How we goin' tell our chirrins be happy when ain' nobody care 'bout nothin' but how they goin' serve some whitie?"

"How we goin' tell Shanda she cain' be playin' wit' Miss Lizzie like she do?"

"How we goin' tell her she be happier when things settled in if that just mean she lose another friend?"

"How we goin' 'xplain why theys so much war?"

"How we goin' 'xplain how we better off now free than when we wasn'?"

Elizabeth sent house servants down the hill to the river road, one at a time, trading off watch duty every six hours. They migrated up and down, sending the occasional Confederate up the hill to work tobacco or cotton, or repair a broken fence for a chance to sleep in the corn crib and eat a decent meal.

On the thirteenth day, Elizabeth ran to the veranda to one of the children screaming from afar. When she saw the child's smiling face, she ran down the hill.

The End of George's Story

MY STORY

How George's Story Came to be Told

PART ONE

Initiation

It was Saturday evening, March 24, 2012, the moment my life so suddenly and radically changed, but a moment I didn't distinguish from any other. It was one of nothing special…at that time.

The events leading up to the moment had begun many months prior, when I found myself technically homeless (as opposed to *actually* homeless, a situation I'd previously experienced), in Dallas, Texas: Eviction papers issued, no money, and a tow truck coming to repossess my car in two days. I had to make that dreaded call. "Hello, Daddy, I need to be rescued."

I had moved to Dallas after I graduated from Louisiana State University, having arrived at that decision after I met a man during one of my scouting trips to determine where I might want to begin my career. Baton Rouge was my hometown, and it hadn't made the list. I needed

big. I needed nightlife. I needed fancy clothes, bright hair, fake nails, and everything else that goes with living among *the beautiful people*. After all, I was of them…*wasn't I*?

Met the man, married the man, left the man, single again. But now I was single in the Emerald City, with no glass ceiling. I was single, pretty, and employed in a position of authority that brought me great satisfaction – the work, that is. Unqualified women with penis issues in positions of authority neutralized the positive aspects, and drove me to attend seminars and read countless self-help books. I wanted to find a way to be happy in corporate America.

A year later…oops! *What was I thinking!* Why am I divorcing this man?

Enough time had passed since our separation for me to have successfully buried all the reasons I couldn't live with such a man, and all I was remembering was the fun – the nightlife, the travel, etc. *Okay*, I said to myself. *It was only three weeks ago that he pleaded for a reconciliation*, so I knocked on the door of my beautiful previous home and announced, "Here I Am!"

"Sorry, I'm seeing someone else."

What? That type of behavior was indicative of those things I had buried. Still, I broke. Crumbled, more like it.

I had recently accepted a huge job with a wonderful organization, and was trying to help my daughter through a challenging pregnancy, while, unbeknownst to myself, I had only two weeks to live this great life – only two weeks before the bottom would drop out.

My grandson was born, and my sudden transformation into a grandmother barely forty years old, unwittingly single, and stressed out with new professional challenges turned on tears that would not be stymied.

Major Depression Disorder had been my very own mutineer since the age of fifteen, but the artificial high from recent personal and professional accomplishments convinced me it could be held at bay without medication. Now, without those drugs, I landed in the emergency room of Dallas' Parkland Hospital – the charity hospital – then spent several weeks in a day-program at a mental health hospital.

My income dropped overnight from six digits to zero, and if it weren't for my emotionally distraught mother calling my ex-husband and asking him to promise that he'd take care of me, I suppose I would have asked my father to rescue me at that time – but I didn't, and it would be another ten years before I would have no choice in the matter. My ex-husband happily acquiesced to my mother's plea, and I remained in Dallas. That type of kindness is indicative of the reasons I married the guy.

Months later, finally able to get myself out of bed for more than an hour at a time, I started looking for a way to support myself. The six-digit career was out of the question. It was good income for a woman in the early 2000s, but the thought of facing the insincerity of corporate America and the frequent injustice and ill will toward inter-company competitors chilled me. The self-help books and seminars I attended helped me deal with some of the discord but, more importantly, it led to a spiritual awakening – a new understanding of the workings of our existence and the universe. The money was not worth my peace of mind.

Then some strange things started happening, things I couldn't explain. One frigid winter night in Dallas when I was bundled in blankets on the sofa and watching television, a commercial for diabetes supplies burst me into tears – the thought of those poor people having to poke holes in their fingers! I had been stabbed with one of those pins and my finger hurt for two days. How on earth did they force themselves to do it several times each day? I blinked my eyes

to clear the tears, and opened them to find a straight-pin resting on the lapel of my pink chenille robe. Though not an earth-shattering revelation, certainly not normal. When I shared this and other similar events with friends who wouldn't think I had lost my mind or maybe joined some ghoulish cult, I was shocked to discover their receptiveness on the subject of paranormal activity.

My newfound self-awareness and this odd connection to the universe was exciting, but it didn't improve my financial position. I decided to start a horse-care business: Therapeutic sports massage for equine athletes along with a line of the world's finest essential oils for equine and human, and *laying of the hands* (Reiki). Being around horses fed my soul, a critical component in healing my life.

Back in Baton Rouge during the Christmas holiday, I met a man with whom I would later have an affair that was as brief as it was intense. Our *getaway weekend* demanded immortalization, so I sat at my computer and wrote day and night for three days. When done, I realized the story would make more sense if I explained the backdrop, and when that section was completed, it needed a little *more* backdrop, and so it continued until it became a book-length manuscript. This was the most rewarding activity of my life. I had found my passion.

With only a few hundred dollars a month in income, I decided to room with a friend who was short on funds. Two weeks later, a severe horseback riding accident put me in the hospital on morphine for four days and, two days after the doctors released me to bed-rest only, I discovered that this friend stole my painkillers and forged a check to steal the little money I did have.

Friends packed my belongings and trucked them to a storage facility, and my father rescued me so my mother could care for me. But that rescue wouldn't hold. Months later, I was back in Dallas, intent on making a go of my horse business and my writing career. A part-time

job at *Dr. Delphinium* flower shop helped, but my income topped out at less than twenty thousand dollars a year. It was during this time that I started cracking double-yolk eggs.

Each morning for breakfast, I ate two eggs, removing them from the carton in a certain pattern to maintain proper weight distribution (before then, my dog often had raw egg for her breakfast when the carton slipped from my hand). The first egg came from the far right corner, a second from the near left, and I continued with this diagonal pattern through the entire carton. I always cracked the second egg I removed first, then the other, and it was always the second cracked egg that had two yolks. This happened sometimes three mornings in a row. My friends said they had never seen even one double-yolk egg. When they asked what it meant, the only conclusion I could rationalize if only to a small degree was that the Universe/God/Master Mind was telling me it was attending to me, which I interpreted as validation that I was on the right path to reach my goals.

Then one Sunday afternoon at the flower shop, the first of a series of career-changing events occurred. A sweet lady named Miss Janice walked in and, after a long chat that left her husband twiddling his thumbs and rolling his eyes, she took a liking to me and decided to help me with my career. She had stopped for flowers en route to her sister-in-law's celebration for the publishing of her thirteenth book. When she arrived at the party, Miss Janice pulled the woman's agent aside and convinced her to take my call.

It was 2001, and that agent, Linda Krueger at Evan Fogelman Literary Agency, did in fact take my call – quite a coup in this industry. The conversation would put me in a whole new league of this, my newly chosen career. Linda advised me first to have my manuscript professionally edited, and gave me contact information for three freelance editors. I chose one arbitrarily, and made only one call, to an editor who would become one of the dearest friends of

my life. I would later discover that Susan Mary Malone was one of the most sought-after editors in the country, and a published author of fiction and nonfiction.[v] We struck a deal: I would give her aged Labrador Reiki and physical massage, and she would edit my manuscript.

A year later, a vow to poverty (my noble contribution to society and a consequence of following my heart), kept me in residence at a dump in South Dallas where friends didn't want to drive, let alone park their cars and walk the few steps to the front door, even during daylight hours. This mandate of lack expected of all us *artistes* was my sacrifice…my suffering…my gift to mankind! Working with horses was rewarding, and my part-time job wasn't bad but, at night, at home, my laptop called to me. I wrote with a passion I'd never known could exist.

Though income and commercial success never materialized with that first manuscript, nor the second, publishers and agents were giving me glowing reviews and saying they were sorry they wouldn't be able sell it, given the state of the publishing industry as it related to literary fiction.

Another five years passed. By the late 2000s, my writing career hadn't progressed, but that second manuscript had earned a semifinalist nod in the world's largest competition for unpublished works: The Faulkner-Wisdom Competition.[vi]

Double-yolk eggs had eluded my breakfast skillet for a couple years, but in March of 2009 they came back in a big way. The old pattern reemerged with the last two pair of eggs in one carton, and continued through the entire next carton and the first pair of the third. Eggs for other dishes never had two yolks.

My spiritual growth flourished, my friendships filled the gaps left by my lack of financial and professional success, and my dating life became one of a bona fide serial monogamist who

more preferred the company of a group of very special women in Dallas – smart, spiritual (not religious), beautiful (inside and out), kind, supportive friends so numerous I couldn't believe my good fortune. Along with a few wonderful life-long friends spread across the country, they helped me save my soul.

I papered one wall of my apartment with rejection letters from that first manuscript, then a second with the next, and wrote ad copy, magazine articles, white pages, Web pages, newsletters…all of which paid almost nothing, but did give me a writing resume.

By 2008, determined to live a joyous, abundant life as a writer, I had attended more self-improvement, law of attraction, and self-actualization workshops, which led me to start meditating for a couple minutes here and there, and envisioning myself in the life I desired. *The Secret* and *What the Bleep do We Know* videos became my personal gurus, and led me to write a request for a boyfriend to the universe (along with a full description of the man I desired, including anatomical specifications), and construct visioning boards that represented the life I wanted – words and pictures that symbolized joy, happiness, monogamy, wealth, and success. *The Soulmate Secret* was my newest self-help book, and I started dabbling with feng shui.

Paranormal occurrences became so startling and frequent that friends regularly called for updates, and when I hosted dinners, they all gathered around the coffee table with lit candles and wine to hear the intriguing details. After dinner on Thanksgiving Day, 2008, they gathered to hear one of the more vivid episodes.

A man had call out, "I'm in here," as though to answer, "Where are you?" I was in my living room, and didn't actually hear it in the normal sense; it was more like a memory of words once heard. A vision accompanied this voice: A beautiful man, mid-thirties with curly dark hair down to the middle of his back was taking a shower in my bathroom.

When I finally summoned the courage to investigate the situation, I found the lid of the commode was open. Feng shui had taught me to close it to prevent good energy from escaping my home through the water, but I figured I had just overlooked it – until a half-hour later when I sat on the seat. It was wet. This wasn't the first time I discovered a wet seat in such a way, as the commode was near the showerhead and was often sprayed if the curtain wasn't completely closed. But I hadn't yet showered that day, and certainly not since the last time I had used the commode. I drew back the curtain and touched the tile. It was dry.

The man in the shower was the one lying on a beach with a blonde girl smack-dab in the center of my first visioning board.

Then Susan Mary Malone recommended me to a theologian who needed a ghostwriter for a book about the Catholic Church (a tell-all from a self-described devout Catholic). The theologian refused to pay her final installment after receiving a draft of the manuscript, and because my previous part-time job had resulted in a layoff, I had no other income on the horizon.

It was October of 2009 when my third and final rescue call to my father put $2,100 in my pocket. I paid two car notes, rented a moving truck and a trailer for my car, and hauled my possessions back home to Baton Rouge with my tail firmly tucked between my legs at fifty years of age, almost ten years after I broke.

That's how I found myself with a microwave, a coffee pot, a card table, and a matchbox refrigerator in one of two rooms in my father's attic, a single bed in the other.

After three months of feeling dreadful and hollow, mourning my old life, I called a friend of a friend who was known to translate messages from what he called *the spirit guides*. Maybe they could give me some ideas on how to get myself happy again, living in an attic with an

empty box for a filing cabinet, no way to cook eggs for breakfast, and a long list of other conditions that fed my self-pity – the self-help books weren't working quickly enough.

On January 13, 2010, these spirit guides gave me a few practical tools that helped me find my joy again by reconnecting with my gratitude – for my health (bah humbug), for the opportunity to be close to my father during his final years, for having a roof over my head! Two days later, I met a man with long, dark, curly hair – Ric.

The part-time job my brother Joey helped me get, as a high-school substitute teacher, paid for my car and kept groceries in my matchbox. Joey then helped me get another job cooking samples of sausage in grocery stores. (It paid three times more than the school!) My sales were higher than the other three sausage girls combined, and my employer crowned me "Sausage Queen," an anecdote he was proud to repeat, and repeat.

The sausage gig parlayed me into an office job, but that work dried up after a few weeks. It was the summer of 2011, and by then I had been roosting at Ric's house for a couple months, so he offered to help me financially while I finished my newest manuscript – the Faulkner-Wisdom Competition deadline was fast approaching.

Now back in my home town over a year, my newest creation no doubt on its way to a judge just waiting to be thunderstruck, I watched my father's rapid decline in health, and passed the time researching material for my fourth book and eagerly awaiting news that I would soon possess that Faulkner medal I so coveted.

About two weeks before my father became lost in his old world, thanks to Alzheimer's, the announcements came. I was only a finalist. Still, he was prouder than I could have imagined. He left us eight weeks later.

A third wall papered with rejection letters…on to the next.

Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* had left me speechless, and I wanted to create something like it, so I finished my research and went to work on my Cunningham look-alike. For one of three subplots, Frances Parkinson Keyes and her bestseller *Dinner at Antoine's* stood in for his Virginia Woolf and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Houmas House Plantation and Gardens became the setting for the second – my brother once worked there, so I knew it well, and the Houmas House scenes in the film *Hush…Hush, Sweet Charlotte* fit right in with my storyline. For the present-day sub-plot, I used my novella.

This would be my masterpiece, and after it became a bestseller, publishers would be clamoring to get their hands on the other novels I had written. One would be the prequel to this first published novel, then, of course, they'd be champing at the bit for my first manuscript, my autobiography, which I had converted to a roman a' clef. Rawlings watch out!

I entered the first chapters of my masterpiece, DINNER AT HOUMAS HOUSE, in the Novel-in-Progress category of the Faulkner-Wisdom Competition.

Between the May entry deadline and the announcement on September 1, 2012, I wrote not a single useable word, and only a handful of unusable ones. I was stuck. Couldn't think of a single path for the remainder of the book. Two months later, I would meet George.

A long sequence of related occurrences had guided me to write DINNER AT HOUMAS HOUSE. Some call such occurrences coincidence, but there were so many that it required more than half an hour to recite the litany of events to friends and family who in time came to believe this was no massive collection of coincidences that brought George to me, but perhaps a pattern of paranormal communication that had progressively opened my mind. They believe the events were a sort of initiation for preparedness of what was to come. Indeed, George had explained why he chose me. He said he knew I hadn't had an easy time with things, and cited one

particular situation in my life above others. You can read about that conversation in the transcript of the first channeling session, or listen to it on YouTube®.[3]

I never wrote another word for that manuscript. Here is where George's story beings – back to March 24, 2012, and the *moment*.

[3] You may use your smart phone with an app such as *Scan* to utilize the QR (Quick Response code) to the right and listen to the actual recording on YouTube®, or access the YouTube® video at http://youtu.be/REUaZ8JCwG4.

PART TWO

The Moment

It was a Saturday night, a little after eight o'clock when Ric phoned me for an update on our search for a house to rent. In an uncharacteristic manner, he second-guessed me when I told him I was checking Craigslist® every couple of hours and finding nothing suitable – he wanted a house of a particular design, located in a very small area south of the Louisiana State University lakes so I could ride my bike without hauling it across town every day and we could walk to the Tigers football games. Cycling around Dallas' White Rock Lake had primed my creative juices for many years, and we became convinced that a new bike on a beautiful new path was all I needed to make the leap into stardom.

About two minutes after we hung up that Saturday night, he rang back to ask, "Well, what about this two-bedroom?"

I had somehow missed the ad. We immediately knew this would be our home, and inspected it the next day. When we stepped over the threshold, a very unusual *energy* hit us. Though the house was in disrepair and needed paint everywhere, including the ceiling, we loved the way it felt and rented it on the spot. The following morning, our cars loaded with boxes full of cleansers, shop towels, brushes, and brooms, we drove to our new home.

A light and the fan in the kitchen were on. They turned themselves on and off throughout the day, and we felt a presence, entities of some type, but they were warm and not at all frightful. We told ourselves they were happy we were there, happy that we'd make this house beautiful again.

Our visitors felt *something* that wasn't quite normal, but they too sensed that it meant no harm. The house felt deliciously warm and joyous, so Ric and I nixed any consideration of performing one of those new-age cleaning rituals that smoked out spirits with a burning wad of sage.

We moved in on April 15, and that light and fan continued to turn themselves on and off, and now faster/slower or brighter/dimmer. Then we started hearing unexplainable sounds. They were the everyday sounds we all make – shuffling papers, bumping into furniture, those kinds of noises that are easily identifiable – plus the occasional thump of unknown origin. In my log I wrote:

> Moved to [redacted], had been painting and cleaning for three weeks and noticed light and fan in kitchen often turns on/off. House has a great presence, very kind. We hear *them* bumping into furniture and other strange sounds. I say "bumping into furniture" because I know what it sounds like when I stub my toe on my bedside dresser,

and I've heard that particular sound a couple times at night when I'm trying to go to sleep.

This was all happening as I was putting the finishing touches on the first few chapters of that fourth manuscript, DINNER AT HOUMAS HOUSE. On May 15 of 2012, I submitted them to the Faulkner-Wisdom Competition, and then began that agonistic period of long months wherein I could not write another word. I started to pray, a lot. Not to the typical Christian God, or Jesus, but to the Master Mind of our Universe, the all-encompassing God of no religion. I had been raised Catholic and still met the underlying definition of Christianity, but the dogma and rituals of religions didn't resonate with me, and I found myself with my own understanding of this Higher Power.

After a couple months of zero production, the worrying set in – often and deeply. September 1 brought the disappointing news of the competition results: Semifinalist. My perseverance in asking for help from *anyone up there* magnified almost to the point of becoming an obsession, then…something finally happened. Here's what I wrote in my log for October 21, 2012:

During this week, after living here exactly six months, I started hearing knocking and what sounded like doors opening or closing. On Wednesday or Thursday at 11:30 pm, the exterior door deadbolt unlocked and the door opened. I called out to Ric, "I'm still up," wondering why he was home so early. No answer. Called a second time, "Baby?" Summoned the courage to look through my partially closed bedroom door only to find that exterior door closed and locked. So frightened I had to call Ric to come home, hid

on the floor behind my bed until he arrived. Called Tammy (Franklin-Davis) a couple days later, and she suggested I talk to her medium. "Jinny," she said, "somebody's sending you a message. You need to find out who and why and what the message is."

Tammy had contacted medium Georgia O'Connor several years prior in an effort to speak with a sister and a brother, both of whom died young. When she told me what transpired during that session, I marveled at the precision information she received, so I logged on to www.TheSpiritMessengerOnline.com and took the first available appointment: October 28, 2012, the day I met George.[vii]

* * * * *

Other than the few snags I've identified within this document, communications with George and the others were smooth and quick, their stories heart-wrenching and astonishing, and often inconceivable and an affront to my sensibilities. The grief of those who communicated with me commonly bled through the words and scenes they conveyed, but they also gave me the gift of sensing their joyousness and devotion, their love for family, and, above all, their graciousness in the face of living conditions we could neither endure nor fully comprehend. That I was chosen to bring forth George's legend is as much a blessing and honor to myself as to George, a sentiment he revealed in the channeling sessions. I know he would thank you for reading his story if he could.

My hope is that those who read about George think of him and his friends and family with new admiration and sensitivity. I believe he would never want pity, but rather a fresh perspective on those years of civil unrest in this country, one only a slave could provide.

EPILOGUE

Still holding on to a bit of skepticism about channeling, I wasn't sure in the beginning that this story was all coming from George; however, the unprecedented speed with which I received it sure was convincing. In the beginning (the sixty days following my first channeling session), I typed just over 5,000 words. My confidence in the project came after the second session, when I wrote over 25,000 in thirty days. That brought me to March 6, the date of my third and final session with Ms. O'Connor. I wrote 3,000 words the following week, and finished this manuscript on March 13, 2013.

The most intriguing aspect of this short schedule lies in the extremely short writing periods – only forty-five minutes to an hour and a half each day, except for one day when I wrote over 2,000 words, which required almost two hours. Some highly successful authors have stated that to write 500 words five days a week is considered a success. I leave you to give your own meaning, if any, to these facts.

By March 22, I had edited the manuscript and added most of the sidebars and endnotes, then put it to bed for a couple weeks. I read it with fresh eyes on April 3, made a few more edits, and sent it to Susan Mary Malone, who corrected my grammatical errors. As a work of nonfiction, it cannot be altered; therefore, no developmental edits could be made.

During those final days of editing, my home was again filled with sounds one might still consider to be unexplainable. I believe George expressed his presence for the same reason he gave me the signs I asked him about in the second session – just to keep the lines of communication open. This assured me that he was with me during the editing process, guiding me to an accurate portrayal of life from his perspective, one that would reflect his truest sentiments.

* * * * *

In addition to the sidebars and endnotes that address some inconsistencies between George's perspective of events and historical records, a few other facts pertinent to the writing of George's legacy deserve mention. Records for The Houmas during the years leading up to and through the War Between the States are scant at best, but research did reveal evidence that some elements toward the end of George's story pertain to periods prior or subsequent to George's lifespan.

Regarding names, as noted in the sidebars and endnotes, it was challenging to ascertain exact names of some people in George's story. He did not convey the owner's name until I asked in the third channeling session. George hesitated, then said the owner's name was Burns, not Burnside or Beirne, the men who owned and managed The Houmas when he lived there. Research later revealed that slaves referred to Burnside as *Burns*, the name he used when he first emigrated from Belfast, Ireland. This suggests the two men's positions may have been interchangeable from George's perspective, and the trickiness in trying to distinguish one from the other (once in the spirit realm), would explain inconsistencies when comparing George's story to historical records and descriptions of the men, especially considering the identical pronunciations of *Beirne* and *Burn*.

John Burnside was virtually penniless when he arrived in America, and friend Andrew Beirne took him under his wing. Burnside bought The Houmas in 1857. He never married, but loved Andrew's son Oliver like his own, and together they managed the plantation. Andrew, his son Oliver and his daughter Elizabeth resided at The Houmas, and Burnside eventually bequeathed ownership of The Houmas to Oliver Beirne.

Daughter Elizabeth was nicknamed Bettie, not Lizzie. Since early in the story, I was not convinced the owner's daughter's name was Lizzie, but couldn't gain a clearer understanding of what it might be. As you will hear on the recording of session three, when asked her name, George hesitated then stated "Caroline," not Lizzie, Bettie, or Elizabeth. Caroline was actually the daughter of General Wade Hampton, the man who owned the plantation several decades prior.[viii] Caroline married Col. John Smith Preston. They finished construction of the mansion in 1840, and it was this family that left The Houmas and returned to South Carolina, in 1848.

George observed his owner's financial position as depleted, but this was never the case. The financial records of John Burnside and the Beirne family reveal substantial cash reserves and equities, and they continued a life of wealth and opulence at The Houmas. However, early twentieth-century owners did face the demise of the glorious estate. That family lost their wealth and abandoned the mansion, leaving it to deteriorate quite substantially. The Houmas cane fields went untended, and the farm equipment and acreage were sold off in bits and pieces.

In 1892, Elizabeth Beirne married William Porcher Miles, who expanded The Houmas holdings and sugar business after the Civil War, creating *Miles Planting and Manufacturing Company,* and raising the estate's status to *Crown Jewel of Louisiana's River Road*. Miles Planting produced more than twenty million pounds of sugar per year, and was the largest sugar plantation in the United States, the third-largest of any type.

The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 spared the mansion, but the surrounding area was inundated. The Flood, followed by the Great Depression, left The Houmas nonfunctional, and the mansion fell into disrepair. In 1940, New Orleans doctor George B. Crozat, famous for his invention of the first removable dental brace – the *retainer* – repaired the mansion and reclaimed its position as the social center it once was, entertaining writers such as Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, and a young Truman Capote. Dr. Crozat was childless, but his extended family came from around the country to share holiday celebrations in the same way the Burnside and Bierne families did. According to Joan Cassily Peterson, as a child, she and her family travelled from St. Louis to Burnside Plantation for summer gatherings and holidays with the extended family – the greatest of all celebrations being Easter.

In 2003, New Orleans businessman Kevin Kelly bought the mansion and surrounding acres, then known as Burnside Plantation, restored the mansion to its original style, and renamed

it to better reflect its history: Houmas House Plantation and Gardens. It remains in pristine condition.

* * * * *

As you may have heard in recording three, George confirmed that the story had indeed changed direction in the last pages to that of his youngest daughter, Shanda's, story. He also confirmed that I was at the end of the story. When I finished writing on the morning of Wednesday, March 13, I knew I was done.

It is my sincere hope that George and I continue our communications. He would be sorely missed not only by me, but also by friends who have visited my home and felt warm wishes and heard the occasional message just as I did – in their heads, like the memory of words once spoken.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Not included in the recordings and transcripts made public are personal communications with my loved ones. My father showed up in all three channeling sessions, and when Ms. O'Connor told me what he was saying, she expressed it with my father's small-town Southern vernacular and the same tongue-in-cheek and corny humor that so amused us when he was alive. When friends who knew my father listened to the recordings, they became as teary-eyed as I did, though I had prepared them with a preview of some of the more jaw-dropping details. Many scheduled their own appointments with Ms. O'Connor, and each called me after their session. I cried with them as they did with me. They had been overwhelmed when I filled them in after my own sessions, and then even more so when they heard the audio; still, they were not prepared to

hear their own loved ones speak of things no one else could know, and say it in the same manner as when they were alive.

Of course, my brother was staunchly in my corner and my biggest fan throughout this process, and after listening to the recording of that first session, he and his wife made an appointment with Ms. O'Conner. During their session, they received answers to questions about what college their son would attend and play football (two days later, this college, which the family had never contacted, got word to the boy's mentor that they wanted him to attend), as well as what was later confirmed as an accurate diagnosis for a family member with a serious undiagnosed illness.

The validation of certain historical elements in George's story were made possible by Craig Black, who facilitated my research efforts and provided invaluable insight as well as introductions to others who helped validate facts. Among them, Jim Blanchard, keeper of Houmas records, historian of record, and storyteller of legendary form. Also Houmas House owner Kevin Kelley, a most affable gentleman. The elegant mansion is his home. He holds it dear to his heart, and spares no expense in effort, time, or funds to keep it in the pristine condition thousands of visitors from around the world admire each month. So great is his desire for visitors to truly experience the setting, that he asks his tour operators to invite guests to sit upon the ancient furnishings, run their fingers along fine silks, ting crystal, handle the accoutrements of the day, and even sample authentic dishes prepared by Chef Jeremy Langlois. Guests of Langlois' award-winning Latil's Landing Restaurant are served in the rooms of the original house built in the 1700s, and are regularly greeted by Kevin, who enjoys most weekday lunches with his guests at Café Burnside.

Regarding the gardens of Houmas House, Craig Black has designed and maintained the grounds for over thirty-five years. I met Craig during my research for the original book I tried to write about Houmas House, then, in two of the three channeling sessions, George told me to contact the man with the beard who lives on the plantation – he called Craig out by name: Black – because he could help me. Craig is also a noted poet and short-story writer, and is a painter and illustrator with an on-site gallery. If you visit Houmas House on any weekend, you can walk through his gallery. I hope you admire Craig (Craig Black Artist) and his work as much as I do.[ix]

APPENDIX A

Transcript of October 28, 2012

The recording of this first conversation with George consists of three separate pieces that were spliced together because of electronic malfunctions – the recorder shut off twice once George finished communicating.

Legend: G = Georgia's side of the conversation, V = my side

Piece #1:

G: So, have you done anything like this before?

V: Yes, I have. Not with the type of medium that you are, though. One that more spoke to the spirit guides.

G: Oh, Okay. And what did you have in mind to focus on today?

V: Well, yes, I have some very, some kind of entity in my house, and it's always been a good entity. It turns off, on and off, lights and fans and things and strange noises, but a few days ago it turned into the opening and closing of doors. And the doors aren't opening or closing, but that's what it sounds like. I mean, it's like, the middle of the night and I hear the lock open, and the door open, and I get up and go look and the door's still closed and locked. And that's happened to me and my boyfriend here this last week. So...

G. Is it inside doors or outside doors?

V: Exterior doors, and tapping on windows as well. So I have a friend who has talked to you several times, and I knew she had a lot of success with you, so that's what she said – it might be a message, somebody's trying to get my attention. So that's why I thought I'd call.

G: Now, interesting, interesting, 'cause there's a couple possibilities. I mean, it could be family or a friend that are trying to get your attention. It could be someone with the house who's just not happy with something going on with the house. So we'll kinda have to figure that out in terms of...well, I'm glad you told me so I can open up a little differently. Usually, I only deal with like family and friends, and not people that don't know you.

V: Well, they've always been so nice. We've been here about six months, and they've never done anything ugly, except that this has been kinda scary. And they've always been welcome.

G: I'm sorry, it started when you moved into this new place?

V: Yes. The noises, we knew, generally, not these door things. That just started last week.

G: Huh, very interesting. All right, well, when we start, I just need to take a minute...

V: Okay.

G: And let my boundaries down and then I'll let you know when I'm ready.

G: Let me begin by telling you who's coming in, and then we can kinda go from there. You know, this is going to sound very strange, but the first one that I have coming in is actually a very large black man, and I don't believe he's related to you. He looks like a slave and, just these incredible huge muscles, and like overalls on, but the one

overall is broken, and short, the pants are way too short for him. And let me just see who he is. He's, he says he's here to help you, he's here to help you with your book, ma'am, if you would like his help.

V: Yes.

G: He says you've been askin' for help with that and so, he's come to give you help with that.

V: Oh, my God. Okay.

G: You have any idea what he's talking about?

V: I'm a writer and I've been asking for help 'cause I'm kinda stumped right now.

G: You still there?

V: Yes, I said I'm a writer and...

G: Hello?

V: Are you there? Hello? Hello? Hello?

Telephone disconnection, then callback

V: Can you hear me now?

G: I can. Yeah, could you hear me too?

V: Yes, I could, I could.

G: That's so weird, you were, it was like [inaudible]

V: Okay, so, the answer to that question is, I'm a writer, and I've been stumped. And I've been asking for someone to help me.

G: Laughter...well, he showed up, and he's huge!

V: Wow. My goodness. Okay.

G: He says he's sorry about making all the noise, but he didn't know how else to let you know that he was there. He says he didn't wanna show up at the end of your bed, you know, come in the bathroom, when you're in the bathroom, so he's just been trying to let you know someone's at the door, if you would just open up...let him in.

V: Okay. Is he telling me how I can do that?

G: Well, he says he thinks that you just did.

V: Oh, okay. Okay.

G: And he says that his family was kinda like your family. There's both black and whites.

V: Okay, yes.

G: He says, but it's a lot easier for you.

V: Yeah.

G: He says that you, you, went to his house. You went to where he used to live. He just thought you should know that's who he is. That you went to his big ol', it looks like a plantation to me. You went to his big ol' plantation and he says you thought about writing about his house, but then you haven't done it. So he's here to help you do that.

V: Yes.

G: He says, so, obviously his, he knows how to get your attention.

V: Yes.

G: Um, and if it's okay with you, he'd like to continue to do that.

V: Okay.

G: He says yes? Yes, he can help you do that?

V: Yes. Yes, and thank you.

G: He wants to know what, if you want to talk about the ideas that you had when you were at his house. Do you know what he's talking about with that?

V: Yes.

G: Okay.

V: That's the story that I'm stuck on right now, and it does involve, it centers around a plantation home.

G: Is there a particular part that you're stuck on that you want to ask him about? I mean, I don't know what to ask him to help, make things easier for you. So if you know what to ask him...

V: Well, I, I'm getting the feeling that it's okay with him, and that it's good for me to write about it, and I'd like to know if he'd like for me to more focus on the slavery aspect? Or what direction, I'm not sure what direction to go in.

G: He says...the...the what? He doesn't understand what you're saying.

V: The slavery aspect, like, of his time? Should I go back into that? I'm not sure what direction to go in.

G: Yeah, he thinks you should do it from the view, the view of his eyes. Looking out, looking out his front door.

V: Okay.

G: He says, what a, what a different view but, he says the reason he's choosing you to help with his story is because of your own, he says your family got, he says, and excuse him for speaking like this, but your family got with child from a man who

wasn't part of the family. He was different color. He says, you understand what he's talkin' about?

V: Yes.

G. He says, and, that happened to them all the time too. Just, the view out the front door of those that happens to is pretty different in a lot of ways, and pretty much the same in a lot of ways. He says, you understand?

V: Yes. Yes. Sure.

G: He says that, uh [inaudible] calling him the little man now, but, I think he's referring to a grandson? You have a grandson that's black?

V: Yes. Yes.

G: Oh, no. I can't hear you again, if you can...

V: Okay, I can hear you now. Yeah, I thought you were just pausing.

G: Oh. He's asking if you understand.

V: Yes. Yes.

G: Okay.

V: I do have a half-black grandson, that's right.

G: All right, he wants to know if you have questions about that.

V: No, I don't think so. No. I mean, unless he wants to tell me something about his wellbeing.

G: Like, what are you asking?

V: Well, do I have any reason to be concerned about his health, or his life right now, or something like that.

G: Oh, your grandson?

V: Yeah.

G: You're talking about your grandson?

V: Yes.

G: He says no. He actually thinks that, he thinks he's a good boy.

V: Okay.

G: He says you've not had an easy time with things yourself, and that's not his place to talk about but he just wants to let you know, that he knows.

V: Okay.

G: Okay, any other questions for him?

V: Can I, can I, would it be good for me to talk to him, for ideas directly, to have him, you know, somehow help me while I'm writing, with ideas, if he can do that.

G: Oh, he says absolutely. He would love to do that with you. Yes.

V: Okay.

G: Okay, he says now, and he keeps referring to you as ma'am, by the way. Every time he says a sentence, he says *now*, *ma'am*. Um, he says he may not be able to make you hear him. He may not be able to make you, hear his voice with your ears.

V: Okay.

G: But he says, if you just start writing, he can make you hear his voice then.

V: Okay.

G: He says, because when you start writing, you get into, like a little bit of a trance anyway, so it's real easy for him to just come in.

V: Okay.

G: If he, if he, if you'll give him your permission to do that.

V: Yes. Yes, I do, and thank you.

G: He thinks it's going to be a really good one. He thinks it's going to be a really, emotional one, but a good one.

V: Okay. Good.

G: He hopes that, um...

Piece #2:

(Inaudible - The recorder shut off, and I had to turn it on again.)

G: ...they're really messing with our electronics today.

V: Oh, my. Okay.

G: Crazy. I guess he's done talking apparently, because he's shut the recorder off and everything. He's done with me. He is really strong. And his name is George, by the way.

V: George. Wonderful. Okay.

Piece #3:

[Recorder shut off again.]

G: Well, we know who's at your house now.

V: Yes.

* * * * *

The morning after this first session, I sat at my desk and started writing George's story and logging my experiences. You can read the log in Appendix D.

APPENDIX B

Transcript of January 20, 2013:

[Introductions, now including R = Ric]

G: And how did you want to do this today. Do you wanna, you know, just see who comes in? Did you want to focus on one more than the other?

V: Well, I talked to you a couple of months ago and we had a really, really, well, I thought it was pretty interesting reading and I didn't know if you wanted me to touch base on that, because this is kind of a...might be kind of a follow-up or continuation or something.

R: There are a few things we wanted to discuss, that we had both experienced more or less together.

G: Okay. Okay. So, I'm going to say, no, you don't have to catch me up. I'll let them bring up whatever they think is relevant from before. But if there's some stuff you want to discuss, that kind of thing, I would suggest that, I just let my boundaries down and let whoever wants to come in come in, and then you guys ask questions and direct me from there. If that sounds good to you?

V: Yes. Great. Thank you.

G: Okay. Okay, and you know don't worry about interrupting or anything. You can ask anything you want, comment on anything you want. Make this as much your conversation as you would like. Okay?

V: Okay.

G: Okay, just let me go ahead and take my minute, and I will let you know when I'm ready. Okay?

V: Okay.

Pause

G: Okay. Let me just start by telling you who's coming in, and then we'll go from there. The first one I need to acknowledge is a female coming in, and Ric I think she's coming in on your side of the family. I don't know if this is mom for you or grandmother, but she's coming in really really close. I would lean more towards mom with her. And then I have another man that's coming in who's telling me he's father, but Virginia I think he's telling me he's on your side.

V: Okay.

G: And there's another man coming in, and I have no idea who he is, either. All right, bear with me here, but he's a very large black man with overalls, and he's got probably twenty people behind him, and he wants me to tell you that he brought them all for you.

V: Okay, is that...can I say hello to him? I believe that's George?

G: He says, yes ma'am, and hello back at ya.

V: I'd like to thank him for all his help and, and I would like to know who these people are and how they can help me.

G: Well, he says some of them are his family, some of them are other people he worked with, he says he even brought some of the white folk with him for you.

V: Great. Great.

G: Humph. I wanna say...Houma? I have no idea where they're trying to get me to. Howma or Humma? Does that make any sense what that word would mean?

V: Houmas House?

G: He says yes to that.

V: Okay, that would be, that's where he lived.

G: He says that uh, he says he needs to give you a little bit of warning about the crazy man who doesn't shave. Who's alive...sorry, I know this sounds very strange, but uh, okay, there's a man that lives at that house that he is talking about, who doesn't shave.

V: That's correct.

G: He, he...I can't believe that makes sense to you.

R: [barely audible, directed to V] Is that Craig?

G: He says that you can use that to your advantage though, in terms of getting access to things and getting information.

V: Okay. Yes, can I ask him if that, if his name is Craig?

G: He says Black.

R: [barely audible to V] Craig Black.

V: Craig Black. That's his last name.

G: Okay. And, Ric, he wants you to know that he likes you very much and he's glad that you've, joined the ranks of this, and, he wants to apologize, however. He thinks that he and some of the others may have come on a little strong in trying to convince you to join in on this. So he wants to apologize for that.

R: Okay.

G: And it wasn't meant to be frightening, it was just meant to get your attention, and he says that they had tried to be more subtle with things and you weren't listening so, they got a little louder.

V: That makes all the sense in the world, Georgia.

G: He wants to thank you for not ignoring it, for not ignoring them. It means a lot to him. He wants you to know he has the utmost respect for you.

R: Thank you.

G: He wants to know if you have questions for him.

V: Well, I guess we wanted to know if there was some specific, or any other information he wanted to give Ric, because Ric got some, definitely got those messages, to get him involved. And then there was another occurrence that we both saw at the same time, and I don't know if this is just them saying hello or, or trying to get our attention, or if there's some other reasoning behind it.

G: He says that, no, that they're not only trying to get your attention, but they want the lines of communication to be open enough for them to show you what they experience and show you their story, if that's all right. They, he says, sometimes words are hard for him to express things, so he thought showing it would be easier, if that's all right by you.

V: Yes.

G: Well, he says he's asking both of you.

R: Oh, well, of course.

G: He says that he was worried that perhaps it was a little too much. A little too much.

R: Oh, no, I don't think.

V: I'm okay with everything. Actually, I want to thank him, because I feel very protected with everybody who's here and hangs out here.

G: Well, he says that he's very glad. He wants you to, he wants you to feel protected there. He says that he doesn't want you to feel worried. He knows that you've been told stories of his house, in terms of spirits that are there, but he assures you that there's nothing to worry about.

V: Okay, thank you.

G: And he says, well now, that doesn't mean that there's not people there, that he just wants you to know that they're not going to hurt you.

V: Right.

G: And he says that there's definitely some, there are some loud people there. He says that he wants to know what he can do to help you. What can he do to help you the most at this point?

V: Okay, well, for me, I guess I'd like to know if he's okay with how we've been communicating on the book, or am I opening enough to him, am I right, am I doing enough. That kind of thing.

G: He says that, you know when you're writing, and it just keeps flowing and flowing and flowing, and then you look back and you're not even sure at all at what you've written and it was just very quickly?

V: Yes.

G: He says that's when they're helping you write. He wants you to know that.

V: Okay. So we should just continue that way?

G: Yes. He's very happy with that.

V: Oh, good, good.

G: He's not sure that you're painting a picture of the man of the house correctly.

V: Okay.

G: I'm trying to figure out what man of the house he's talking about...he's saying it's the one that owns the house. Does that help any?

V: Yes.

G: He says that he was not a horrible man, he was just a business man. He wants to make sure that's clear. He was not a mean man, he was just business-like when it came to everything.

V: Okay.

G: Any other questions that you want to make sure you ask him?

V: No, I guess I just want to...oh, yeah, here's one thing. Do I need to distinguish who is talking to me? Whether it's him or one of the people in his family or whoever is with him?

G: No.

V: Okay.

G: No, he doesn't think that matters, as long as the story is right he doesn't think it matters who it came from.

V: Okay.

G: He says, and he's gonna be running who's coming through you. He's always going to be standing next to them to be sure they get it right.

V: Great. Thank you.

G: Now, he wants to know if you saw the woman of, the woman of the house, because he tried to make sure that both of you saw her. The white one. Did you go see the white woman of the house?

V: The white woman who lives there now or the white woman in his story?

G: The white woman in his story.

V: Oh, I have something about the daughter of the owner, and her name is Miss Lizzie, I believe, and there's a little bit about her so far in the story, if that's what he's talking about.

G: I don't think so. I almost want to say...the owner's daughter?

V: Well, maybe I have the name wrong but this is the owner's daughter.

G: Okay, alright, well he's definitely saying the owner's daughter and he talks about her being a very sweet soul but very, almost a very tortured soul. Like there was deep depression, deep darkness with her.

V: Yes, I did pick up on that. That there was something. Good. Yeah.

G: But there's just such a sweetness to her, such a kindness to her he wants to make sure that that's in there. It just, as privileged as her life may have seemed, she was rather, a rather sad person. He doesn't think that you've gotten all of that.

V: Okay. I'll pay attention to that.

G: He says thank you. Okay, so Ric he says he wants to talk to you again now.

R: Okay.

G: He says that he wants you to go on the land down by where the water is.

R: Okay.

G: He says and he wants you to stand there and he wants you to watch for them. He says he wants you to watch for all the men walking towards you. He thinks that it'll be a very interesting event for you, so he'd like for you to go do that.

R: This would be at the plantation?

G: Well, he says that's what we're talking about isn't it?

Laughter

R: Well, okay.

V: Does it matter whether we go at day or night?

G: Well, he thinks it'll be easier to see where you're going in the daylight.

Laughter

G: He says that, he says that it doesn't matter to him one way or the other.

V: Okay.

G: He says that he wants to help you to finish this up. He doesn't want this dragging out for too many years.

V: Okay.

G: And he thinks that he's made it clear to both of you that he's willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen.

V: Okay. Yes, I believe so.

G: He wants to know if there's any parts that you're missing, any parts you don't understand, he thinks now would be a good time to ask.

V: I, I, I don't know what to ask because I never know what's coming. I never know the story. It just has a life of its own and so I, I can't predict any, it feels like I can't

predict anything because I don't understand anyway, where all of this is going. And I just assumed that was okay.

G: He says it is with him, yes. He's, he has no problem leading you where you need to be.

V: Okay.

G: And he thanks you for trusting him to do that but he meant in terms of what has been given so far, were there any questions.

V: None that I can think of really right now.

G: He says alright. Fair enough. He says he would like his tree included.

V: Is it the tree that I've written about so far? Should I talk about it more?

G: He says that no, he didn't necessarily mean you have to talk about it more but he just thinks that maybe a likeness of it in the book would be nice. And I think he means like a photograph or a painting of it.

V: Okay.

G: A likeness of it. He said it's a pretty special tree.

V: Yes, it is a very special tree. Is there anything else...

G: He appreciates...

V: I'm sorry.

G: That's okay. He just says he appreciates that you, you've respected his tree.

V: Is there anything else he wants me to know about the tree right now? Or would he just prefer to just give me that information as we go if there's anything else?

G: He says he thinks you've got enough on it and he wants to make sure that you also include, make sure you include parts about being down by the water. That's where they took their leave. That's where they went to have fun, you know.

V: Okay. Can I ask is it the big water, the river or the other water?

G: No, by the river.

V: Okay.

G: He says on occasion that's where they would go do their, their drinkin', and their talkin', and their singin'.

V: Great.

G: He said you might want to put that in there.

V: Yes. Would it be alright if I go with Ric to see the men on the river?

G: He says yes ma'am.

V: Okay. Well, I thank 'em all again.

G: Alright, and he's stepping back and actually the father figure wants to step forward.

V: Okay.

G: And Virginia, I think this is your father, and he thinks a proper introduction would be nice...Ric. He wants to know if there's anything you'd like to ask him, Ric, if there's anything you'd like to say to him, Ric, he's turning all his attention to you.

R: Oh, well, I don't...

Laughter

G: He just wants, wants to make sure you know whose daughter you're with right now.

R: Oh, yes, of course.

Laughter

R: Well he raised a wonderful daughter, and I'm very grateful for her.

G: He says that he wants to make it very clear that he's watching everything you do.

Laughter

G: And if, if you think that these people from this house are loud, try ticking him off.

Laughter.

G: He says he has no intention of leaving his daughter unprotected, just so you know that.

R: Okay.

G: He says now that that's out of the way he would like to say that he actually for the most part likes you.

R: Oh.

G: He says although he, he has some concerns about your intentions. He says, since you are so hell-bent on keeping things casual, he says that he's gonna give you some time to mature, but don't take too long.

APPENDIX C

Transcript of March 6, 2013:

G: So what did you have in mind for today?

V: Well, I guess I wanna just see who shows up. And I do want to be a little more specific today about some of the questions I ask those who show up.

G: Okay, alright, well let me go ahead and take my minute and I'll let you know when I'm ready and we'll go from there, okay?

V: Great. Thanks.

Pause

G: Okay, let me tell you who's here, and then we'll go from there.

V: Okay.

G: I've got a man coming in that, I want to put him in the position of father for you.

V: Okay.

G: It's gonna seem now, that I think it's grandmother on your mom's side of the family.

V: Okay.

G: And I have another man coming in who says he's not a family, he's George.

V: Good. Excellent.

G: Okay, so who do you want to start with?

V: I wanna start with George, and I'd like to say hello.

G: He says good morning ma'am.

V: And I want to thank him, and I guess I need, first of all, is there anything he needs to tell me? Any messages I need to know from him.

G: Well, he says you, you got yourself knee deep in this mess now. He says he's hoping to help you find your way out of it.

V: Okay, well, because I, I got to a point, and George I don't know if you know this or not, so I'll just kind of give a summary, but I got to a point a week or two ago where I was writing a scene I really didn't want to write and then I ended up writing it, and I thought everything was okay, and then a day or two later I felt like I had reached the end of the story, and so the next morning I got up and I wrote a little, but it seemed more like it was closing the story, so I wanna know, I guess, have I gotten everything right? Am I being accurate? Where am I with the story? Am I on the right road still?

G: He says that, you're doing a really fine job of letting them direct the way they need to. He wants to apologize about some of the things that you had to feel and some of the things you had to write. He knows that some of it was a little more upsetting than you thought it was gonna be, so he wants to apologize for that.

V: Thank you.

G: He says that, you know, that being said, he wants to remind you that this is part of the reason this is so important is because it's not, not a pretty story. He says, so, it was all these parts, the ugly and the pretty needs to be told. He thanks you for doing that. He says now, you know, in terms of, are you getting everything right, he says that so far so good. He's real happy with most of it. He says that, just remember that sometimes the story weaves back and forth so he says, he says if it feels like it's still coming, then continue to keep writing. You're not completely done yet.

V: Okay, so when he says I'm not completely done yet, that sounds to me like it probably is nearing the end?

G: Mm-hm.

V: Okay.

G: Yeah, he thinks you're getting pretty close.

V: Okay, excellent. I'm just so appreciative and, yes, the story is a beautiful, it's just a beautiful and often heart-wrenching story, and I just feel so honored to, to have been chosen to write it for him.

G: Well, he says that he appreciates you lettin', you lettin' them do that. He says that you know it's been a lot to ask somebody, hey, can we come in and take over your body for a little while? He's laughing.

V: Yeah, well it's working for me, so I guess it's still working for him. I'm good.

G: He says it's working for him just fine. Just fine. He says thank you for that.

V: Okay, so I did have some specific questions for him. Ric and I did go down to the river to see the men there. We did not see them on the river in front of the house where George lived, but they did turn up in a story, so can he give me any information on that? Did we get the message wrong the first time, what?

G: No. He says you're just looking with the wrong set of eyes, that's all.

V: Okay.

G: He says you can't, you can't be, you know, looking for men, men long gone with your regular eyes, you know.

V: So do we need to try to just close our eyes and do kind of a meditation or any advice on that?

G: Well, he says part of it was he wanted you, he wanted you to be able to see the area, see the feel of it down there, you know, just kind of feel what that was like and he says, and he thinks the rest will come.

V: Okay. Okay, thank you. Does he want to tell me, can he tell me the owner's daughter's name? Because I'm not sure I have that correct.

G: Owner's daughter's name, okay, let me see if I can get him to do that. He says to ask you which owner you're talking about.

V: The owner of the big house where George lived when he lived there.

G: He says, Mis…Mister Burns? Is that who you're talking about, Mr. Burns?

V: Yes. Mr. Burns was the owner of the house, right?

G: Alright let me see if I can get him to see his daughter's name. I actually want to say Caroline. Is that who you have, is Caroline?

V: No. It's not, but I'm not sure that I do have the right name either way, so...I know Lizzie is wrong. Lizzie is what I've been calling her because, and I just, I know that that's wrong, so that's why I'm asking.

G: He keeps telling me Caroline, I don't know who that is, but.

V: Okay. That's, that's her name. That's good enough. So, right now, the story seems to be told through, right now through George's youngest daughter's eyes and I wonder if he had anything he wanted to say about that or we're still, we're still going forward through her eyes or do I need to know anything more than that right now.

G: No. He thinks you're doing just perfect. Doing just perfect.

V: Okay. Now I'd like to switch gears, and George I hope you can help me with this. There's been a suggestion, or an idea that I came up with about this book, about

including not only George's story, but the story about this whole event, with how I met George, and the messages in the house, and, you know, how I contacted George, and even including transcripts or recordings of these portions of our, of our conversations, and so that, I felt like that was the way to go, but then somebody else said their spirit messenger said no. So I want to hear it from George, what he thinks.

G: Well, he thinks that that's mostly up to you. He says if you're comfortable saying this story came from him well he's okay with that.

V: Great. Great.

G: But he says you know that just opens you up for a world of…interesting, let's put it that way.

V: Yes. Yes.

G: But he says, you know, you're okay with that he's okay with that. He doesn't mind at all.

V: Okay. Okay, now I guess from this point, since I am nearing the end, I'm gonna need help finding out how to sell this book to the right publisher. Because what I have done in the past has never worked. Maybe it wasn't supposed to, maybe this was what I needed, this book is what I needed to wait for, but either way, the, the methods I, that I know about how to get a publisher have never worked for me, so can they help me, can they guide me, can they tell me where to go, something.

G: He says they're definitely gonna be helping you this time to make it a lot easier and, he says you're gonna go through the process of submitting, that's all there is to it. He says, now, you might, you might want to go over there. You've got some friends that, that are at this house. He says, you know, they have real connections with

people whose pockets are pretty full. So he says you may wanna, you know, talk to the people at the house that you know, and see what they can do in terms of gettin' you connected, you see.

V: Okay. Okay, so I'm assuming that he's talking about the current owner, Kevin Kelly?

G: Yes, he says yes, but you have a friend there.

V: Yes, yes, the guy he referred to last time, Craig, yes, Black.

G: He says, use that connection a little bit.

V: Okay. Two other things, unrelated, but, George, if you could help me out with it that's great. There's a house that I've been drawing for a very long time, and, I, can I get any indication of anybody, am I, am I, am I on the right track with that house? Do I need to hurry with getting the plans done? Is this gonna happen, like, in my near future? I know that the, the timing is difficult to say but, you know I really believe that I'm gonna have this house and wanted some input.

G: Well, he doesn't think that there's any big hurry here, but yeah, he says you, you know, you know when it's flowing you need to let it flow, so definitely, he thinks that's a good idea to get working on that too.

V: Okay.

G: But he doesn't want to overwhelm you with too much stuff to do all at once, you know.

V: Great. Great. I was getting that feeling these past couple of weeks.

V: Okay, well, I guess that's really the end of my questions, so I wanted to be...open up to see if George had anything else he wanted to share with me, or if my father or my grandmother, who are also there, or anyone else.

G: He says that, you know, he just wants to make sure to tell you thank you again, because, you know it means a lot to him, that, that you do this. That uh, this is his life that we're talking about, it's his legacy that we're talking about, and just, it means a lot to him, so he'd just like to say thank you.

V: Okay, alright wonderful. Thank you, and I appreciate everything he's doing.

G: Okay, your dad wants to say something.

V: Okay.

G: If that's okay with you.

V: Yeah, hi Dad.

G: He says that, you know, he's helping you with this too, just so you'll know.

V: Great.

G: He says it's very exciting to be able to help you this way, and he just wants to make sure you know how pleased he is.

V: Great. Yes, thank you, I'm happy.

G: Well good. He says that's all that he cares about, that you're happy. He really wants you to be happy. He just, you know, he feels like you've finally stepped into where you're supposed to be. So be prepared for things to line up real nice for ya.

V: Oh, great, well I'm pretty excited about it.

APPENDIX D

To follow are excerpts from my log, taken during the process of writing George's story. They are listed chronologically, segmented within groups associated with certain chapters.

Chapter One Timeline

October 29:

Started writing today. Just as promised, George was there and the words flowed through my fingers freely. All I had to do was close my eyes and open my mind.

November 1:

Today was exciting. Again I wrote, starting off the same way I had the previous two days. I went back and tried to do some editing, but couldn't seem to keep myself from being annoyed about the challenge not to edit. This all happened before I started writing, so I closed my eyes and started writing. The words flowed easily again, so I didn't open my eyes for several minutes. When I did open them, I saw that my manuscript was shrunken to tiny thumbnails on my screen. I was on the fourth page. On my screen was just blue with four tiny white rectangles lined up horizontally at the top left of the blue. *Now I couldn't edit!* Amazing! What a relief to be able to sit down every morning and not have to edit, and know I didn't have to edit at the end of my writing period either!

Chapter Three Timeline

December 24, 2012

"Something/one" showed up in a photo with me in front of the Christmas tree, a sort of fog partially in front of me and to my right side – we took other pictures with and without me in that location and the anomaly does not appear.

Ric has been hearing things. Saw the silhouette of a man pass by the living room door and heard the wood gate pounding though he saw it wasn't moving.

Around Christmas '13?

Ric and I both saw twinkling lights out the corner of our eyes, in the back yard, which was well lit, five sparkling lights falling in equidistant parallel lines totaling maybe ten inches wide and two and a half feet vertically, beginning about chest high down to hip level.

January 7, 2013

Decided to start meditating using the CDs I bought at the Dallas Buddhist temple. Downloaded Pink and the CDs, and decided to start that very night. In the middle of the night, I heard what sounded like a book slamming down on my bedside dresser [the book I bought at the Buddhist temple]. I took it to mean that George was ready to start working again, because my goal during meditation was that I become more productive – I had been acting lazy, watching TV, etc.

January 14, 2013

Googled "Liddy slave" and found Digital Library on American Slavery details for Liddy ([Lyddy]) in Petition 21385018.

January 20, 2013

Talked to Georgia.

Ric participated in this conversation in part because he was still hearing sounds, though I was not. Also, we experienced visual happenings – some together, some he alone.

George's appreciation for Ric's involvement in the telling of his story, clearly evident in the recording, motivated Ric to the core level of his spirit. That spirit has been the driving source of Ric's benevolence. "You write and I'll work," he told me.

Also of particular note is George's request that I allow *others* to tell part of the story. I have on more than one occasion felt it more difficult to understand what I was being told.

You can read a transcript of that recording in Appendix B, or listen to the YouTube® videos for Part I and Part II at http://youtu.be/3MbnS763UAs and http://youtu.be/QW0yyxhOMfE.

Log for Chapter Five Timeline

January 22, 2013

Writing, found myself in Google search bar again but a whole paragraph was still in there so I didn't lose anything like I did the first time this happened. "Miss Lizzie" were the first words in the bar and, when Googled, a recipe for Miss Lizzie's Caramel Pound Cake, was one of the first entries.

January 24, 2013

Today, Thursday, I've been writing at least 1,000 words per day since I talked through Georgia Sunday. Doubled my word count in four days – 5,200 to 10,600.

Log for Chapter Nine Timeline:

February 2, 2013

19,376 words now

February 3, 3012

Still no noises or visuals since my session with Georgia one week ago. Joey and Susan had their session with Georgia this afternoon, and Lisa did so this morning. Amazing!

Log for Chapter Eleven Timeline

2/14/13

Couldn't write today; kept seeing swirls when I closed my eyes, like several whirlpools. I wrote "They were running," and felt like that was wrong, but couldn't find a way to listen, or hear, or whatever, get to the story.

Log for Chapter Twelve Timeline

2/15/13

Saw swirls again today when I closed my eyes, so meditated a minute, focusing on my breathing, then I was able to write the story about the catastrophe on the Mississippi [when George described swirling leaves and whirlpools in the river].

Log for Chapter Fourteen Timeline

2/17/13

For a while today it felt like George's story was suddenly coming to an end. I felt so disappointed. I didn't want the story writing to end. I remembered about thinking a couple months ago that the story would be about 27,000 words long, then I dismissed the idea when I talked with Susan M. on 2/2/13. Of course, by then I understood that part of this book would be not only George's story about his life, but actually the entire story, beginning with how we found this house. The spirits here at that time, the noises, then the different noises that started occurring, eventually turning out to be George. The entire story, perhaps these notes I'm typing – generally, the story from my perspective – is part of the book, and my part should be inserted chronologically, as I wrote George's story.

2/17/13

28,110 words now. Felt like I needed reassurance from George as to the story at this point – am I still getting it right, have I missed something? Made an appointment with Georgia for March 6.

2/17/13

Forgot to record this last week: I think it was Friday, 2/8, the day after Gary arrived for Mardi Gras, and he asked to read George's story. I tried to print it the following morning but the printer wouldn't print. It had worked fine a few days prior, but nothing I did to fix the problem worked. I thought to myself that maybe this was a message from George, him not wanting anyone to be reading it right now – he and the others have affected electronics so much – George turned off the recorder twice when he was ready to stop talking during that first session with Georgia. A few minutes later I heard – in my head – what was clearly an actual voice saying "Ain' nobody need to be seein' this right now." It was as clear an audio in my head as the remembrance of a voice in a real conversation.

Log for Chapter Seventeen Timeline

2/20/13

I stopped writing abruptly yesterday. An image appeared in my mind for a brief moment, a scene I refused to believe was real. I decided to sleep on it and, if it returned in the morning, I'd know I can write about it. The scene was so disturbing, and it was just a quick flash. I'm just now sitting down to write this morning, so...we'll see!

2/20/13

Oh, thank God! The vision was correct, but I had seen only that quick glimpse so it was out of context. Everything's okay now. Whew!

2/20/13

I feel like I wrote the end of the book today. Very sad. Hope I'm wrong.

2/21/13

Sat down to write today still worried about getting to end. Wrote 2,000 words but it felt anticlimactic so I REALLY feel like I'm at the end

Log to Chapter Eighteen Timeline

2/27/13

I feel like I'm finished but not sure. Haven't written since Pink concert a week ago. I don't want to just sit by and do nothing while I wait to talk to George next Wednesday. I get the feeling that I might be ready to start editing but I'm not sure.

2/28/13

Decided to spell-check only. Won't be able to see but a few words at a time because the pages are still shrunk on my screen. Maybe tomorrow I'll feel like it's okay to print the manuscript, or maybe just read it on the computer and edit.

3/1/13

Still not sure whether I need to edit or not, print or not. Gonna sit here a few minutes to see. Yesterday, I thought about how George may again not allow the printer to work if he doesn't want me to print and edit.

3/1/13

Did the spell check yesterday. Whew! So many errors!

3/1/13

Started editing today.

Log to Chapter Nineteen Timeline

3/6/13

Talked to Georgia. Almost finished with book, per George.

Epilogue

George was a slave who lived at what is now called Houmas House Plantation during the years preceding and into the War Between the States. This is what George described as his legacy, a story about his life and how I came to write about it.

Desperate to find an explanation for loud sounds of unexplainable origin in my home, especially locks and doors seemingly opening and closing, and knocking on windows, I contacted medium Georgia O'Connor. During the first of three channeling sessions, Ms. O'Connor introduced me to an entity who identified himself as George.

"He says he's here to help you with your book, ma'am," Ms. O'Connor explained. "He says you've been asking for help with that and so, he's come to give you help with that. You went to where he used to live. He just thought you should know that's who he is. That you went to his…big ol' plantation, and you thought about writing about his house, but then you haven't done it. So he's here to help you do that." I had started such a book months prior, and George came in response to my pleas for *anyone up there* to help get me out of a writing slump.

* * * * *

It is worthy to note that prior to taking Georgia O'Connor's call for the first session, I had never met or spoken to her, nor had any other communication taken place. She knew nothing about me other than my name and mobile number.

The setting of George's story is derived from the narrative of those sessions. Historical records tell us who owned South Louisiana's Houmas Indian land, the place George called home, as far back as the sixteenth century. He lived there when it was known as The Houmas, a sugar plantation owned and operated by the Burnside and Beirne families. Theirs was a grand home that still boasts the opulence of the day.

When I finished George's story, I felt compelled to research those elements that might be verified by historical records. Part of me wanted to believe everything George told me, no questions asked; however, I felt that core need to verify the facts, just as many of you will undoubtedly feel. In the end, I verified a great deal, but not one hundred percent.

Regarding the manner in which George told his story, I simply sat at my computer, closed my eyes, and wrote what George silently told and showed me. Although today's physicists continually unveil deep mysteries of our existence and our universe, the science regarding communications between entities not within the same time-space is slim. Many physicists assert that our existence is one of a multi-verse rather than a single universe, and all possibilities exist. Another theory concludes that time and space become somewhat homogenized to those who have passed. As it applies to this story, we are dealing with someone who has escaped the constraints of time. This may explain why George refers to a few events that actually occurred before or after his lifespan, and why he does not always tell his story in our linear state of past-present-future. I will point out some discrepancies in sidebars, others with endnotes and in the *My Story* section.

If you do subscribe to the idea that we are all attached within and to this and perhaps other universes through some type of link between past, present, and future, perhaps all existing simultaneously, then you most likely accept the premise that all facets of our existence are open

to an infinite number of possibilities, and you know that attempting to describe these potential relationships in a finite way is very sketchy indeed.

If your background leads you to believe the channeling process is hokey, sacrilegious, or spooky (Einstein considered entanglement theory to be *spooky actions at a distance*), please know that it is neither my intention nor my desire to convince you of anything at all. What follows describes a *personal experience* that cannot be confirmed through historical, scientific, or religious information, dogma, belief systems, etc. I can only say that my experience is one hundred percent authentic. Having documented my progress on several levels, my log of events, the audio and transcripts of channeling sessions, and supporting emails and research documents are available for examination.

If you listen to the recordings and believe George is a composite of several entities; that maybe I misunderstood George and he didn't live on Houmas land during that period; that the inconsistencies prove the whole story is fishy; or any other debunking or otherwise discrediting explanations, I can only reiterate that this is my personal experience concerning George's observations and the few facts that became known to him once he joined the all-knowing spirit world.

This story is unique inasmuch as it is told from a slave's front door, an interpretation of events strictly from his perspective. One's own understanding is one's own truth, so this is George's truth. Your theories and beliefs regarding methods of communication and the difficulty in relating to the timeline of this world once individuals pass to the other side, are your truths. In order to maintain the integrity of the story as it was given to me, I did nothing to correct any inconsistencies in fact and timing – no exceptions.

Also left unchanged was the chronological order of George's story, particularly those portions that shifted back to scenes previously described. What you will read is in the exact order I received it. This caused for a little confusion in reading the beginning chapters once I finished writing the manuscript and read it for the first time, but I again chose to maintain the integrity of the document.[x] This was George's story, and I wanted to convey it exactly as it was given to me.

Regarding vernacular, by the end of the story, George's words (and those of others he eventually allowed to speak to me), became clearer and more precise, so I did go back and altered the vernacular in the first chapters to match those of the ending. This is the only modification I made, other than edits to text that describes scenes I was shown rather than words I was told.

In summation, the myriad of perspectives, beliefs, and explanations for anything you believe to be inaccurate or inconsistent in what you are about to read are likely infinite; therefore, I will not attempt to address them to any greater extent at this point. Paranormal events I experienced and the setting in which they occurred are detailed in the *My Story* section and Appendices. For those who wish to follow the entire story in the order it occurred, you may wish to read a transcript of the first channeling session now, or listen to it on YouTube®.[4]

[4] To follow events in chronological order, including my introduction to George, read the transcript of the first channeling session with Georgia O'Connor in Appendix A before proceeding. You may also use your smart phone with an app such as *Scan* to utilize the QR (Quick Response code) to the right and listen to the actual recording on YouTube®, or access the YouTube® video at http://youtu.be/REUaZ8JCwG4.

Notes

[i] Later in the story, George's master refers to his 150,000 acres of cane. Some records indicate that John Burnside initially bought only 10,000 acres in 1857, and eventually acquired an additional 10,000 acres; however, Burnside owned several plantations, combining for a total of over 150,000 acres.

[ii] Such instigators would have been "outside agitators," a term that refers to those who press to disturb the status quo, most often within the setting of conflicting political or social agendas.

[iii] The U.S. map of 1858 indicates a Poché plantation at the southernmost edge of Iberville Parish on the east bank, abutting the northern border of Ascension Parish, where Houmas House Plantation and Gardens is located. See http://usgwarchives.org/maps/louisiana/statemap/1858brno.jpg.

[iv] For more information on Houmas House Plantation and Gardens ghosts, see www.HoumasHouse.com/ghosts.htm.

[v] www.MaloneEditorial.com

[vi] The William Faulkner-William Wisdom Competition through the Words and Music organization, sponsored by the Pirate's Alley Society, Inc. www.wordsandmusic.org.

[vii] For more information about Georgia O'Connor, go to www.TheSpiritMessengerOnline.com.

[viii] For a more complete history of the Houmas lands, see www.HoumasHouse.com/history.htm or the books cited in sidebars.

[ix] For pictures and information on the gardens of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens, visit www.HoumasHouse.com/gardens.htm.

[x] I read portions during the first three days, and in the beginning of January, I read the first 4,000 words, but none thereafter.