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Childe Nathan and the Northward Flight

I.

They came at night, as was their murderous custom. A burning cross illuminated the sinister darkness. Spook hats revealed a cadre of hateful eyes.

They dragged their victim from his house, intent on hauling him to a horrible reckoning. He kicked and screamed curses, bidding his family to turn away. His pride did not allow him to beg.

His pride could not save him.

He spat at his assailants as they marched him off, the gesture expressing his hatred for them and all that they embodied. The butt of a shotgun dislodged three of his teeth, knocking him to the ground.

Hard soled boots launched a vicious assault on his ribs. Two of the curved bones fractured before hateful hands yanked him to his feet.

“I ought to blow your head clean off, nigger,” the man whom had struck him with the shotgun snarled.

“Naw you don’t, boy,” a booming voice disagreed. “This coon don’t deserve a quick death. Gonna make him suffer for all the trouble he’s been causin’.”

Held fast, the black man offered no resistance as he was swept away. Instead, he focused his energy on not crying out during the eminent torture and lynching. No matter how much they hurt him, he wouldn’t give the bastards the satisfaction of hearing him cry out.

“There’s a tree waitin’ for you, nigger,” the man with the booming voice taunted. “A tree an’ a rope.” A hateful chuckle passed his lips. “But first you’ll suffer. Gonna make you suffer something awful.”

II.

The boy leapt from his sleep, his strange eyes bulging in terror. Seven years on earth had been more than enough time for him to learn that his dreams often forecast an approaching reality. He streaked into the quarters where his Papa and stepmother slept.

No sooner had he entered than Papa sprang up like a man-sized Jack In a Box.

“What is it, boy?” the man grunted, striking the bedside lantern alight.

The trembling boy flew into his father’s arms with a force that nearly toppled them both. His stepmother moaned something unintelligible, turning over and claiming more of the cotton blanket for herself.

“What is it, Nathan?” Papa asked again. “Tell me what it is, son.”

“They’re coming, Pa,” Nathan gasped into his father’s sinewy shoulders. “They’re coming soon.”

The man stood the boy up as he got to his own feet. He grasped his son’s face as he leaned over so that they were at eye level. The boy’s irises shone an ethereal light, as they always did when the sight was working in him.

“Who’s coming, Nathan? Who?”

“The sp-spooks,” Nathan stammered. “The spooks with the burning cross. They’re coming for you, Papa.”

James Walker knew then that the night riders had marked him, just as he knew that some poor Colored had identified him as the organizer of meetings among homesteaders. He didn’t doubt that the fellow had the secret beaten out of him.

James knew that word was bound to get out, sooner or later. He’d figured on being picked up by the local authorities and thrown into jail as a rabble rouser.

He hadn’t figured that the night riders would come for him. He had no idea that the Klan was poised to ride again. The original spooks in sheets had been suppressed by the government when he was but a small boy. He had no clear memories of its actions, only terrifying accounts that his father had shared with him as a youth. James’s father wanted him to be able to instantly recognize if such a threat ever arose again. Well, now it seemed to have done so.

If it wasn’t for Nathan, James wouldn’t have known until it was too late. Once again, the power within his young son both amazed and scared him. But the boy’s ability was not nearly as terrifying as the prospect of falling prey to the new night riders. The legacy of their forebears preceded them, leaving no doubt about what they were capable of.

“When are they coming, son?”

Nathan's visage twisted in deep concentration. He closed his eyes, placing a small brown hand on his forehead. He swooned before managing to steady himself. His eyes popped open.

"Tomorrow night, Papa," he gasped. "They're coming for you tomorrow night."

III.

It was a cold January night in 1902, at least cold by Alabama standards. A young Negro woman writhed in a rickety bed, using every bit of strength she had to push her child into the world.

A midwife leaned over her, dutifully applying a cold compress to her fevered forehead. The woman's husband waited outside the birthing room, feeling helpless against her tortured screams. His murmured prayers belied his sense of hopelessness.

The roar of an approaching motor and the sight of automobile lights interrupted his pleas to the Lord. He rushed to the door of the small farmhouse.

The man who exited the beast of a vehicle carried a huge, weathered satchel. There was a regal air to his walk.

"In here, Doctor Woodson," James Walker said to the graying, bespectacled man whom he hoped to be the salvation of his wife and soon to be child.

Woodson was the only white doctor in the county known to treat Negroes, even if they did have to come through the back door of his office at irregular hours. James had never forgotten their first encounter, when Helen was just a few months along in her pregnancy.

“I’m hardly a champion of the Negro cause,” Doctor Woodson had remarked. “I just realize that whether it passes from a white hand or brown, money’s just as green.”

James's mind crashed back to the urgent present as he hurried Dr. Woodson to the birthing room. "Helen's bad", he said. “You have to help her.”

“I’ll do the best I can,” Dr. Woodson’s tone was solemn as they reached the parlor that had been transformed into a makeshift birthing area. “You’d best wait out on the porch.”

It was the second time that James had been made to wait elsewhere since his wife’s labor began.

The midwife had earlier instructed him to wait in the hall on account of his presence only helping to overexcite his wife. Now, Dr. Woodson wanted him outside of the house altogether.

“I won’t leave my home while you cut on my wife,” James argued.

“You will leave, because I am her doctor and I am telling you what’s best for her,” Woodson growled. “It’s also what’s best for you!”

Against his own desire, James exited to the porch. As he sat in his big chair, he realized how bitterly cold the night air had become. That detail would burn itself into his memory, never to be forgotten.

IV.

James did not bother to be gentle or polite as he shook his second wife awake.

“What is it?” she grumbled, rubbing her eyes.

“Damn, woman. You could sleep through a Texas Twister. Couldn’t you?” He frowned. “Well you have to get up, now.”

“What for, James? It’s the middle of the night?”

“No time to explain, woman! We have to pack.”

“Pack for what?” Naomi sat up beneath the bed covers, noticing Nathan for the first time.

“What are you doing in here, Nathan?” she grimaced.

“He saw something. He came in here to warn us,” James answered. “Now when I say we have to pack- we have to pack!”

V.

A sea of blood coated Dr. Woodson’s garments.

“Worst breeched birth I’ve ever seen,” he spoke solemnly, placing a hand on James’s shoulder as he stepped onto the porch. “I had to do a caesarian. I’m sorry, James. These things don’t usually end in death. But your dear Helen’s body just couldn’t stand the ordeal.”

James gasped and fisted his hands before placing his right hand over his left breast. He headed inside, on a beeline for his liquor cabinet. He eviscerated a tall glass of brandy in two long swallows.

Nightmares of this very scene had besieged James for months, nightmares that were no false harbingers. Helen had been sick for most of her pregnancy. James had spent hours beyond number hoping that she would come through the birth intact, but he wasn’t at all surprised that she didn’t.

Surprise or not, the pain was still bitter. The sense of loss was acute, final.

A second glass of brandy insured James's composure. He'd allow himself to weep for his lost wife later. His newborn child awaited him.

"I want to see my child." He headed for the birthing room, stirred by the wailing sounds of new life.

Doctor Woodson stepped in front of him. If he had been Colored, James would have moved him aside, but even his misery did not stop him from remembering not to touch a white man.

"I want to see my child," he repeated in a listless tone.

"Not with your lost wife in there," Dr. Woodson urged. "It will be too much for you, James."

"I want to see my wife, too," James sighed. "I want to kiss her goodbye."

"Very well." The doctor stepped aside, grabbing James's arm as the widower opened the door. "But first, there's something about the child that bears warning."

VI.

The April sun yawned, opening its' eyes after a restful sleep. James Walker and his wife finished loading their bedroll onto his carriage. His young son helped with the smaller items.

James soon guided a pair of young horses from his seat behind them. The muscled legs of the steeds were due to transport the family on a number of stops this day.

Their first stop was in the cornfields on their own property. James brought the carriage to a stop and stepped down. "Hezekiah!" he yelled into the yellow and green sea. "Hezekiah?"

A sweating, well-muscled man soon emerged from among the stalks. He wore a straw hat. "How are you, boss?" the man asked.

James laughed. "How many times do I need to tell you, Zeke? I'm not your boss. You're an independent agriculturist operating on my land."

Hezekiah grinned. "I'm a sharecropper," he said. "A sharecropper on your land. I reckon s'a sight better than bein' on some peckerwood's land, though."

"Ain't it the truth?" James extended his hand, enjoying an uncharacteristic slip into improper English. "Listen up, Zeke. I have a proposition for you."

VII.

The discarded caul was membranous and slick, the texture of a wet snake skin. The veil, as superstitious people referred to it, was not what mortified James. The Deep South teemed with tales of such a birth portending clairvoyance and other types of fantastic powers. But James was an educated man, his father having been one of the first Negroes to own land in Butler County. Four years at Tuskegee College had forged a man of reason, so James didn't keep with such backward superstitions.

He knew that the presence of a caul on a newborn's head was a natural, if rare occurrence of childbirth. What mortified him was what the veil covered.

He resolved to kiss his dear Helen goodbye before granting his full attention to the strange newborn. She lay still on the pallet, a beatific smile fixed on her face. Her still eyes stared toward heaven.

James did not doubt that heaven had claimed his beloved wife. Nor did he doubt that she'd gone willingly, pleased that her earthly work was done. He took the child they had created together from the young midwife, knowing that his earthly work had just begun.

VIII.

Having settled matters with Hezekiah, James next exited the carriage outside of a rustic two-story home. He marched to the front door, pounding on it as if trying to force it in. To his surprise, a plump, grim-faced woman answered. "What do you want?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips.

"Good day to you, Emma Jean." James smiled, trying his hand at charm in the face of this unexpected circumstance.

"I said whatchu want, James?" Emma Jean hissed. "Oh, I know! You want to see Julius. Don't you? Well, that won't be happenin' seein's how he's locked up at the county jail."

"The county jail?" James's eyes bulged. "What for?"

"On account o rabble rousin 'n' bein a public disturbance."

Emma Jean's bronze face turned a deep crimson. Her neck bobbed back and forth like a chicken's. "On account o havin' meetins with the likes of you. Now, git the hell off my porch."

Emma Jean stalked into her house and slammed the door shut.

James realized that Julius would have been out of jail if he had given James up. He supposed he owed old Julius an apology if he ever saw him again. The man had more steel than he'd thought.

But if not Julius- then whom? Twenty two homesteaders had met with him in the old barn, seven of them Colored. James didn't think the authorities would dare to violate a white Anglo-Saxon's right to peaceful assembly by brutalizing him. That left six others to choose from, at least one of whom had given him up.

James wanted to face his betrayer before he left Alabama for good. He wanted the bastard to know that his weakness might have cost James his life.

IX.

Once the caul was removed, thick folds of skin that engulfed the newborn's eyes were exposed.

"I've never seen anything like it," Doctor Woodson spoke in a reverent tone. "I've heard of such occurrences, but in twenty seven years of medical practice, I've never seen it for myself."

"Can anything be done?" James clutched the now silent baby to his breast.

"There must be an operation, of course," Doctor Woodson said. "I will not be the one to perform it. I will have an esteemed colleague visit you from the hospital staff in Greenville. He is at the vanguard of modern ophthalmology."

"Do you think that the surgery might harm him?"

The doctor shook his head. "Either he'll be blind or he will see. That is not much of a risk, for he is already blind."

X.

James found the man whom had betrayed him at his fourth stop.

Sitting in his parlor, John Avery looked worse for wear. His right eye was badly bruised and swollen almost completely shut. His bottom lip was purple and looked fit to burst. There were splints on the pinky and index finger of his left hand.

Despite the brutal treatment his erstwhile ally had received, James couldn't help thinking that John looked a lot better than James would look if he remained in Butler County come nightfall. John's wife treated James to a hostile glare before leaving her husband alone with him.

James fought back a chuckle, amused by his newfound popularity with his friend's wives. "Sheriff Allen do that to you?"

John nodded. "Him 'n his deputies." He picked up a washcloth lined with ice and pressed it to the swelling over his eye. "They rounded us all up. All the Coloreds't attended that meetin'."

"They got no legal right to do that."

John grimaced. "Yeah? Try tellin' 'em that when they come for you."

James furrowed his brow, staring daggers at the beaten man. "What makes you think they're coming for me?"

John bowed his head, letting the hand that held the washrag rest on the table before him.

“I....,” he stammered. “I- I jus’ figga’d they’d round up everybody who was at that meetin’. I jus’ figga’d that.”

“You jus’ figga’d that?” James snarled, voice barely above a whisper. “You jus’ figga’d that or you know? You know because you gave everyone up.” He pointed an angry finger. “And you named me as the ringleader!”

John looked up. “What was I supposed to do? Stay in that jail? Take more beatins?”

James bellowed, pounding the table with both hands. “I would’ve gotten you a lawyer when I got wind of it! I would’ve gotten you out.”

“ ‘N when would that a been? After two or three more days o’ me gittin’ beat on ‘n starved? After two or three more days o’ me not even bein’ given nothin’ ta scrub the filth off maself wit’?”

James took a deep breath, flattening his palms on the table. “It would’ve been good for the cause in the end.”

“What cause? Ownin’ land free ‘n clear in Butler County? I got news for you, most Colored ain’t fortunate enough to be born into land ownership. Most Coloreds are lucky if they inherit a chicken ‘n a decent pair of britches.”

“You think I don’t know that?” James shouted, leaping to his feet. “You think I don’t know how damned fortunate I am? That’s why I try to help my fellow homesteaders win the same privilege I have. But I guess you and I aren’t fellows after all.”

John grunted as he got to his own feet. A defiant expression emerged on his battered face. “No, sir. I guess we ain’t. We ain’t fellows. ‘N you kin shove your cause directly up your hindquarters.”

John’s wife reappeared, placing caring hands on her husband’s shoulders as she helped him back into his seat. She fixed James with accusing eyes.

“My husband cain’t take too much excitement in his condition, Mr. Walker.”

James picked his hat up off the table and straightened it on his head.

“Not to worry, Mrs. Avery,” he matched her formal speech. “I’m going now.”

He stepped past his grudging hosts and exited the parlor. He paused on the sliver of floor just before the living room and spoke without turning.

“Just so you know, John. They weren’t going to arrest me. They were coming to kill me, tonight. They were coming to kill me because they know that without me around the rest of you Coloreds will never put up the fight you need to put up to gain what’s rightfully yours. I hope your injuries heal up nicely.”

James didn’t wait for a response. After all, he had another very important stop to make.

Doctor Gabriel Addison was the most renowned ophthalmologist in the small pool of Alabama surgeons. James could tell that the esteemed gentleman viewed the impending operation on Nathan as a grand opportunity.

James saw the operation as a no lose circumstance for the Doctor. If the procedure proved unsuccessful, the man's profession would hardly strike a black mark against him. After all, harming a Negro baby was nowhere near as upsetting as harming a white child.

On the other hand, the successful completion of such an operation would surely bring Addison international renown in his field. A feat of such magnitude would render the patient's ethnicity moot and validate the performance of future procedures on white patients.

Baby Nathan was only a month old when the operation date was set. He had spent that time in unrelenting darkness. Silence and stillness were his arms, embracing the black void that surrounded him.

Nathan's activity was so minimal that at times it seemed as if he didn't realize he had left the fluidic cave of the womb. He only complained when he was hungry. Even then, he managed only low-pitched sobs. Infantile giggling was rare, as was the playful movement of his tiny limbs.

James's gratitude for Nathan's survival was tempered by the acute sense of loss he felt for his departed wife. He wasn't confident that the coming surgery could help Nathan, but he agreed to the procedure because he did not want his child to live a life of darkness.

James felt certain that his beloved Helen would have shared that sentiment.

Everything James had ever strived for and all that he believed about right and wrong paled in comparison to his desire for his son to see. He decided that if the Good Lord would grant him the boon of Nathan's sight, he wouldn't ask for anything else as long as he lived.

XII.

"What do you mean only 700 dollars is available?" James said, scowling. "I have 1100 dollars invested in this bank! I earned every red cent of that money. Why is the entire amount not available?"

Sweat dappled the brow of the Colored clerk who faced James's ire. He was a small man, with close cropped hair and immense spectacles. "'I'm very sorry, Mr. Walker. I can assure you that the entire amount will be available in a few days."

"I don't have a few days!" James banged on the square desk that separated them. "I leave town today!"

"We could wire the remaining balance to your destination," the clerk suggested, his voice shaky. "That's the best that can be done on short notice."

James exploded into laughter. He slapped his knees and nearly fell from his seat. "I do apologize," he straightened up, voice and mannerisms aping an embarrassed southern belle. "I suppose I should have given you advance notice so that you could have all of my money ready for my use. After all, this is a Colored bank. I most certainly should have known better."

The clerk's cheeks flushed as he lowered his eyes. "It's the best we can do, sir."

James returned to his own voice, managing to keep it low and even. "I suppose it will have to do. Only do me one favor."

"Sir?"

"Look me in the eyes when you're causing me one of the worst inconveniences of all my days on God's green Earth!"

Minutes later, James left the bank with seven hundred dollars in hand. He wasn't pleased about waiting for the rest of the money to be wired to his destination, but he couldn't stay until it became available. Four hundred dollars was a large sum of money, but a dead man could not spend it.

XIII.

James didn't care that the cost of Nathan's surgery and aftercare had devoured a large slice of his savings. Nor did he care about being herded into the Colored entrance of the hospital, like some thief in the night. He only cared that Dr. Addison proved as skilled as advertised. He only cared that his boy could see.

Baby Nathan had the strangest eyes. The tiny pupils were green, which was unique enough in itself. Still, the irises outdid the pupils. They were hazel save for the outer edge, which formed a thin green ring. James couldn't help thinking that they were as ethereal as a cat's eyes at nighttime. As strange as his son's eyes were, he did not consider for a moment that they signified anything mystical or supernatural.

Naomi, the young midwife whom James decided to keep on as a nanny, once made a passing reference to such a possibility.

James's response was as deliberate as it was harsh. "As someone who is quite skilled at what she does and has had an intimate bond with my child and late wife, I would enjoy continuing to employ you, Naomi. But I'm not certain that will be possible if you insist on speaking of such nonsense."

Naomi hastily agreed to keep any future notions of the like to herself. She didn't know that James lacked even the slightest inclination to make good on his warning since he didn't see how he could get along without her.

Business was James's strong suit, not caring for a newborn. He was a merchant and something of a farmer, although he rented out most of his generous acreage to Colored sharecroppers. He was also something of a crusader for increased opportunities among the Colored in his home county. He raised and donated money to keep the schoolhouse for local Negro children open, among other endeavors.

James's time with the boy would come when he grew bigger. For now, he would defer to Naomi in any child nurturing matters that didn't involve silly superstitions. For a better than customary wage, she cared for the baby, fed and bathed him. She also cleaned house and cooked good food.

Having Naomi around freed James to concentrate on a man's duties. In many ways, having Naomi around was almost like having a wife. Not that anyone could replace Helen. The pain of Helen's loss

was a tireless hound on James's trail. Holding the baby they created in his arms was the only thing that truly brought James peace.

He'd kiss Nathan and murmur to him. "Your mother gave her life to create something so beautiful. Yes, she did. Your mother gave her life for you, you beautiful boy."

Nathan always laughed when James kissed him, regarding his father with those beautiful, mysterious eyes. The crystalline wells of those eyes always left James content.

XIV.

The persistent locomotive chugged along its track, causing the only slice of earth Nathan had ever known to shrink further and further from view. He, James, and Naomi were the only passengers in the Colored car.

While Nathan marveled as a child enjoying his first train ride should, James grumbled at the spare quarters he and his young family were confined to. Jim Crow is a rotten son of a bitch, he thought.

The Colored Car was the rearmost car of the train and the mobile equivalent of a dank cellar. Its musty smell offended James's nose. He felt bilious resentment of the knowledge that the Colored porters were sure to tend to the dining needs of he and his family last. James longed for the days when Jim Crow would lose its stranglehold on the Colored community. He believed that longing without action was senseless, so he took action often.

His boldest maneuver in pursuit of social change had been mobilizing the twenty-two homesteaders whom had met at his home

two nights ago. He had felt encouraged by the fact that fifteen of the attendees were whites of low station. James believed that a white man without his own land was almost as bad off as a Negro. He also believed that if such white man were smart, they would stand with Negroes in pursuit of bettering themselves.

Each of the gathered homesteaders faced staunch opposition from the government and banks of Butler County. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, the terms of land acquisition were quite clear. A man could move in on unclaimed acreage, improve upon it for the overall good of the local jurisdiction, and submit a completed application for ownership of that land. There was no provision in the act to exclude Negroes or families whom lacked community standing. Yet, the county bigwigs up in Greenville actively blocked the approval of homestead claims for such men.

It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure out why. The politicians and bankers were in bed together. They wanted to snatch land away from would be homesteaders so they'd be free to sell it to the federal government or develop some cash cow of an investment, such as more gambling houses.

James had inherited his own land from a father who'd been gifted by his former master after Emancipation. James was relentless in galvanizing the struggling homesteaders, wanting to see others gain what had been his birthright. During the meeting, they all agreed to pool their resources to hire legal counsel.

That was before the sheriff and town magistrate cooked up bogus charges of public disturbance and arrested all of the Negroes who'd attended (save for James). Other than that Judas John Avery, James expected the rest of the arrested to be released today. The plan seemed to be to have them out just in time to see what became of men like James. Well, all they would see now was the dust from his proverbial tracks. James hoped to be wrong in his belief that the sharecroppers lacked the steel to see the fight through without him around.

James believed that many of the men whom intended to string him up come nightfall were county officials by day. The sheriff and his deputies probably had spook hats in their closets as well.

After all, the original incarnation of the Klan had been birthed by such leaders. James's father had told him that, just as he'd told him that the pastime of such men was hateful violence.

James wished that he could have stayed in his home on the outskirts of Greenville, but he knew that was no longer possible once Nathan described his vision of the night riders. James had come to know long ago that young Nathan's sight rarely erred.

XV.

"I do appreciate all your help around here," James said, smiling at Naomi.

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Walker." Naomi flashed two rows of pearls back at him. It took James a while to notice, but he now realized just how pretty she was.

She reached to clear his finished dishes from the dinner table. James sprung from his seat and seized them from her. “No, let me get those.”

“You gon’ to do my job for me, now- Mr. Walker?” Naomi asked, looking concerned.

“Your job this evening is to accept a humble demonstration of my appreciation,” James spoke over his shoulder, clanging the dishes into the sink. He turned and motioned toward the table. “I want you to have a seat, Naomi.”

The young woman’s eyes shifted into surprised circles. “Mr. Walker, I cain’t....”

James furrowed his brow. “You’re still working for me, correct?”

Naomi nodded.

“Very well, then. Your last duty for this evening is to sit and allow me to serve you some of the delicious food you have prepared. Surely you don’t intend to be insubordinate to your employer?”

“No, Mr. Walker.” Naomi smiled, bemused. “I don’t intend to be insubordinate.”

She settled into a seat at the large dining table. James heaped a plate of tasty vittles and sat it before her. He poured her a tall glass of sweet tea before seating himself across from her.

“I know you must be hungry, as hard as you work around here.” He looked into her eyes. “I know you have a time with my boy.”

Naomi blushed. “He’s no bother, Mr. Walker,” she said, pushing at the food with her fork. “I’m awfully sweet on him, to tell the truth.”

“Yes.” James smiled. “He’s quite the boy. I’m so glad he’s turned out healthy. You know with the way he was born....”

“I know,” Naomi interrupted him. “It’s a blessing. He’s a blessing.”

James stood up and poured himself another glass of tea. He cast a long glance at Naomi as he returned to his seat. Her eyelids fluttered as her pupils fled to the table.

“Why do you look at me that way?” she asked.

“I look at you that way because I’m seeing you for the first time.”

Naomi laughed. “I do believe somethin’s gittin into you tonight, Mr. Walker.”

James shrugged. “I do believe you’re right.” He smiled. “Is that bad?”

Naomi’s pupils ceased their flight and met his. “It doesn’t seem bad, I guess. I just don’t know if it’s proper.”

James shifted in his seat. “Don’t be alarmed, Naomi. I’m just a lonely widower, in need of some conversation. Would you be kind enough to indulge me with some?”

“Alright.” Naomi sat her fork down. Her hands formed a brown tent in front of her untouched plate.

“Damn, girl. You don’t eat and talk at the same time?”

“Not on this occasion, I don’t.”

James laughed and slapped the tabletop. “Alright, then.” He cleared his throat. “So tell me a little about yourself.”

She shrugged. “There ain’t much to tell.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Surely there must be volumes.”

Naomi took a deep breath and leaned back in her seat. “Okay, well – I been reared to midwife from a young age. I learned from my mother and aunt. They learned from my grandmother. They say she got free around 1850. Passed down midwifing as a skill that will always be needed.”

James sighed. “I should’ve figured it was a family skill,” he said. “You were so good to my wife. You’re so good to my child.”

“Thank you.” Naomi unleashed a smile that could guide ships to shore. “You know I’m going to school next year? Been savin’ up for it. Gon’ be licensed. Then I might really be able to make a decent living at it. White women and Colored gon’ line up for my services. That’s what I hope for, anyway.”

“Hot damn, Naomi,” James exulted. “I love to hear a Colored person with a plan. I think that’s the only way for the Negro race to progress. Through plan and action. You know, I feel almost embarrassed that we haven’t talked like this before. Here you’ve been kind enough to stay on a year after my son’s birth. You’ve looked after him expertly, cooked and cleaned like an angel– and I’ve never really talked with you.”

“Well, I don’t know how kind it is, Mr. Walker.” Naomi held her palms out in front of her. “You do pay me well, after all.”

“I guess I do.” James tapped the tabletop. “Still, I appreciate everything you do. And it’s nice to talk with you.” He stood up. “I

think I've kept you from your dinner long enough. I'm going to look in on, Nathan."

He began to walk away before stopping in his tracks. "Oh- and Naomi?"

"Yes, Mr. Walker?"

A broad smile engulfed James's features. "I hope we can talk again some time."

Naomi's face flushed as she grew a smile of equal measure. "That would be fine by me, Mr. Walker."

XVI.

"Papa." Nathan tugged at his father's arm. "Do we have far to go now?"

James rubbed the boy's coarse crop of hair. "We don't have far to go on this train, Nathan. We're maybe an hour from Atlanta. That's a bigger city than you've ever seen. We don't have time to sight see, though. We're just going to change trains to one that's heading North."

"We're going to Baltimore. Right, Papa?" Nathan whispered. "We won't have to worry about spooks in sheets there."

James nodded. "That's right, boy. I'm going to strike it big in business there. There are far more opportunities for Colored men further north. Who knows, in a few years we might do well enough to move on to New York."

Nathan closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat. "We won't need to go to New York, Papa," he said, opening his eyes a few moments later. "Baltimore will be just fine."

James clouted his son upside the head. “What have I told you about abusing your talent, boy? I told you, it’s wrong to get an unfair advantage in life.”

“James,” Naomi complained, diverting her attention from the landscape passing in the Colored car’s single window.

James leaned toward her and whispered in her ear. “Don’t challenge me on this, woman. I don’t want him misusing what he was blessed with.”

She responded with her own whisper. “You don’t want him misusing it or you don’t want him using it at all? Just remember that without his blessing, this might have been your last night on earth.”

James fell silent, trumped by the simple truth that had passed his wife’s lips. Still, he didn’t want to encourage the boy to summon his sight at random.

Nathan had lost the only person who might’ve taught him proper use of his gift before he was old enough to reap the full benefits of the tutelage. Now it was left to his father and stepmother to mold him. But how could the ordinary mold the extraordinary?

Just moments ago, the boy predicted that they would do just fine in Baltimore. James closed his eyes and said a silent prayer for his son’s unbidden forecast to prove correct.

XVII.

“What’s the matter?” James asked.

Naomi sighed. “I think I’ve gone and made a big mistake,” she said.

James placed a sinewy arm around her, pulling her naked torso into a spooning position.

“You call what we just shared a mistake? That doesn’t do much for my ego.”

“It’s a mistake if I expect to be courted,” Naomi muttered into her pillow.

“Well, now. I guess that’s true. Thing is, I don’t intend to court you.”

“I knew it.” Naomi pushed his arm away, revealing a furious visage when she turned to face him. “Listen- I’m no strumpet! I’m not here for a cheap thrill.”

James smiled then. It was a kind smile, bereft of guile. As much as she wanted to, Naomi could detect no cruelty in it. If she had, if would have been easier for her to storm off in a huff and retain what little dignity she had left.

“I know you’re no strumpet, Naomi.” James dared a quick peck of her lips. “I could tell you haven’t traveled that road too many times before.”

Her face plummeted, embarrassed. “S-so you didn’t enjoy it?”

James responded in the most earnest voice he could summon. “Hell yes I enjoyed it, Naomi. I felt like you were sharing something very precious with me. And you can’t be a strumpet, because I’m far too smart to fall in love with that sort.”

Naomi gasped, placing her right hand over her left breast. She cast a prolonged stare into his eyes. She did not glean even a tiny hint of deception in his returned gaze.

“Don’t toy with me,” she warned.

“I don’t mean to toy with you, Naomi.” James accomplished the uncanny feat of flashing a broader and kinder smile than he had before. “And I don’t mean to court you. Why waste time with formalities when we could hurry and get married? That is- if you’ll marry me. Will you marry me, Naomi?”

Naomi jumped out of bed and stood stock still, in naked, nubile glory. Her hands covered her face as if she were a child afraid of the dark.

James took two slow steps toward her, removing her hands from her face and pulling her into a tender embrace. “Please say yes, Naomi. Please say yes.”

“Yes,” she sobbed into his chest. “Yes!”

They danced around the bedroom, hand in hand, naked as newborns. They were married two months later.

XVIII.

James breathed a sigh of relief while boarding the train in Atlanta.

Naomi squeezed his arm, no doubt sharing the same unvoiced sentiment.

Hezekiah had driven them the fifty miles from Greenville to Montgomery to board the previous train. The married couple had been

worried that the authorities of Alabama would apprehend them at the Bessemer or Birmingham stop- that James wasn't safe from the trumped up charges which had landed the homesteaders in stir. James could have stomached cooling his heels in jail for a worthy cause, but he was certain that his fate would be much worse than an arrest if his adversaries got their hands on him.

James felt much safer as the train from Atlanta headed north. In five hours, they'd change to another train in Columbia, S.C. He hoped to sleep as that one chugged through the night, ending its long route in Baltimore.

James couldn't wait to arrive. Maryland might technically be a southern state, but it wasn't the Deep South. It was far different from Dixie.

James's cousin Virgil had told him as much years ago, when he'd first tried to convince James to come north through written correspondence.

"You ought to sell off that old farmland and come up to Baltimore, Virgil wrote. You could do better in business up here, for sure. And you wouldn't have to worry about no peckerwood trumping up a reason to throw you in jail or swing you from a tree."

James had passed up his cousin's invitations for years, choosing to pursue change in the Deep South. Though he was aware of how unsafe his immediate surroundings could be for Negroes, he never truly feared being lynched or wrongfully incarcerated. He felt entitled to a

kinder fate- especially considering that the cost of his land inheritance had been losing his parents as a young man.

James had always figured that if he fought for right the right way, things would eventually work out as he wished. In the wake of Helen's death, he became more and more determined to further the cause of Colored folks. He became obsessed with it.

He had lost Helen in childbirth only a few years after losing both parents to tuberculosis. The twin tragedies served him as a cruel lesson about the frailness and temporary nature of life. Those who are here today could be gone tomorrow. With that harsh lesson stained into his soul, he decided that he ought to have more than what the racist structure of American society deemed his privilege. Perhaps his strongest belief in life was that other Coloreds and whomever else society deemed to keep trampled underfoot should also have more.

James now knew that his incessant pursuit of such beliefs would have led to a violent death, had it not been for the boy. What a boy he was. Watching the fruit of his loins stare out the window from his train seat, James ached with love for him. James wished it hadn't been necessary to chide Nathan during the previous train ride, but he didn't want his son turning into some sort of sideshow who called on his abilities all the time. There was nothing to be done about the occasions when the sight just seized hold of the boy, but he didn't want Nathan abusing something no science or scripture could explain.

James smiled in bittersweet fashion, allowing himself some overdue relaxation. He scooted over to his son, sharing a view of the

big window. He mused that this train's Colored car was much less shabby than that of the previous one. Perhaps a dozen other Negroes shared its space. James surprised himself with the ability to share Nathan's undiluted amazement while digesting the rapidly passing landscape. Scenes of towering, verdant forest and fantastical wetland passed before them. Nature's wonder was only slightly intruded upon by the smoke stacks of industrialization. America was a beautiful country.

A great swell of excitement swept James's dread aside. He felt full with the certainty that he would still have all the opportunity he craved- just not in the state of his birth. Baltimore awaited him.

If Virgil spoke true, Baltimore was a place where James could pursue his ambition without the worry of being dragged off by hateful spooks in the dead of night. James had never known Virgil to be a liar.

VIX.

Nathan was just a few months past his second birthday when he first showed signs of the sight.

"Horse hurt, Papa," he spoke during breakfast, nibbling on a piece of sausage that Naomi had cut small for him. The pleasant spring sun shone through the kitchen window, giving an ethereal glint to his already fantastical eyes.

"What are you talking about, boy?" James smiled, scooting his own chair closer to Nathan's wooden high chair.

Nathan swallowed the sausage before lifting his drinking cup to his lips. He sucked at its nipple with pleasure before setting it down. "Horse hurt, Papa," he repeated. "Horse hurt, today. The big horse."

James's smile twisted into a frown. "I don't like that, Nathan. That's not a good joke."

Nathan looked across the table at Naomi. It seemed to her that his eyes betrayed a depth of awareness that was impossible in such a tiny child. She had never dismissed the circumstances of his birth as mere physical anomaly. Unlike her husband, she didn't think that education precluded superstition.

"Horse hurt, Mama. Horse hurt."

"Yes, baby," she responded.

"Yes, baby?" James bellowed. "Surely you're not going to encourage such behavior, Naomi."

He stood up and pushed his chair in. "Nathan, I know you're little more than a baby, but you are an exceptionally smart boy and it's never too early to learn that although we may think certain things are funny, they just aren't acceptable. After you finish breakfast, I want you to go to your playpen. Without toys, of course. You are to remain there for one hour."

Nathan waited in his assigned location while Naomi approached James in the corridor between the living room and the kitchen.

"I wonder about you sometimes," she whispered.

“What would you have me do?” James matched her volume, peeking at Nathan over her shoulder. The still tot stared at the floor. “He has to learn that that sort of thing is not acceptable.”

“Acceptable?” Naomi somehow managed to maintain her whisper and yell in the same breath, her whisper voice quaking with frustration. “James, you speak as if he was a young man already.”

James whisper-shouted right back. “And you speak as if everything he does is a ray of sunshine.”

“Isn’t it?” Naomi smirked, her voice rising. “Has it even occurred to you- Mr. Walker - that your son might truly believe that one of the horses will be hurt today? Have you even considered that?”

The headstrong expression on James’s face departed. An embarrassed smile crept into its place after a few moments of silence. “As a matter of fact, I hadn’t,” he confessed, grasping his beautiful wife by her shoulders. “I’m sorry. I guess you must be pretty sore with me.”

Naomi’s face remained stern. “Now, what on Earth makes you say that?”

James grinned. “The fact that you called me Mr. Walker. Like you always do when you’re angry with me. Do you think he may have dreamed about the horses?”

Naomi nodded, allowing herself a small smile. She turned and looked at Nathan. The boy grinned and clapped his hands.

James brushed a hand against his wife’s. She grasped it, intertwining her fingers with his. He marveled at the strength in her grip.

James pulled free, bringing the moment to a reluctant end. “I guess I’d better make it right with him,” he said, still grinning.

Naomi grabbed rough hold of her husband, whispering into his ear. “You’re damn right, you’d better. Then later you can make it right with me.”

“Love to,” James chuckled, making his way to Nathan. He bent at the waist and hoisted the tot from his temporary prison. James wrapped his son in a tight hug, ruffling the miniature bird’s nest of his coif.

“Sorry, I was stern with you, Nathan,” James said. “Thought you were trying to put one over on your Papa.”

He extended his arms to hold his son in front of him. “I guess you were just trying to tell us about your dream. I guess it’s hard for someone barely two years old to relate a dream. Tell you what. I’ll give you an extra piece of candy to make up for it later. That okay with you?”

Nathan smiled and nodded his head.

“Good! We’re square, then.” James set the boy down. “One happy little family again. Well- Papa’s got to head into town, now.”

He thought for a moment, resting his chin on the knuckles of his right hand. He dropped to his knees in front of Nathan.

“Don’t you worry, Nathan.” He squeezed the baby fat around the toddler’s cheeks, eliciting a squeal of laughter. “Junie will be just fine.” He spoke of his chestnut mare, the largest of the four horses he owned. “She’ll finish the day just as she began it. In tip-top shape.”

A haunted expression deposed the smile that had decorated Nathan's face. It was an expression that should visit no toddler in a just world. He bit his lip and hung his head. "No," he moaned. "Junie hurt. Big horse hurt, Papa."

James felt no anger this time, only concern for his son. He kissed Nathan on his forehead before straightening up and turning to his wife.

"Poor boy's really frazzled," he said. "See if you can't comfort him, Nay. I'll return just as soon as I can."

"Of course." Naomi swept the boy she'd come to love and accept as her own into her arms. "He'll be alright, James. You just be careful heading into town."

Even in such curious circumstances, it gave James satisfaction to hear her clearly pronounce the "g" at the end of "heading". It would have been "headin'" before he'd started stressing the importance of proper speech. He was glad to have such positive influence over the woman he loved.

"Don't get spooked, Nay." He smiled. "You know I'm an excellent driver."

"Yes, you are." Naomi leaned past the child she embraced to plant a kiss on her husband's lips. "Still, I cain-can't help being a little nervous. I guess the boy's worry is catching this morning."

A few minutes later, James piloted Junie and Lulu Bell as they pulled his carriage up the coach road. He meant to conduct his business and immediately return home.

He sensed that his young family needed his composure on this day. That boy, God love him as his father did, could be downright strange. For her part, Naomi could be downright skittish.

James attributed that quality to Naomi's youth. She had just celebrated her twenty first birthday, nine fewer birthdays than he had known. She was extremely intelligent, hard working, resourceful, and adaptable. Still, she bore the skittishness of youth, the tendency to overreact.

James hadn't noticed it before he married her. He'd been too busy being swept along by her physical beauty, effervescent spirit and stunning devotion to his son.

Though he'd come to recognize Naomi's skittishness, James didn't feel any less fond of her. If anything, being able to detect flaws in his beloved provided strange comfort. He mused that he had his own fair share of them.

James's train of thought was disrupted when the carriage made careened to the left and came to a clumsy halt, coming close to upending. Junie brayed an alarm that soon gave way to pained whinnying. James righted himself in his perch and climbed down.

"Easy girl." He approached the big horse with care, placing a comforting hand on her heaving, heavily muscled side. "Easy. Let Papa see what's wrong."

He stood by her ear, murmuring comfort until the heaving of her torso decreased. He began checking for her affliction once she grew still.

A large rock had become lodged within her front left horseshoe.

Whispering and calming the big steed all along, James slowly and carefully removed the offending object. Moments later, he steered the carriage towards home, keeping it at a slow crawl so as not to further damage Junie's hoof before a vet could examine it. He spoke soothing words to her the entire way.

The rational portion of James's mind argued that what happened had been pure coincidence. The small part of his mind given to fancy held a different opinion.

XX.

"Hot damn, it's good to see you, boy," a stout, bear of a man declared as he embraced James.

James returned the embrace with equal enthusiasm. He couldn't decide which was more exciting- seeing his cousin Virgil for the first time since he was 14 or arriving in a place that offered far more opportunity than the Deep South.

Nathan and Naomi completed the quartet that stood outside of Baltimore's Mount Royal train station. James's smile cast a pleasant glare as he made the proper introductions.

"Virgil." He made a small flourish with his arm, as if he introducing the President of the United States himself. "This is my lovely wife, Naomi. I know you're probably wondering how I ever hitched myself to such a peach of a woman. Rest assured, I haven't figured that one yet, myself."

“Nice to meet you, Ma’am.” Virgil bent to kiss the hand that Naomi demurely offered. “You’re quite the lady, if James letters tell the truth.”

Naomi laughed. “If his letters say that he can’t get along without me, then they should be taken as Gospel. I see now that flattery runs in the family.”

Virgil chortled, his ample midsection and chest heaving. “An’ I see that you’re a firecracker, too. I cain’t wait to introduce you to my wife, Alma. You an’ her gon’ git along just swell.”

Still smiling, James nudged Nathan towards his much older cousin. “This of course....”

“Is your handsome son, Nathan!” Virgil exclaimed, bending to the boy’s eye level and extending a broad paw. “Nice to meet you, Nathan.”

Nathan’s small fingers disappeared inside Virgil’s mitt. “Your hands are soft,” he said.

Virgil cackled like an excited coyote. “As a matter of fact, they are, little cousin. See your big cousin’s got to keep these big ol’ hands gentle. That’s because I’m an artist. I know I might not look the part, but I got the talent, boy.”

Nathan smiled. “Could you draw me a picture sometime?”

“Sure thing, little cousin. But first things first. I got to git you folks to your lodgings.”

A few minutes later, they all boarded a crowded streetcar. It was a new experience for James and his young family. Though he had seen

such conveyances during his few trips to Birmingham, James had no occasion to set foot on one before now.

He drank his new city in, watching streets of cobble stone pass in the streetcar's wake. Baltimore seemed much grander than Birmingham, the largest city James had ever been to. There were no farmhouses here, only brick buildings and storefronts, many far taller than even the tallest buildings in Greenville. In fact, Greenville would struggle to fill Baltimore's boot. Scores of brick rowhomes sprung from the ground like spring flowers. Immaculate marble steps lay at their feet. Further along, brick tenements pulsed with activity and screamed of overcrowding.

The difference in architecture, roads and methods of transportation portended a new world of possibilities for James. He would become part of the growing industry in this city. Through hard work and business acumen, he would soon claim one of these brick buildings as his own.

Once he managed that, he would see if he couldn't become a galvanizing force among the Colored in this burgeoning city. Things might be a lot different here than in tiny, rural, Greenville, Alabama, but he could already tell they weren't different enough.

The fact that all of the Negroes were crowded into the back of the streetcar served as prime evidence of second class citizenship. James wouldn't raise a fuss just yet, but he didn't think that a seat in the back was acceptable for any Negro or other person of color. In time, he

would find out how many Negro citizens of Baltimore he could influence to share his viewpoint.