

5 Slavery's Child

WHITE FOLK TYPICALLY WILL say we's born slaves, whereas a black will tell you: "I was born in slavery." There's a world of difference. A child needs to be trained to be a slave—it don't come natural. So when they say we ain't educated, that ain't strictly true, neither. We educated in the peculiar ways of slavery.

Schooling starts early, and the major lesson is work. Babies is took out to the field and set at the end of a t'bacca or cotton row to watch the humped backs of they mothers shuffling from plant to plant. A man once told me he couldn't remember his mama's face, just the shade of sun-faded blue what was wrapped round her head, 'cause that's what he seed all day: the rag, not her face.

It ain't long 'fore somebody puts a broom into the hands of what I likes to call the "wobblers," or shows ten stumpy fingers how to pull a weed up by its roots. Quick learners get rewarded with harder tasks. Slow ones get the switch, and on some plantations they get a whip or a belt. I've seed healed welts on the back of a five-year-old.

I been lucky, myself. Harriet sucks her teeth to hear me say that, but I know it: sized next to other slaves, my tribulations come up short. When I was a child I had ring games and word games and spinning tops. I wasn't put in the fields but was with Gran, there in the big house. The hardest thing in my young life was small chores in

the kitchen—not ‘cause Missus Blow set me to work but ‘cause Gran never did countenance idleness.

Worst thing slavery done to me was to take my mama and papa, but I didn’t appreciate that ‘cause I had Gran. She was mother, father, teacher. True to her name, Gran schooled me to heed the past. Her downriver stories of kin, her proverbs, all was to help me see a world other’n the plantation. In Gran’s tales, there was possibilities other’n slavery’s possibilities.

An early lesson of Gran’s was happenstance. She said, “You born into slavery and that’s a fact, but it’s a fact of happenstance. Onliest reason you got a master is ‘cause you come into this world at this place and this time. It ain’t ‘cause you black, nor small, nor ‘cause you done something wrong. It ain’t no reason like that. Your kin was free—till slavery snatched us. We be like t’bacca: we grow according to the soil, not the seed—and now we’s planted in slavery’s soil. That’s happenstance. But happenstance,” she often reminded me, “don’t change who you be.”

Most her other lessons was protections, things a slave child got to know in order to live amongst white folk. “Don’t make white folk nervous,” she’d say when I complained about being small, which I did a lot. “Big and strong makes the white folk nervous. Big and black be half of what got your papa sold away. I give thanks every day that some white man ain’t likely to look at you and feel threatened by the sheer might of you.”

But that didn’t turn my sour milk to cheese, ‘cause Gran herself was a big woman, and I seed daily how she used her size and her might. Partly she got away with it ‘cause she done been Master Peter’s mammy, partly ‘cause she was just right most the time. So I seed her breaking the rules she laid down for me. Gran should’ve heeded her own proverb: If you want your children to follow your footsteps, watch where you walk.

That become particular true when it come to Master Peter. She was deep fond of him. She liked that he wasn’t like his papa, and she taken a pride in how he turned out. Even when she scolded him, it wasn’t with a hard heart. Leastways, not until he begun tipping with some of the local grandees. I was about six when Gran started warning me against him. “Don’t be trusting that man, that man’s your master.” By then it were too late for me to hear. “Master” were just a

word, a word what didn’t ‘count for the sap that run hidden betwixt us. “Master” didn’t ‘count for how he been raised elbow-to-elbow with his papa’s slaves, et and played right along with them. “Master” didn’t ‘count for how he was young, fresh-married, with no young’ns of his own when I come into his life. “Master” didn’t ‘count for how Gran was his mammy, so he felt partial to Gran, and I was Gran’s boy, so he felt partial to me, too.

I’ll say it plain: I loved Master Peter the way a boy loves a papa. He played with me, tickled me, learned me how to use a whittling knife. He provided everything. He was the man with the power: the power to give, to protect, and yes, to punish, though he wasn’t never even as hard as Gran. I didn’t see his power as power over me. I felt it like any child will feel the strength of a papa: I felt myself inside that power, sheltered by it.

Here’s what I be saying: a slave child gets hisself born and iffen he be lucky, iffen he ain’t treated like a dog—iffen he’s picked up and twirled and grows knowing he got the power to bring a smile to folks—then he gets to feeling he belongs. That’s only natural, babies believing they belong in the world they born to.

Not belonging, now that’s something else that’s got to be learned, and it got to be a hard lesson to overpower the strength of a child what believes different.



On a typical Sunday, after everyone returned from church services, Gran got busy in the kitchen. Peter Blow had recently acquired a stove, a fat, black, iron monstrosity which required constant feeding—a task well suited to six-year-old Dred. But Dred was feeling dreamy and bone-idle. The smell of honeysuckle teased him from the house. Knowing Gran would find some task for him, he skirted the outbuildings for cover and made his way to the pasture where the cows grazed. He flopped on his back and the fluttering spring grasses concealed him.

The sky shimmered in heat-streaked blue. Shapes in the drifting clouds flirted with him, and he began spinning tales. The cows ruminated to his chatter. Daisy, one of the gentlest of the herd, chomped closer and closer, until she was munching right next to Dred’s ear. Impulsively, Dred scooted between her hoofs, reached up, and

squeezed fresh, warm milk into his mouth; a dangerous pleasure, but Dred felt happy and secure. Trouble was something that happened in stories.

A breeze roused him. Dred began to think maybe Uncle Solomon's boy, Sip, would help him fashion a slingshot, and they could hunt squirrels. Hadn't Nyota been an expert with the slingshot? Surely that talent ran in his blood. Hurrying toward the quarter along the edge of the tobacco fields, he saw Mary Anne Blow by the granary and set his course on a wide arc to avoid her. Nothing but trouble, that one.

Too late, she saw him and called him over. She was not quite five, but she already understood more about her privileges than Dred did. With increasing frequency she practiced her entitlement over the slaves.

Dred approached skittishly, and his irritation ballooned when he saw her dolls. He hated dolls. She knew this.

"Dred," she said, "I want you to mind Sally and Maggie while I'm busy over here." He followed her pointing finger to a small mound of freshly-turned earth.

"Aw, Mary Anne, they's just cloth and cotton batting, don't need no minding."

"Dred, pay attention to me, now." She mimicked the prickly condescension her mother often used with the slaves. "Pretend like baby Sally is asleep, but baby Maggie's wet and wants her diaper changed."

"I got things to do, Mary Anne. I can't be playing with you now."

"What do you have to do? It's Sunday," she challenged.

"I think I heard Gran calling me."

"You did not. You were way over in the pasture. I'da heard her if she called. Now sit over there and play like you's the mammy and gonna change the baby's diaper."

"I don't want to."

"I say so."

The children squared off, neither sure of the limits of their power.

"Dred! Play like you's the mammy!"

Dred turned toward the house, hoping to see Gran. No one was about.

"Dred! Play like you's the mammy!"

Exasperated, he retorted, "Play like I ain't here."

Mary Anne's lips puckered and her eyes shot fire. He worried what she might do next, but she shifted into a carefree attitude. With

mincing steps she returned to the little mound of dirt, picked up a stick, and poked inside the hole.

Dred began to turn away, then looked back, realizing what he had overlooked—the reason Mary Anne was "busy." He added it up: she was digging in the dirt; this digging was more interesting than playing with her precious dolls; and her Sunday morning frippery had been exchanged for play clothes. His whole attitude changed and he slid into the dirt beside her, peeping into the hole. Sure enough, she was nudging a reluctant, fat worm from the crumbling earth, just the kind of worm her papa liked for Sunday fishing down by the creek. Master was going to take them fishing! The prospect of going fishing erased all thought of Sip. A slingshot he could make any day, but fishing—the children were forbidden to play at the creek unless Peter Blow took them, which he sometimes did on Sundays.

"Move over, Mary Anne, and I'll help you dig for more."

She didn't budge.

"I sure do love fishing with my papa," she said.

Talking as if I ain't here, thought Dred.

"And I've got the best worms. I'm going to catch a big one."

Her smile, prim and secretive, gave him pause. She was holding something back. She dangled the squirming worm.

"I'll help, Mary Anne. If he's a real big one, I'll hold the pole while you reel him in."

"Well, guess I'll just have to manage all by myself, Dred Scott," and she turned to look him full in the face, "because I'm going fishing but you're not. Papa's only taking me and Thomas. No slaves."

He longed to punch her. Not too long ago he had, and Gran had whipped him harder than the missus had.

He ran home to Gran and was relieved to see her packing the picnic basket. With a whoop he climbed a chair to peer in the basket and see what goodies they would eat. His smile dimmed as he counted only three sandwiches. "Where's my sandwich?" he asked.

"You and me be having our own picnic later, out by the maple."

"Master's going fishing. I want to go fishing."

"You not invited, child."

"But Mary Anne and Thomas are going. I always go when they go."

"Not this time, Dred. Only his own children be going with him this time." She spoke softly, but firmly.

His own children.

Gran continued, trying to brighten the shadow on his face. “You and me’s gonna have a special treat—I got johnnycakes on the griddle, just for us. Not for nobody else.”

His own children. Dred tried to understand it but couldn’t. Lamely, he said, “I’s one of his children. When the children go, I go.”

“Master Peter got his own children, Dred. That includes Mary Anne and Thomas and baby Elizabeth. It don’t include you. You know that.”

“But Master lets me ride Gen’ral. He takes me up in the saddle with him and he don’t let nobody else on Gen’ral but me. Not even Mary Anne.”

“That don’t mean you can do everything with him, Dred.”

“I tell him stories. When he naps I tell him tales, and he says I give him good dreams.”

Gran stooped to her knees and ducked her head to look at the child, sorrowful eye to sorrowful eye, letting him read from her eyes what her mouth could not explain.

His eyes filled with tears. She reached out but his little frame would not yield. He wanted no pity. “You don’t know! You don’t know everything. He calls me ‘son!’”

Gran pulled him to her breast. “Child, that don’t mean you be kin. It ain’t like with Thomas. Master just call any little boy that.”

Dred wrenched free. “He don’t. Nobody but me and Thomas. I know. You don’t know.”

Feeling cramped and off-balance, Gran stood abruptly. She didn’t want to argue. She winced as he slumped under the weight of this new lesson, his small features screaming defeat and betrayal. With furious rebuke he shook a finger violently at the stove. Too late, she smelled the smoking cakes. “They’s burned, they’s burned,” he screamed. “You ruined everything.”

Minutes later, Peter Blow came for the picnic basket. Separating the carefully folded linen, he peered inside, lifted the top item, and frowned. Carrying the basket to the stove, he shuffled the burnt johnnycakes and selected three of the least burnt. He turned to leave.

“Oh, Gran! I didn’t think anyone was here.” His own laughter annoyed him. Composing himself, pointedly ignoring how the old woman remained motionless in the corner, he continued, “You forgot

to put the cakes in, so I, yes, well, it seems I have everything now.” He was on the threshold when he added, without turning around, “You explained it all to Dred?”

Still she said nothing. He turned to look at her, then dropped his eyes and said to the floor, “Fine. I’ll be off, then.”

When she could no longer hear his steps, she rose and stood at the window. Often while she washed before that window she would hum, releasing the tunes from her childhood like birds from a cage, letting her music fly out and settle among the branches of the great maple, and the leaves would applaud. Now her heart was struck dumb. Now she silently watched her grandson, striding purposefully toward the stable, where she knew he would confide his sorrows to the horses. His little hands, swinging at his sides, were clenched into fists.

Good, she thought, good.

But when Dred returned to the kitchen, fists still clenched, she cupped her two big hands around his little one and saw it was not a fist. His thumb was merely tucked into the palm, with the tiny, half-moon of his thumbnail peeping out between two fingers, and her heart, finding its voice, howled at that moon.



Surprising how the littlest thing can lead to something stretching through your whole life. Them tucked thumbs led to two things—every time Gran seed them, she added another stone to the rock pile of resentment she be building against Master Peter, so that for all my life, the most friction that sparked betwixt Gran and me was always over him.

The second thing, though, were something good. Gran begun learning me rhythms. She begun patting games with me, and when she told her stories, she urged me to rap out a beat. That’s how they done in Africa, she said. Somebody drummed while somebody else told a story. I learned me a whole language: fast and slow, hollow and sharp, muffled and loud. Got so’s I wouldn’t even know I was tapping till she begun clapping along with me. When I was eight, she made me a fine set of bones. She shaped them and polished them herself. Don’t know whatever come of them bones. I must’ve lost them ‘fore we moved to Alabama, when times was bad and we didn’t have frolics no more. I sure ‘nough had them back when we was having

Saturday night frolics. I could rattle them bones along with Uncle Solomon's fiddling. He learned me his fancy rhythms, and we put on quite a show.

Bones or no bones, though, I hammered out a beat on pots, on the tabletop, on my thigh. I couldn't do it round the missus—drove her to distraction. But Gran never minded and here's why: I couldn't tuck up my thumbs when I was working on a patter.

Sure 'nough, she hated them tucked thumbs worser'n the constant tapping.