UNCOMMON FEMALE

By: Maurice B. Wade
*DEDICATION*

To my Mother, Mrs. Cleo King Wade; the most Extraordinarily uncommon Female under God's sun.
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UNCOMMON FEMALE

Common women are too
Weak to trek
This vicious man-made low-way.

Where weeds between cracks
In living forced
To blossom from black roots
    Become
Twisted by fate.

Into crooked trees that
Drink from springs
Of despair
    often lost in a poisonous fog
Of psychedelic color explosions;
Detonated by impossible futures.

Yet, continuously search
For the trench
    dug by Crystal Rivers
To dreams
That consume flesh
Time, energy, love, and Spirit-

Thank Goddess for the
Uncommon Female hand
Of strength
That reaches through the
Deadly fog of nothingness
And guides man to clear skies.
424

Celestial Heavens
Touch the skies which caress earth
As we kiss God's face.

*2.
The moose and otter
Share habitat, lakes, rivers,
Mountains' room for both.

*3.
The snake and tortoise
One treacherous and limbless
The other slow go.
Canadian geese
World travelers of the first
Order wed for life.

*5.
The Praying Mantis
Regal Queen of Mantids brown
Or green eats her King.

*6.
SEASONS OF LIFE HAIKUS

N A K E D N E S S
I sit in the raw
Nakedness of my pure soul
My god mind in awe.

S U M M E R
Summer the sun warms
Blue water is cool on her
Breasts her fruit is sweet.

W I N T E R
Winter is frigid
All is still-chill hardens her
Nipples freeze her bed.

S P R I N G
Spring the shallows are
Green awake she listens...when
Birds sing of rebirth.

F A L L
Fall is life's recall
She hears TIME stop with the wood
Man's chop of deadwood.

* * * * * * *

*7.
Japanese haiku
Five seven five syllables
Respectively go.

Some English haikus
Cannot follow in the path
Japanese dictates.

Harmonious winds
Lull eyes immediately
Before destruction.

Harpsichord woman
With swaying hips purple lips
Kisses like leather.

Hare brained hatchet jobs
Hide esoteric knowledge
And enlightenment.

Domestication
Depreciates Humankind
Causing derangement.
Schizophrenia
Bequeaths scholarship that is
Invisible truth.

Netherlander Queen
Laci & Holland Goddess
Is blessing prisoners.

Males pee holding it
Females pee folding it down
Both evacuate.

Africans, Asians,
Caucasians, Indians and
Mexicans need love.

Anisette will bring
Sexual intercourse a
Sweet liqueur pleasure.

Animosity is
Spiritualism darkness
Annihilation.

*9.
Anniversary
And commemoration makes
Her soul sing awhile.

Yin and yang Female
And Male mixtures of dark and
Light death and rebirth.

Leading ovaries
Down fallopian way leads
To Mother's pure Womb.

Humans have football
Heard instinct ought to be left
Games for animals.

Coffee will find that
Camera ready MS
And splatter on it.

Father, Holy Ghost
God, humanitarian
Heaven Hell or Son.

*10.
Eugenics, the cruel
Little scientific hoax
Brain fail concocted.

Personal robot
A machina non-grata
Dead zone will kill it.

Swillers swill a swig
Like Swiggers swilling to will
A woman swigging.

A Theist thaws a
Thawer thawless with lukewarm
Theistic coldness.

Carolyn, Diana,
Pat, Melissa, and Blinky
All pee standing up.

Alexander, Rod,
William, John, and Laura Little
All pee sitting down.
Restaurant diners
One day end meals to go rest
In a cemetery.

Red mahogany
Conquers Sarah's reluctance
With beautiful blood.

Black Female MD
Ms Rebecca Lee Crumpler
Tragedienne not.

Tranquillity was
Transubstantiation when
Father crossed transept.

Pain will become pure
Blissfully evanescent
When blindly received.

Human bigots have
Lived with a wasted useless
Soul ethnocentrism.
Euthanasia of
Females, human and others
Often done coldly.

A Woman will not
Fit comfortably in a
Man-made woman place.

Men have tried over
And over to rid the world
Of Female beauty.

She bleeds to live life
Until man shoots or beats her
Then she bleeds to bleed.

Even blind I know
Beautiful Green her essence
Suppresses all else.

Happiness becomes
An excruciating pain
Excessively done.
UNCOMMON FEMALE

629
Her thigh heat is sweet
Sweeter than mango fruit with
Honey strawberry.

714
Satan keeps trying
Again and again to rid
The world of dark skin.

831
Mosquitoes have a
Sharp mouth especially down
Old Short Thomas road.

920
Crickets strum a long
Complicated song playing
On their wings alone.

69
When she allows all
Of her candy to be seen
My sweet-tooth throbs hard.

25
Artificial limbs
Are useful lacking power
To carry blood flow.
The diver wears a mask to provide space between her eyes and sea, allowing sight. Objects appear a third larger and distance a quarter closer than actual objects.

Light rays are bent as they pass from dense material into refracted.

Underwater: visibility depends on the turbidity of the sea.
The choppiness of the surface stratification of the sea into layers
The silt and the plankton suspended in the ocean...
The roughness of the material its layers of clarity, the residue that deflects and distorts the material

And how much truth is reflected
Never directly enters the sea.

Even clear Ocean:
75% of light rays are diffused in the first 16 feet down...

Sunlight is composite of all colors
The sea filters the colors...
Reds are absorbed first
  Oranges-
  Yellows-
Then greens and blues.

*15.
Below 60 feet nearly all color is
Scrubbed clean
Except blue.

How does the Ocean get to the
truth of true blue-
Remains when there is only Black...to sea?
PHILANDO'S DIAMOND

Sexy dark brown skin, mahogany lips, this uncommon female
Living to the best of her knowledge, sometimes crying a river.
Denied societal human kindness, riding a rail.

Watching others murdered and broken like an empty shell.
Gaia's daughter of Sun, made to freeze and shiver;
Still rising above every hardship, a true uncommon female.

Believing, praying, and even singing like a boxer's ringing bell,
Fighting for 'inalienable rights' no arrows in her quiver.
Fearlessly standing beside her dying man, riding a rail.

Quicksilver thinking, running strong, never slow like a snail.
She keeps the pots boiling, sometimes meatless, even liver.
Her child is always well fed by this uncommon female.

Be sure there is something healthy and green; cabbage or kale.
She is a ride or die, when needed she is sure to deliver.
Ever last hired, first fired; still holding tight-riding a rail.

When the cop's shots rang out she didn't shake or turn tail,
Running and screaming for her life, she held her pail.
Streaming Facebook on her phone, steady, this uncommon female.
Philando Castile's love, Diamond Reynolds, did well riding a rail.

*17.
Enchantress beauty
That delights utterly and
Captivates ever.

*18.
Gabbagelike wrinkled
Plant majestic in its youth
Delicious in time.

*20.
Killer whale or large
Predatory dolphin black
And white and playful.

*21.
Rhinoceros thick-skinned killer mammal feared by lions in bravery.

*22.
GREEN MONKEY

If you hold a green monkey
In both hands, pressed tightly to your chest.

There will be no need for concern
With the brown monkey
Trying to steal the banana
Out of your right front pocket.

Or the white monkey that is
Pissing in your left ear;

Or the blue monkey trying to
Sing you a song;

Or the pink monkey that is
Shitting on both of your shoes;

Or the yellow monkey that has
Started biting your buttocks.

Focus on your green monkey whose heart is
Beating to the rhythm of yours.
Surely your green monkey loves you all the more
For ignoring other monkeys completely.

And the infinite wisdom and power of the universe
Will bring true peace and clarity into your life;
Once you have a green monkey:

That is, if you hold her to your chest with both paws—
And reach for nothing else;

*23.*
GREEN MONKEY (Cont.)

Not even that cute little purple dog
Eying you with love and devotion beaming
From her hazel eyes.

Trade in your green monkey
And you'll be left holding
A funky monkey that will never smile.

Uncommon green monkeys are difficult to come by.
WHEN THE WIND BLOWS

When the wind blows;
All birds turn and face it head-on.
Following God's instructions -
Creator of thunder, wind and rain.

Storms have caught some birds unawares
With an abrupt huff and puff.
Still they turn into it with determination -
When the wind blows

Fighting mightily to right their
Course, they never lose faith.
Even in the harshest thunder, wind and rain.

Facing away ruffles feathers unmercifully
And causes great loss of essential downy
When the wind blows.

Shelter behind the wing facing head-on;
The perfect foil in devastating thunder, wind and rain.
Watch God's birds when the wind blows.
486
Aspartame low-cal
Sugar can pass as cocaine
With the unaware.

107
Cryobiologist
Learn from cryogenics how
To cut bodies cold.

178
Fragmentary things
Make up the universal
Whole we live inside.

490
Government offers
Unexceptionable shit
Minus paper wipes.

289
Misanthropist fools
Hate themselves viewed within the
Orb of humanity.

104
Qualification
Even with credentials will
Not sanction bullshit.
29
W. H. Auden great
Poet and teacher of verse
Written and spoken.

249
English poet Keats
Writer of conventional
Poems of his day.

16
Anemometer
Cannot stop a windbag from
Self-destruction wind.

357
Perservative
A chemical to harden
Your arteriole.

194
Arizona a
Rebel State that refuses
Martin Luther King.

375
Argumentative
A diamond hard hardass
Expressing dogma.
CREATOR'S MESSAGE
Love and Gratitude
To the people of the
Universe from God.

AMERICA
America the
Beautiful home of killers
Liars and prisons.

MEXICO
Mexico in league
With drug dealers life stealers
And dirty police.

AFRICA
Don't hold back your tears
Crying does you good and makes
You remember love.

BRAZIL
I love your sweet words
Forever more speaking my name
Tenderly with love.

ISRAEL
We know time is a
Murderer moving to steal
Love and destroy all.
HOME

So many words for home
Joy loss and brutality
Maybe obloquy.
LOVE
Arbitrary beauty
And cruelty of love may
Lack commitment nine.

EMPTY
Although our people
Do not seek to retain God
Their knowledge is full.

1000
Women on women
Wickedness before Goddess
Pleasure unto death.

999
The less humans know
The more they say concerning
Inapproachable.

998
Men sexing men as
Women unnatural in
Desire judged by God.

997
Because death is with-
Held temporarily let
Evil be far from.

*30.*
Preachers
Prostitutes and
Fried Chicken

By Maurice B. Wade
PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

A NOVEL

BY

MAURICE B. WADE
DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my beloved brothers and sisters; the people that lived a similar story with me.

THE GIRLS:
Thelma, Jacqueline, Lina Lanee, Cleo, Valerie, Yulonda and the baby girl, LaHarriette (AKA Nikki).

THE BOYS:
Samuel Ray, Raymond Jr.

You all started out life as WADES. I love every single one of you dearly.
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(Afterword by: Asar Imhotep Amen, Ph. D.)
As usual, on a cool mid-November evening, a dignified John Niko Fofana sat in his sheep skin rocking chair on the enclosed front porch of his home. He was a very tall, very dark-skinned African man of exactly seventy-one years of age. Even without a birth-certificate he was quite sure of this. Advanced age had only sharpened his memory of the trip from Canada to Louisiana, with both of his parents, down the Mississippi river in 1864 when he was eight years old. He also recalled, quite clearly, why he was the only African that owned his land and home in this budding Texas town. He refused to refer to himself or other people of his race as colored, Negroes, Niggers or darkies; none of those cruel names or epithets coined by white people to dehumanize African men, women, and children, ever crossed his lips.

Nandie Akosua Fofana, his African mother, at eighty-seven, still lived on the land she had purchased sixty years ago at two dollars per acre, and five gruelling years of servitude. The house, a square blue and white two story, sat on the front left of five acres of lush land sheltered by pecan and moss-bearded live oak trees. The street, of oyster
shells, would one day be black-topped, named Enterprise street, and given a number by city fathers; in a locale called Acres Home, located fifteen miles southeast of downtown Houston, Texas. Seven fifty-one Enterprise Street was now, found in "The Bottom," if you asked a Negro, or "Niggertown" if you were told by a white person how you might find John Fofana's home. Across the right side of the yard, some sixty feet, was a similar house, but white, in which lived Miss Essie Reed, the sister of John Fonana's wife, Miss Cleo.

Miss Essie was married to Phillip Reed, who had been a giant of a man that worked laying railroad until 1886 when he was lynched by the klan in the state of Georgia. Rumor said that it was his size and ability to carry a sixteen pound hammer, four oil soaked rail-ties, and sing simultaneously which scared white folks so badly they had no choice but to hang him by the neck until he was dead.

Miss Cleo Fofana, in a loving attempt to ease her sister's pain and anguish, told her of God's love, patience, and understanding. And suggested that she "forgive those who trespass against her," for they had surely, "placed Phillip Reed into God's hands, even as big as he was."
Miss Essie, a fiery woman to began with, placed her right hand on her hip, tilted her head slightly to the left, eyes blazing, and told her sister-all in one breath: "Get out of my house go directly to hell and be sure to take God's hands and those murdering Georgia crackers with you!" So the sisters were not on the warmest of speaking terms. Which explains why Miss Cleo planted five rows of corn down the middle of the yard as a barrier between her twin sister and herself. Miss Cleo would not waste time, money or space, and she most certainly would not put up with anybody's "blasphemy" not even if they looked exactly like her. Which Miss Essie did, indeed.

John Fofana's house within this family compound his mother had created, was built, like the other buildings, of hard-pine. The front room was a parlor, kept spotless for the preacher's weekly visit. Miss Cleo had a "strong love of the Bible" according to Mr. Fofana; who always found something that needed fixing immediately, whenever the preacher arrived. The parlor walls had Fante art, masks carved of mahogany, colorful platters and mats of traditional Fante design, orange, green, yellow, blue and red, surrounded by fields of warm browns. There was also a gun rack which held three shotguns and several smaller hunting rifles. A Kalamazoo stove rested in one corner to provide warmth; the furniture was hand-made, covered with beautiful, pure white sheep skin, cured, designed, and sewn by Mama Nandie and Caimile.
The rest of the rooms were warmed by fireplaces. Which were rarely used, Texas was never very cold for very long. But Mama Nandie's winters spent in Canada combined with an unusual cold-spell in Texas during the 1880's convinced her, so there were fireplaces.

The most comfortable and lived-in room downstairs was the kitchen, which was reached through a long hallway from the parlor. Midway down this hall was a door that entered the dining room, but the family rarely took their meals there. The kitchen had a huge oak table that seated eight, a large wood burning stove, and a walk-in pantry. Tilt-out bins within the pantry were filled with pinto beans, navy beans, rice, flour, cornmeal, sugar, and starch. The shelves were well stocked with home preserved goods such as, squash, green peas, corn, beets, dill and sweet pickles, honey, figs, berries, peaches, and pickled watermelon rinds. There were two five gallon tins of lard, baskets of peanuts, pecans, and almonds stored on the floor. Onions, potatoes, garlic, peppers, and apples, hung in bags attached to pegs strung along the back wall. Miss Cleo had the only key to the pantry and monitored it closer than a mother with a new babe.

Just left of the pantry were stairs that led to the second story. Another door two steps to the right of the cooking stove, opened onto the screened in back porch which
ran the full length of the house. Miss Cleo kept bath and laundry tubs hanging from the back wall—there was also her rocking chair, a sewing table fully equipped with stool, pedal driven Singer sewing machine, and a life-size mannequin. She planned to store the mannequin under the house, someday, because it had, "scared me so bad!" she told her husband, "I thought it was a hobo standin' there."

The mannequin stood guard beside the screen door that led down four steps into the backyard, where a large four feet by eight feet, four inch thick, maple butcher's table fitted with a granite washbasin abutted the water pump. Beyond this set-up, forty feet down a stone path just past a large chinaberry tree, sat an enormous smokehouse filled with meat, it too, was padlocked. Hobos, thieves, and other unsavory characters that managed to slip past the dogs never won the battle against the padlocked door before Miss Cleo descended upon them with her stout oak cane and a few choice words (Biblical in content) expounding the certainty of hellfire and brimstone visited upon the souls of thieves, liars, and fornicators. Once satisfied that her sermon was understood, they were fed, watered, and sent packing. Miss Cleo would return to her kitchen duties, peering out of the window occasionally, and at the slightest sound. She never missed much.
Beyond the smokehouse stood a tin-roofed woodshed; a brisk five minute walk from it, through a pecan grove, sat the small four room cottage in which lived Mama Nandie; true proprietor of this self-sustained community homestead.

Having fought all of her battles for a decent life, head-on, losing some, but winning the war, this magnificent African woman was at peace within her soul. In the winter of her years as the vigor of her life cooled, Mama Nandie was at peace within a world composed of trees, grass, birds, flowers, family, sky, water, and earth. She sat now, listening to the rhythmic drum-songs played by her son; the vibrations reached through the trees and caressed her tenderly. "Oh, how the drum beats in concert with my heart," she whispered to the old oak tree against which she rested. Her son, John Fofana, only played this song to entertain his grandson, Seneca, who loved the cultural excursions given by his grandfather. Learning ceremonial drum songs and exciting verbal accounts about Africa and its people were his favorite activities. So she knew that her great-grandson was there at the big house visiting. She knew too, that Seneca would soon show up at her door, all bright white teeth and big brown smiling eyes filled with love, questions, and a desire for the sweet tea cakes she always made for him. Thinking of her great-grandson's impending visit, Mama Nandie hugged the massive old tree letting it know that she would return.
PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

This particular oak tree held the spirits of her loved ones; Caimile, her adopted mother, and Nekozi Abla Fofana, her husband. The only two people that had been with her during that terrible journey from Africa to Canada; endured the trials and tribulations faced in getting to Louisiana, then sustaining her through the hardships of reaching Texas and building a home; were interred beneath the old friend’s branches.

Concluding her heart to heart with tree and spirits, Mama Nandie rose and turned to look out across her field at the enormous fig tree standing beside the pond. The fig tree, like the oak, stood bare this time of year; its branches reaching naked fingers toward the cool sun in search of its summer clothing in which it would dress and provide shade and comfort for the weary, baskets of fat purple fruits for jams and jellies and feed the hordes of sparrows, cardinals, and blue jays that fought for a fair share of its largess.

"Kumekuchwa. Kwa heri, Miss Fig Tree," said Mama Nandie. Walking toward her cottage to prepare tea cakes for Seneca. "You are but woman, like me, yet blessed to remain in one place. I shall soon leave you, Miss Fig Tree, please remember our summers together." Mama Nandie, closing her cottage door against the chilly November evening, was quite certain the fig tree understood sunsets better than most people did.
John Fofana put aside his drum, rubbed a hand through his all white hair and reached for his jug. He took a drink, shook the jug to see how much remained, took another swig and sat the jug down. Then he turned to the handsome little black boy sitting on the porch beside his rocker petting three blue-ticks. The eyes of boy and dogs were focused expectantly upon the old man.

"I'm warmed up," John said, smiling at his grandson. "But I can't find elbow room to beat my drum whatwith a boy and his dogs crowding me."

"Tell me some more about the old-old days," the boy said, ignoring his grandfather's complaint. "Back when you were a little boy living with Indians in Canada."

"Well, not until I get proper payment," John Fofana leaned toward Seneca. "Anything a man gets in this world cost him something."

"Grand D I don't got no coins," Seneca pleaded. "How about horse-tradin', I'll get some firewood."

"I don't 'have' any coins, and there's a 'g' on the tail end of 'tradin'." John Fofana corrected. "Boy, let Mama Nandie hear you talking like that you won't have 'no' back pockets to hold
money in." Seneca quickly looked toward the side yard hoping she wasn't turning the corner. His grandfather laughed and continued. "Tell me a Fante proverb, translate it into English...to prove you've been doing your language studies, and then get that firewood. That'll square us up for the stories."

"Now wait a minute, Grand D!" Seneca protested. "You sound like that old white fellow, Malone, at the butcher's shop. You want two bits for a pound of bad meat." His grandfather, pretending not to hear his protestations of being cheated, remained silent and immobile as a block of granite. From experience Seneca knew it was useless to try arguing with his stubborn old Grand D when he assumed this position, so he gave in.

"Se eye ndzeye pa enum yi a; Enyimnyam, Awerehyemu, Akokodur, Ehumbobar, na Gyedzi; na eye barima," said Seneca; then: "Gather the five virtues, Dignity, Confidence, Courage, Compassion, and Faith; then you are a man." Seneca looked at his grandfather trying to determine if his translation and pronunciation were correct. The old man held his stern expression a moment longer, and then smiled.

"You one smart little African boy!" John Fofana said. "But you should have held out for a better trade—you had me going with that Malone business—now get that firewood, it's getting chilly for these old bones. I'll meet you in the kitchen," his grandfather

9.
said, rising with his jug and heading through the door.

"Yessir!" Shouted Seneca as he scrambled around his grandfather and ran through the hall. The hounds nosed their way out of the screen door and raced to the backyard. They knew this ritual as well as Seneca, and would be waiting faithfully at the back door to escort him to the woodshed.

* * * * * * *
Although John Fofana called his grandson 'little', that was in comparison to his own height which was a tad over 6' 9". Seneca was tall for eleven years old, with deep intelligent dark brown eyes, blue-black complexion, the whitest teeth and thick curly hair. His shoulders were wide, promising an imposing physique; he had hands and feet that his body hadn't quite caught up with yet. His face was dimpled when he smiled, otherwise, he appeared rather pensive; his full lips firmly set, seeing some hidden thing, unknown, but destined to be his. In a blue flannel shirt, long blue cotton pants and moccasins, he looked like a future athlete running down the hallway, but Seneca's greatest loves were his family, books, dogs, and hunting; he did not care for physical sports.

As he went through the kitchen his grandmother poked her head out of the pantry door. At sixty (she was actually 57, her mother, an ex-slave did not record her birth year) she was still a very lovely woman, her face was plump, free of wrinkles except for worry lines in her high forehead that marked her light tan-yellow skin with diagonal shadows. Her doe-like sienna eyes always appeared to be startled by any unexpected movement. She had very full lips which looked like strawberries lightly dusted with cocoa. She wore, as always, a flowered cotton dress with matching head-scarf tied African fashion through her auburn hair, and she smelled of fresh
peaches and vanilla. Seneca loved it when she hugged him.

"Slow down boy, come gimme' a hug," she said. "Where yo' Grand D got you runnin' to now, 'huntin'?" She asked in a playful tone that suggested that he was on a fool's errand.

"No ma'am, Big Mama," Seneca replied, hugging his grandmother, who was slightly shorter than he was. "Grand D wants some firewood."

"Firewood my foot," she huffed. "He can git his own wood. He don' have no trouble walkin' all 'cross the bottom to git moonshine." Miss Cleo, like many children of exslaves spoke English little better than slave owners, overseers, and uneducated whites did. Seneca knew better than to correct her, only Mama Nandie dared; but after forty two years even she had settled for winning half the battle: Miss Cleo could read and her sister, Miss Essie, spoke perfectly, Swahili, English, and French.

"Yes ma'am...I mean no ma'am," he said, and ran out of the back door towards the woodshed. Seneca did not think his grandmother cared one wit who got the firewood. But he knew when she had mentioned his grand D's moonshine that a sermon would follow. He did not want to hear another harangue on the devastation of liquor ("dev'station of lickker" as his grandmother pronounced it) to those foolhardy enough to drink it. He had never even tasted it and had no immediate desire to do so.

12.
PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

Seneca slowed to a walk because his bitch, Queen Victoria, kept bumping his legs nearly knocking him over. She was his smartest dog and always made sure that he acknowledged her. He patted her head and rubbed Prince Albert and Prince Alfred behind their ears.

When he returned to the screen door, both arms loaded with wood, the bitch, Queen Victoria, snagged the hemp cord that dangled from the door handle in her teeth opening the door long before he commanded her to. "Thanks old girl," he said as he entered the porch. "Big Mama," he yelled. "Open the door, I know you don't want Queen Victoria on this back porch, and my hands are full."

"Was Essie's lights on?" Miss Cleo asked, as she held the door open. "I sho' hope you didn' let dem nasty old dogs inside dis porch."

"I didn't Big Mama," Seneca said, dropping the stack of short logs into the basket behind the stove. "I can't see Aunt Essie's windows through all those corn stalks."

"That's what she's making sure of," said his grandfather, entering the kitchen. "Throw a couple of logs on the fire, boy."

13.
"Ya' old goat, you don' know nothin' 'bout nothin' 'cept moonshine," said Miss Cleo. "Got dis chile runnin' in the cold gettin' wood ya' oughta' git ya' ownself."

"What's dis 'bout my whisky?" teased Grand D. "Somebody been in it ya' say?" Miss Cleo rolled her eyes at her husband in mock anger and went about preparing their evening meal.

"Now," said Seneca, sitting down opposite his grandfather. "You've got some stories to tell. So take me down the old Miss, it's all paid for."

The old man took a deep breath. "I've told you that story six thousand times," he said, taking his pipe from his coat pocket. "I've spent more time telling it than it took us to get to Louisiana."

"Well then, how about the story of Mama Nandie, Poppa Neko, and great-great grandmother Caimile?" Asked Seneca. "How did they get kidnapped and end up in Canada in the first place?"
Both his great grandfather, Nekozi Abla Fofana, and Caimile, Nandie's adopted mother died long before Seneca's birth. But he felt he knew them. He'd seen many charcoal drawings and paintings of both. Daudi Fofana, his father, was an excellent artist and
and sculptor capable of rendering extraordinarily stunning life-like portraits of people and animals.

"Let me get my pipe going," John Fofana said. He packed his pipe, tamped it down with his thumb, struck a match, watched the sulfur burn down then touched it to the bowl. Squinting through a puff of smoke he said, "It was 1854, Mama Nandie was fourteen years old when the French ship that would change her peaceful life, forever, put into port at Mombasa, Kenya. Which was a British possession. That was--"

"But Grand D, " Seneca interrupted. "Why were French and British people in Africa, and how could Britain own Kenya?"

"Do you remember last summer when we found that dead eagle?" asked John Fofana.

"Yes sir." Seneca wondered what that had to do with his questions, but refrained from asking more questions. He knew his grandfather had a way of circling the long way around to the answers he eventually gave. And he didn't want to have to wait all night for the answers.

"You remember what we found when you turned that eagle over?"
Without waiting for the boy to respond John Fofana answered his own question. "Maggots, that's what we found, maggots, millions and millions of white slimy maggots writhing inside that eagle, eating it from the inside out."

"Is Kenya...is the eagle Kenya, Grand D, is that what you mean?" Seneca asked.

"Africa is the eagle, son, Kenya is just a part of Her insides," said John Fofana, quiedy.

"John, I'm goin' down and sit wit' Mama Nandie," said Miss Cleo. "Don' let dis' roast burn...and don' go cuttin' on it neither." She added, leaving the kitchen satisfied with a nod of acknowledgement from her husband.

John Fofana had not understood his wife's instructions, he'd merely nodded his head upon hearing her voice because a nod usually silenced her. He was in deep thought, puffing on his pipe, looking across the table at his grandson trying to determine the best way to describe the destruction of a continent and its people to an eleven year old boy; without creating permanent fear, helplessness, or destructive hatred within this child whose very heritage was directly tied to Africa and its inhabitants.
"Like a cloud of voracious locust," said John Fofana's father. "Europeans landed on the continent of Africa with missionaries, Bibles, and guns, devouring our people, destroying our cultures, and stealing our resources." John Fofana could hear his father's words, words spoken over sixty years earlier when he himself had questioned why Caimile's three children had been murdered by white men. "They were like hyenas stripping the flesh from a carcass, Niko. Their feeding frenzy began with African people of coastal villages and towns; they raped, murdered, and enslaved. All along the entire east and west coasts of Africa, African people were hunted, trapped, chained, and loaded into ships bound for slavery in Portugal, France, Britain, and North America. White people usually killed our elders, men and women. Always, always they murdered our babies and very young children by either dashing their brains out on the walls of our homes, the ground, or by hacking them to pieces, then leaving their bodies to rot in the sun." John Fofana still recalled the white-hot hatred that his father's words created within his young mind; and how that hatred had filled his heart like a burning branding iron for the next thirty years. He could not see giving such a hate inducing legacy to his grandson. Seneca's voice penetrated the old man's thoughts.

"Oh, I know what you mean," Seneca's eyes gleamed with the joy of solving a puzzle. "When that ship got to Africa, French
people were all over Kenya like those maggots on that eagle!
Right...Grand D?"

"Lots of white people were claiming Kenya, and Africans
were accustomed to seeing their ships," his grandfather said.
"But this particular ship wasn't a trader looking for spices,
coffee, tea, or gold. It was a slaver flying a French flag.
The slave industry—that's what white folks called it—had been
abolished by Britain in 1807 and France in 1815. But North
America still bought Africans for slavery and they did not care
how they got them. So, some men pretended to be trade merchants
under French or British flags and raided the towns and villages
kidnapping Africans to sell in Canada and America. Mama Nandie
and Caimile were taken in one of those night raids."

* * * * * * *

18.
THREE

John Fofana had decided not to tell Seneca how Mama Nandie's entire family—father, mother, grandmother, and four brothers—had been murdered the night she was kidnapped. He recalled the conversation his mother had told him she'd had with the killers. When the attack began she screamed in English, Swahili, and finally French—Nandie was the only interpreter within her village—trying to determine why they were under attack. Finally, the slaver that was holding Nandie upon the ground trying to rape her realized that she was speaking French.

"Captain Chouart, cette pute parle Francais!" He called to his captain, who walked over and looked down at Nandie. He doubted that his seaman had heard the girl speak French, but decided to ask her a few simple questions.

"Quelle est ton nom?" Chouart asked, "What is your name," he repeated in English.

"Mon nom est Nandie. Pourquoi tuer vous mes gens?" Nandie spoke her mind in spite of her fear, she wanted to know why they were killing her people. But the captain ignored her question and asked if she spoke Swahili.

"Parlez-vous Swahili?" Nandie ignored him, and tried to push the seaman off of her, as his weight impeded her breathing.
Not waiting for Nandie to respond, Captain Chouart told the seaman to get off of her and take her to his cabin. "Pierre, amène-la à ma cabine, et, touche la pas!" Nandie wondered why the captain was having her taken to his cabin, and why she wasn't being raped like the other young women. In fact, he'd told the seaman who'd called her a whore, not to touch her. Her thoughts were distracted by Kandioura's pitiful cries as she tried to reach the bloody bits left of her murdered daughters. The white men still held her on the ground, beating and raping her. This horrible sight was the last image Nandie saw of her once peaceful home.

Nandie came awake trembling, and with the sense that something dreadful had happened. All at once the confusion at the back of her mind coalesced into images. Strange white men running through Kisumu village burning huts, shooting, stabbing, raping, killing, and chaining her family and friends. As she tried to stand she realized that she was naked and chained to an iron ring set into the floor of the ship's cabin. But for the chains and over-powering stink of the cabin she would have rejected the nightmare her mind kept replaying. She knew she had witnessed her father's third and youngest wife, Kandioura, raped and beaten. Kandioura's daughters, her little sister's, Nene age 6, Nafi age 4, and six month old Aminata, had been hacked to pieces by seaman wielding a long sword. The same sword that moments before had
beheaded Nandie's mother, Zakia; when she tried to pull her sister-wife, Kandioura, away from white men that were raping her. "All dead," thought Nandie, "dead-dead-dead." As her mind gingerly picked its way through the wreckage that had been her life, Nandie found nothing that she could grasp, nothing with which to ground herself to reality; and she screamed and screamed and screamed.

The mind-shattering screams of lost souls, the screams of wounded animals, the anguished screams of mothers burying their beloved children, the sad, bereaved scream of a lost child; all, all issued forth from Nandie's crushed heart. For Nandie was indeed a child alone on that terrible night of 1854 when criminals raped and murdered all that she knew or held dear in life.

Her terrifying heart wrenching screams were heard topside by Captain Chouart. Thinking that his third mate—who hated Africans—may have slipped into his cabin to rape the monkey, the captain ran down the stairs and rushed into his cabin.

She was sobbing now, curled into herself as much as the heavy chains on her wrists and ankles would permit.

Captain Chouart walked over to the bound girl and kicked her over onto her back placing his booted foot on her breasts to hold her in that position. He knew the value of an interpreter that spoke the coastal trade-language, Swahili; and also French, was immeasurable; and he intended to protect this rare property. He'd inspected her vagina while she slept and was surprised to discover that she was a virgin. She would bring as much as

21.
three thousand dollars in Canada, even more in America where they still bred Africans like stock. For now he needed to put great fear into her.

"Listen you sow," he barked. "No more of your screaming like some demoiselle in distress, you're not a woman, you're a black monkey that can chatter French and Swahili. Do you understand?" He pressed the heel of his boot into her right breast. Wincing in pain, Nandie could only nod her head for her mouth was dry with fear; her tongue glued fast in its place behind her teeth. "Good." Chouart said. "Now listen to me you trained baboon, you will serve as my interpreter when I have orders for those monkeys chained below. Do you speak any other monkey chatter?"

"No." A quiet whisper was all she could manage.

"How old are you, monkey?" Chouart asked; and thinking of her virginity, he added. "Why haven't you been fucked you're big enough?"

"I am fourteen, and unmarried." She licked her dry lips, thinking it best to keep secret that she also spoke Kimbundu, Kikuyu, and Meru. What was he asking now, she was becoming confused.
"As long as you do my bidding I won't have you raped and chained below." Captain Chouart turned and left the cabin.

With his trained monkey he could put in at numerous coastal villages and the monkeys would be easier to trap, he wouldn't have to kill so many of value. But his main concern was putting distance between Kenya and his ship. The British would certainly be patrolling the Indian ocean after his attack of Kisumu village three days ago. Captain Chouart gave orders to set sail for the west coast of Africa where he would raid towns and villages in Angola, Gabon, Sierra Leone, and Senegal. At the end of his raids a total of six-hundred and nine Africans would be chained together in the bowels of his ship. Another seven-hundred and three elders and babies would lay dead on the shores of Africa. Four-hundred and sixty-three of that seven-hundred and three left dead were children under the age of six, some only a few days old.

"This was the nature of the white man when he forgot that he too, was a member of the human race; subject to retribution for every single act of violence against others." Thought Nandie, as she tried to make herself as comfortable as possible in the chains that cut into her arms and legs. The vision of little Aminata's unbidden sleeping smile crept into her consciousness. Watching it flit across her troubled mind, eased her pain and she slept. She did not know it then, but Nandie was soon to discover that seven people from her village were alive, including Kandioura.
The enticing aroma permeating from the cooking roast infiltrated John Fofana's long contemplation of his father's description of the awful pain and unbearable suffering endured by his mother and Caimile during their violent extraction from home and family. Placing his pipe thoughtfully onto the table, he rose, got a butcher's knife and removed the meat from the oven; cutting a small piece from the end he asked: "Son, you want to try a taste before your grandmother gets back?" Chewing on the hot morsel looking at Seneca: "Taste mighty fine," he said.

Coming to stand beside his grandfather; still thinking about Mama Nandie and Caimile being taken in a slave raid he asked, "Is that why great-great grand Mama Kandioura changed her name to Caimile?"

"You mean the slave raid...no, it wasn't that," said John Fofana, handing Seneca the knife. "She lost all of her children that night."

"Oh, I didn't know that," the boy said, holding the knife suspended over the roast staring at the old man. "But her name, Kandioura, is so beautiful and...well, Caimile is-"

"Caimile means, (the correct pronunciation is Chah-ee-mee-lay) it means "she who is in despair after losing all of her children"
"Kandioura changed her name after all of her children were murdered."

Seeing the reddish-brown blood seeping from the meat where his grandfather had cut it, Seneca decided not to taste the roast, "I'll wait," he said, returning the knife to his grandfather. Seneca slowly returned to his chair. His mind trying to grasp the reason or at least an understanding of why white men would kill little children and force their mother into slavery. What gave them the right? His sister, Zakia, had said 'all white people are nothing but evil animals', but he did not believe that. Miss Faye Hardee, the young white teacher at his school was nice enough. True, she sometimes called them 'little hard-headed Niggers,' but that was only when they got too noisy in class. Still, he didn't think she would stand by and let white folks kill children; and he was sure she wouldn't kill little babies, she didn't even kill that field mouse she'd found in her desk—she just got it by the tail, took it outdoors and let it go free. "Grand D, are all white people evil animals?"

"Why do you ask that?" The old man was in the process of removing the evidence that he'd been sampling Miss Cleo's nearly done supper roast. Hanging the freshly cleaned knife back in its place on the rack and the pot-holder on its hook, "sounds like Kia been sharing her personal wisdom with you abou—"

"Zakia said that all white people are evil animals and that
any one of them wouldn't hesitate to kill anybody that's not white."

"Boy, that roast is good," said the old man, looking out of the kitchen window. "Wonder what's keeping that woman, I'm ready to eat." He continued as he resumed his seat, "like I was saying before you interrupted me. Your sister gets her views from your mother." John Fofana stopped to take a drink from his jug and fire up his pipe. This done, he said, "Sarah is a strong woman, that's why Mama Nandie chose her for your father, but sometimes her views are just a bit brittle...a little too hard." It wasn't difficult for the boy to understand this description of his mother. He loved her, but did not like her very much and did his best to avoid her; and he never, never asked her questions if he could help it.

"I know Mama looks at things...well, mostly it's black or white with her, no in between," said the boy. "It's right, left, or straight, with Mama." Seneca said, thinking of an incident that had happened when he was six years old; an incident that left him black and blue.

Mrs. Sarah Jean Fofana was mistress/master of her home, husband, and children. She prescribed the penalties and served up the punishments. If she caught you in a lie, she laid a switch across your naked behind. If you got sick she forced a heaping spoonful of cod-liver oil down your throat and dared you
to frown. Her hugs and compliments were few and far between. Her punishments always left Seneca upset but tearless. In his stubborn pride (so much like his mother's) he refused to cry.

When he was six and thoroughly enjoying every new thing the world offered a little boy finally old enough to venture beyond the confines of his own yard, Seneca discovered bullies. Taking a stroll one bright summer day, the boy whistled happily as he neared the small store on little York road in the heart of 'The Bottom'. He was quite pleased at having twenty-five cents to spend on whatever he wanted. He'd worked all week earning a nickel a day helping his father, Daudi, stretch canvases. Jingling his coins as he passed a group of boys loitering at the corner of the building, Seneca was caught off guard when one grabbed his arm: "hey lil' Nigga', fork ova' da coins or I'ma' kick yo' ass!" said the bully. Seneca, not much for fighting, quickly passed his week's pay of five nickels to the bigger boy and ran all the way home. He did not tell his mother, father, or sister, thinking he could avoid the boys from here on. The boy that robbed Seneca, decided—once nothing happened—to latch himself onto Seneca who'd proven to be an easy source of income. Buddy Joe, the bully, was himself only nine years old, fatherless, streetwise, a kid that bullied the other little boys that hung out in 'The Bottom', stealing, fighting, gambling, and running errands for pimps and whores. Buddy Joe discovered where Seneca lived and began waiting outside the fence for him to enter no man's land beyond the gate. At
which time he would chase the boy down, beat him up, and relieve him of any coins found within his pockets. Sometimes Seneca would slip by Buddy Joe and make it to the store; if he saw Buddy Joe first, Seneca would run for the safety of the yard his coins intact.

One afternoon he spotted the bully and ran for the yard, running through the gate and clicking it shut just seconds ahead of a vicious punch. This particular time he was met by his mother with a switch, and she beat him unmercifully right there in the front yard.

"Every-time-that-boy-run-you-home," she said between licks. "I'ma'-beat-your-little-butt-so-bad-you-gon'-be-glad-to-run-back-to-him."

Miss Brooks, Sarah's mother, and Sarah's daughter, Zakia, ran from the house into the yard when they heard the noise. Both saw Seneca getting a beating and pleaded with Sarah Jean to stop.

"Shut up Zakia, and Mama you hush," Sarah Jean told them. "Now, Seneca," she pulled the out of breath boy around facing her. "You go back out that gate and fight that little bastard right now!" The little bastard, seeing only two women, a little girl, and a cowed little boy had decided to stay and watch the show. He was looking over the fence laughing at Seneca.
"Mama I don't like fighting, I'm scared," Seneca said.

"Let me kick his ass Mama," Zakia was very protective of her younger brother. Even though she was only two years older, and shorter than Seneca, she was tough and fearless. Looking at Buddy Joe she said, "I'ma' kick your ass when I catch you!"

"Shut up Kia!" Ordered Sarah Jean. "Seneca you get out there and fight!"

"Sarah Jean, honey," the boy's grandmother pleaded, "You can't treat your own son this-a-way." She was now crying, Seneca was the apple of her eye.

"Mama, I told you to hush! This my child!" Sarah Jean viciously switched Seneca again, "you get out there and fight or I'll keep beating you till judgement day!"

"Mama I'm scared!" Seneca yelled. "One time I tried to hold his arms but he kept hitting me in my face anyway."

Sarah Jean hit Seneca across his back, "you gon' fight him or do I have to stand here beatin' you all day?" And she hit him another blow.

Seneca looked into his mother's eyes which were coldly set.
and immobile, "don't hit me no more, Mama, please." He looked
toward his sister drawing courage from her nearness and said, "I'll
fight...I'll fight him, Mama, you don't have to hit me no more."

Seneca jerked out of her grasp and charged through the gate
throwing himself into the laughing boy. His fist and feet were
like battering rams, he punched and kicked and hit until Buddy Joe
lost his footing and fell onto his back. Seneca dived on top of
him and grabbed his hair banging his head on the oyster-shell
street over and over. When someone finally managed to pull Seneca
off of the bully, Buddy Joe was crying and bleeding from several
cuts in his head. He slowly got to his feet and barely out-ran
Zakia who had charged out of the yard with a big stick. Seeing
that she could not catch him, she threw the stick hitting him in
the middle of his retreating back. "I'ma' still get you!" She
yelled at the beaten boy.

Sarah Jean broke her switch, turned and walked into the house
without a single word or a backward glance. Seneca always regarded
his mother with hidden dislike afterwards, but he never ran from
anyone again. He walked with his head held high. When he went to
the store jingling his coins all the boys would scatter or look the
other way mumbling: "Don' bother wit' dat fool he don' fight fair
and his sister'll hit you wit' a stick." Underneath his newly
gained confidence, Seneca was still his father's son in temperament,
even though he looked and fought like his mother.
Seneca's father was born, it was said, at the exact moment of 'his' choosing. According to Miss Cleo, she wasn't due to 'lay-in' for another month and would certainly see that her cleaning and cooking duties were properly done because she would do them herself. On the morning of March 20, 1886, the duties in question were the parlor and the upstairs bedroom, now empty, except for the walls upon which there were numerous low-relief carvings. Pastoral African scenes created by Caimile; which Miss Cleo's minister thoroughly enjoyed viewing after their Bible study. After being racked over the coals by Caimile, Mama Nandie, and Essie during breakfast, for her insistence on cleaning these areas personally, Miss Cleo could not be persuaded to leave the work in other's hands.

"Now ya'll need to jes' leave me alone," Miss Cleo said, struggling to push herself back far enough from the table so she could stand without her huge stomach getting stuck. "Da'morrow is Sunday and I don' won't Elder Morris to hafta' wade in dust."

"Child, you and that preacher ca-"

"Essie May, you kin jes' hush!" Interrupted Miss Cleo, "Ain't Phillip 'posed to leave for Jawja da'morrow...you oughta' go see to his packin'"
"How long will he be in Georgia, Essie?" Asked Mama Nandie as she rounded the table and started assisting her daughter-in-law to her feet.

"After what I read in the Brownsville Dispatch, the 'deep south' ought to be the last place Phillip should go to work or visit. They're hanging black people like laundry every day down there." Said Caimile, stacking the used breakfast dishes, dumping scraps, clearing the table, and daring Miss Cleo with her steady eyes, to say another word about not wanting any help.

"Mama Nandie, she isn't going to listen to nobody but you," Essie tried to hold Miss Cleo's other arm as she spoke. "Phillip will only be gone about two months-look at how she walking, Mama Nandie, that baby might be coming right now!" Essie shouted, as she turned watching her sister waddle through the kitchen doorway into the hall. "Let the dust float child, God won't mind." Essie sighed after her sister. Frustrated, Miss Essie appealed to Mama Nandie and Caimile with raised eyebrows.

"Leave her alone, Essie," chided Mama Nandie. "She's just as stubborn as you are, let her keep her rituals."

"GO SEE TO YO' OWN HUSBAND!" Shouted Miss Cleo.

"Mama Caimile, do you need any help in here?" Asked Essie,
turning away from the doorway. "If not, I'll go pack my husband's things."

"I'm sure he's wondering where you are," Caimile said. "Did you even feed the man before coming over here to argue with your look alike?"

"Well if you need me just yell," answered Miss Essie. They exchanged playful smiles and let the matter drop.

After watching Nandie and Essie pass beneath the kitchen window Caimile began washing dishes. "How blessed all of these women truly are," she thought to herself. "Nandie off to spend the day with Nekozi, Essie to see her husband properly prepared for his trip, and Cleo's womb filled with the future, a new life to continue hers. And my broken womb," she thought; "its fruit murdered." Suddenly Caimile experienced extreme pain within her vagina; as the lightning bolts shot up through her womb she fell to her knees unable to withstand the tremors that shook her to the core whirling her mind backwards. Caimile's mind, against her will, took the painful road to a place she never consciously revisited: (She was being held spread-eagled and raped-her babies chopped to bloody bits before her eyes-Now chained in a dark hole that stinks of shit, vomit, despair, unwashed bodies, and rotting fish-She is freezing- No it's Nandie's cool hands and soothing voice: 'You have fever Mother, I won't leave you', said the voice behind Nandie's face: Fort Albany
on James Bay—stinking white men dying at the hands of men with red skin and black hair! 'Mother we are in Canada, we are free, the Ojibwa have taken us into their tribe!' Nandie and Nekozi carrying her, she is beside a lake under the brightest sky, she takes a wide pointed stick and rams it into her vagina again and again, trying to kill the pain in her empty womb—hot fluid spills down her inner thighs—'NO!' Then she asked, 'who is screaming...it is only my blood offering to Mother Earth for release of my empty soul.) But the screams are too near to be within her past visions. "Oh NO!" Caimile realizes that Cleo is screaming, but she can't free herself of her own pain and rise to her feet.

Suddenly Nandie, Nekozi, Phillip and Essie came through the back door into the kitchen. They all began at once helping Caimile to her feet.

"It's not me scre-" Cleo let out another glass shattering scream and they all ran for the stairs beside the pantry.

"Everyone stop, just stop!" Ordered Mama Caimile. They were all trying to enter the narrow stairway simultaneously. "Nekozi, you go get your son, tell him Cleo needs him. Phillip you get that big kettle off the sideboard (she pointed behind him) and fill it with well-water and bring it to a boil. Essie go to the linen closet and get sheets and towels, bring them up to me and Nandie, we'll be with Cleo." They went up the stairs and into the empty
room to find Cleo giving birth. The baby's head was visible, and becoming more-so as Cleo groaned-pushed-panted and breathed deeply to continue the process.

"Nandie, get my scissors and some black thread!" Nandie ran down the hallway to Caimile's bedroom which was above the parlor. She reentered the impromptu birthing chamber just as Caimile caught the baby who seemed to have waited for a pair of hands to land in before he leaped into the world.

"It's a boy, Cleo, a fine black, smiling boy," As Caimile began to wipe his face and clear his nasal passage and mouth, the baby let out a piercing scream and turned his eyes to the carvings which covered the walls.

"Will you look at that!" Exclaimed Nandie, "He's really looking at those sculptures, look, he's smiling!" Sure enough, the child's eyes were darting from piece to piece, and he smiled with pure delight as he discovered each one.

"Well git'em unhooked from me," breathed Miss Cleo. "So's he kin git a closer look." Essie, after assisting with the afterbirth went and sat at her sister's head and gently placed it onto her thigh. Cleo opened her eyes to look up at her sister; "Girl jes' as soon as I walked in dis' here room
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dat chile wenta' kickin' lak a mule. He do dat ever'time I come in dis room. Sumpin' 'bout dat art sets him off-

"Girl hush!" Scolded her sister, lovingly stroking her forehead, "Don't try to blame it on him cause you hardheaded!"

"Where ya'll won't dis water?" Phillip yelled, staying outside of the door, hoping he wouldn't be called inside.

"Just Leave it, Sugar Bear!" Responded Miss Essie, smiling at her sister's efforts to cover herself up.

Had Phillip Reed known that he would be dead in less than two months, he might have been inclined to go in and take a peek at his nephew. "I'ma' go on downtown and head on out, honey," he said.

"Tell John that he's got a little boy up here waiting to be named!" Called Caimile as Phillip turned to leave.

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36.
Twenty years after seemingly forcing his way into the world; Daudi Fofana was considered a mild, agreeable, courteous young man. He was tall and slim with beautiful, long thin hands. Better suited for playing piano (said his mother) than physical labor. His only real passion was art, and to this end he was quite successful. Encouraged to draw, paint and sculpt by his mother and great-grandmother, Mama Caimile, he excelled at the craft and soon began selling enough of his art to support himself. He worked hard and prospered. At times he made as much as $75 a week with the sale of only a few pieces. He smoked round the clock, but never drank. This was attributable to the fact that Miss Cleo had made him drink a quart of moonshine as punishment when he got into his father's liquor jug and lied about it. It was a solid week before he could remember his own name, or stop throwing up. He never lied to his mother again.

In fact, there were only two instances when he defied his mother's wishes; (or any other woman's, claimed his father) he took it upon himself to arrive a full month before Miss Cleo thought he should have, and he flat out refused to learn to play the piano for her. This last he made up for by becoming a member of her church choir.

At the insistence of his grandmother, Mama Nandie, he married, at twenty, Sarah Jean Brooks.
Born December 7, 1886, Sarah Jean Brooks became Sarah Jean Fofana on December 15, 1906; after a four month courtship in which she was the aggressor, (albeit with a slight nudge from Mama Nandie and Miss Cleo) she led a smiling, extremely pleased, Daudi Fofana down the aisle and into wedded bliss; at least for herself and two very happy old women. Excluding Daudi, it came as a total surprise to everyone, (even her co-conspirators) when, just seven months later Sarah Jean gave birth to a baby girl. Without consulting her husband, she promptly named the child Kandie Jordan Brooks Fofana. This one public act of independence established (for all time) who was to be the dominant force in their marriage. Sarah Jean had carefully laid a tender trap for Daudi, which, in her mind, had confirmed the ease with which she would rule his world; the naming of their first child was merely her way of letting everyone else know that she was in total control. Sarah Jean had always been attracted to Daudi, but had kept her feelings totally secret, even during the encouraging, enlightening conversation with Mama Nandie. However, once she understood that she was accepted by both Mama Nandie and Miss Cleo, she was determined to have Daudi. She had easily seduced him one cold October night; not long after her enlightening conversation with his grandmother. A couple of weeks after taking Daudi’s virginity, (which he happily surrendered) and investing her own virginity in their future; she calmly told him: "I'm pregnant, it’s yours, and we're getting married in December, right after my birthday." Then turned and left the stunned young 38.
man staring at the painting of her that he was working on.

For his part, Daudi did not have the desire, Will, or energy to protest, and simply looked on the bright side of his newly developing life. At least he'd have someone to do the physical labor (he thought) and keep his accounts correct, and besides, he loved Sarah Jean's passionate desire and straightforward approach in matters "of a private nature," as his mother referred to the act of sex; and her cooking was much better than his own mother's. His mind replayed the night he had taken advantage (at least to his way of thinking) of Sarah Jean.

She'd been sitting in the kitchen when he arrived from delivering a portrait to one of his many clients. He was covered with paint, and needed to clean himself up before sitting down to a late supper. Hurrying through the kitchen to bathe and change clothes, he'd asked her, "Is there anything left in those pans?" He stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

"If you're hungry, I'll warm the food up for you," she said, rising from the table and moving toward the stove. "I cooked today, there's pork chops, greens, cornbread, and baked sweet potatoes, and some of that peach cobbler-"

"I'll be right back down," he interrupted, rubbing his hands together and smiling at her. He was always in a great mood after completing a painting.
Preparing his food, feeling a strange inner peace at having made the decision to go through with her plans; Sarah Jean peeked through the kitchen window hoping that Miss Cleo and Mr. John Fofana would remain at Mama Nandie's cottage just a little longer. She threw her coat around her shoulders and slipped out into the still, frigid, peaceful night, and walked as far as the woodshed to make sure no one was coming up the pathway.

Shivering from the cold, or perhaps the enormity of what she had decided, she fixed his plate, went quietly up the stairs and knocked gently on the door of his room. Daudi pulled the door open enough to see it was her, and then quickly opened it and stepped back to admit her. She hurried in and went to the small table beside the fireplace, absorbing its warmth as she placed his food upon the table.

Daudi was without a shirt, his clean scent, and the towel thrown over the chair made her realize that she had caught him at his washbowl.

Caution lined his brow as he remained standing beside the closed door, body tense, waiting to see what had made her bring his food up. She had never been in his bedroom before, at least, not while he was there. Sarah Jean stepped up close to him, so close that he could feel the heat from her clothes. She met his eyes boldly, "I know that you like me, I can feel your eyes on me all the time."
"Where is everybody?" He asked, taking a step back. "What I feel goes deeper than just liking you." Daudi's eyes shifted from her face.

"Down visiting with Mama Nandie," she answered, taking a half-step forward, forcing him into the door. "Your food is getting cold," she reached and took his hand leading him to the small table.

Stopping in the middle of the room, his hand came up to grip her upper arm. "You shouldn't be in here, I'm not even dressed." His intense gaze holding her in place.

Sarah Jean had been focused on the decision rather than the details of how to go about it. There were practical matters she needed to take into account if she was to succeed. Quickly, while he still held her arm, she said, "Kiss me, or let go of my arm and go eat your food."

A small smile curved the fullness of his lips.

"You haven't ever kissed a woman before, have you?" She teased. Little did Daudi know, but Sarah Jean hadn't ever kissed a man either.

He didn't count kissing Millie Anne Ferguson when they were
kids because she wasn't a woman and they were only doing things they had saw animals do. So he didn't mention that fact. Even though Daudi seemed as modest as always, she could see a spark of pride in his eyes; he was enjoying her nearness, which made him bold; then his eyes became serious. "When I first saw you, I thought about kissing you."

"Stop lying, boy, you didn't even look at me!" She placed both hands on his naked chest, and playfully pushed him slightly backward, letting her warm hands remain just below his shoulders.

"You're a very beautiful woman, I'd really like to do a painting of you." Sarah Jean felt his fingers tighten on her arms, pulling her closer. She resisted, gently.

"What kinda' painting...I saw that naked one over behind your bed," seeing fear flash across his face she quickly added. "I think it's beautiful, but I'd never let you see me naked; and I didn't tell anybody about your painting? Who is that woman anyway?"

"You do! I mean you really think it's beautiful?...It's not for me...it's for Mr. Goldman, he owns the greasy spoon up on Little York," his eyes asking an ancient question as he looked at her with new found respect. "I didn't know you understood art." Before she could respond his mouth met hers in a clumsy, rushed, 42.
first kiss.

Her plans forgotten, she held her hands out to the side of his body, afraid to hug him because if she did she would be embracing his naked flesh; something she'd never experienced before. She steeled herself and remained in his arms, her spine arched back under the pressure of his body. Suddenly his mouth felt hot and luscious, a different kind of warmth was growing within her stomach; slowly spreading down her inner thighs. His arms did more than hold her, they sheltered her and made her feel like a woman, small and needed. The room seemed to be tipping, and she felt as if she were hanging in midair.

Suddenly she felt the press of the bed against her legs and realized that he was guiding her down onto it. The shock of suddenly being on her back with him on top of her was confusing and she didn't know how to react. She'd seen her share of couplings, albeit by accident; but the fine details were still a mystery to her. Sarah Jean wanted to stop him, things were proceeding too fast. At the same time, she feared to do anything that would cause him to stop; she did not want to spurn him at this point. The choices that she made would decide her future, and also hold sway over Daudi's heart. This thought gave her a comforting sense of her female power.

She surrendered her will into his embrace, daring to use her
tongue as he was doing, and was exhilarated by the taste of his mouth. She liked this new feeling, this hidden woman, a woman of desire. She ran her hands along the smoothness of his back, feeling the muscles, free of clothing, feeling him flex at her touch. She could barely get her breath with the wonder of these unknown sensations shooting through her body. Her heart was racing so fast until it frightened her, and his breath, too, came in desperate gulps, his lust for her driving him mad. She clung to him, eager for the feel of his flesh. His warm breath on her neck made shivers run down her body and into its core. These feelings were more, much more than she had expected, and she was ready to take the whole trip.

And yet, she froze when his hand slipped under her dress. His long fingers glided over her naked knees, over her naked thighs. It was her choice, she kept telling herself. It was all her choice. Her fingers closed around the back of his head, pulling his mouth tighter against hers. All she could do was pant and squirm, helpless, at the sheer delight of what he was doing beneath her dress.

Ever so gently he forced her knees farther part. Then he pushed himself between her trembling thighs. "I'll always need you, Daudi...I need you now...so I can live." She heard herself say, as he entered her fully, and made her see stars and rainbows she didn't know existed. She knew then that he would always rule 44.
this part of her female soul; even as he surrendered his outer world into her keeping. These truths both understood without words: their physical bonding said all there was for their respective souls to hear, they both knew that they had found a home within each other where their hearts would be safe and protected; they had suddenly become one desire, one heart, one soul.
SEVEN

Sarah Jean, at twenty, was a large, beautiful, dark-skinned, stubborn, outspoken woman. A true woman’s Woman. She was a pragmatic woman, and knew that Daudi would be a better provider and husband than any of the factory workers or day labors that were always hitting on her to be their girl. She had her mind made up as to what she wanted and planned to take out of life. Even as a young girl, Sarah Jean was the girl that worked beside her father and brothers cutting trees, putting in food crops behind a mule and plow and picking a thousand pounds of cotton per day since age twelve, while most girls worked in some white woman’s kitchen. She disliked all aspects of being a female, kept her virginity while other girls tossed theirs away on a promise, and she had an inflexible, indomitable will. Sarah Jean was the oldest girl in a family of three girls and two older brothers. She resented her brother Leroy, because he had ran in fear when a mob of white men attacked and killed their oldest brother, Jordan; when he was seventeen.

Leroy and Jordan, at the time of Jordan’s death, were employed at the train station in Houston. Jordan was lugging a white woman’s huge trunk when he accidentally dropped it spilling the contents. Without thinking, he began picking her clothing up and returning them to the trunk apologizing for his carelessness.

"You filthy Nigger!" Shouted the irate white woman. "You
PRESERVERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

git your dirty black hands off my unmentionables!"

That was all it took in 1890; a black man holding a white
woman’s bloomers, (even if she wasn’t in them) was D-E-A-D, that
spells quickly. Lacking the time to grab a rope, find a tree,
and do the deed properly; a group of upstanding white citizens
stomped Jordan to death on the spot, (no questions asked) wiped
his warm blood and brains from their boots in the grass, and
still boarded their trains on schedule.

Jordan had been Sarah Jean’s greatest joy, she was his
shadow and followed him everywhere asking a thousand questions,
and he always explained things to her until she understood; no
baby talk, no lies. At four years old she understood death,
she’d buried birds and seen animals killed for food. She knew,
watching her mother wash her brother’s scarred and battered
body; that once he was buried she’d never see him again. Her
resentment for Leroy knew no bounds once she found out what had
happened.

"Why you runned Leroy?" She’d asked. "I woulda’ died wit
my brudder." She whispered, her little teary brown eyes fixed
on her dead brother’s crushed face.

As she grew, Leroy learned to avoid her or suffer physical
and verbal wounds for his trouble. Her younger sisters lived
47.
in awe of her, and attempted to do whatever she did. When she went to work for Mama Nandie at eighteen, she immediately learned that there was at least one person she could not dominate.

For her part, Mama Nandie saw in the young woman a kindred soul in need of direction; a young black woman with a strong will to live life on her terms or die trying. Sarah Jean had fierce physical energy, and a passion for uplifting works on behalf of black people and the community at large. Mama Nandie came to love Sarah Jean and treated her with trust, respect, and gentle but firm kindness and consistency.

Sarah Jean found great pleasure and peace in working for Mama Nandie, and made an extra effort to please her. She also absorbed all that the old woman taught her about life; and soon begin to believe that she too, could have a good family and life, with hard work, dedication, and well thought out decisions; in spite of all the obstacles white America had conspired to keep her on her knees.

One evening after they'd cut down an old pine tree for firewood. Mama Nandie and Sarah Jean sat talking in the shaded grass beneath the ancient fig tree. "You have nice wide hips, full breasts, and thick strong legs, Sarah Jean, and your mind retains everything."
"I can out work most men," she answered. "Been doing out side work most all my life." Sarah Jean wondered what point Mama Nandie was working up to. She knew that she did her equal share of the work, and wasn't worried about losing her job. She valued the old woman's wisdom and always showed patience whenever Mama Nandie started in the middle of her thoughts and worked her way round to the main point. "I guess that's why I'm big and strong," she added.

"You'll have strong, beautiful black babies," said Mama Nandie. "That's what I'm speaking of."

"Oh! I don't fool with no men, Mama Nandie," Sarah Jean protested. "You think I'm pregnant? Shoot, ain't nothing gettin' inside of me but some food!"

"Child," laughed Mama Nandie. "You're getting so excited until you're talking right past my meaning." Still smiling at the serious expression on Sarah Jean's face, she continued, "I was thinking in terms of my descendants, that's our only eternity; you know. We must choose well."

"Hmmm...that's good Mama Nandie," responded Sarah Jean, still not quite sure of Mama Nandie's meaning, she said. "I'm still pure as the day I was born, I don't fool with no men."

49.
Seemingly to herself, Mama Nandie said. "I was thinking you would make a good wife for my grandson, Daudi. He's such a day-dreamer. Art, books, abstract intangibles fill his mind."

"Are you talking to me or yourself, Mama Nandie?" Asked Sarah Jean, confusion and concern taking turns on her beautiful face.

"Yes, excuse me," said Mama Nandie, still not speaking above a whisper as if she were lost inside of herself. "Nekozi loves you also. You know Daudi will provide well for his family."

"Hmmm..." said Sarah Jean, more confused than ever, "...I know he sells lots of his paintings and carvings, even white folks buy stuff from him." Trying to follow the conversation as she understood it, she added. "He makes more money doing that than most do sweating from sun up to sun down."

"But with a weak wife he'll drift away." Mama Nandie said. "Let's go in, the mosquitoes are starting to feed on me."

Sarah Jean rose and walked beside Mama Nandie around the pond toward her cottage; her mind replaying the old woman's words, still trying to discover just what the whole conversation meant for her. Suddenly a frightening thought occurred, and she asked. "Mama Nandie, you don't think I've been messing with 50.
Daudi, That boy and me hardly say two words."

Deeply in thought, Mama Nandie didn't realize Sarah Jean had spoken until she reached out and brushed her shoulder. "What was that, Sarah Jean?"

"Daudi; I ain't never done nothing with him, is that what you thou-"

"Sarah, Sarah Jean," interrupted Mama Nandie. "I wasn't saying anything like that. I meant that you would probably have to court...well, he's far too shy to ask you to marry him, but I know he likes you, I've seen the way he watches you."

"I must have missed something, Mama Nandie," Sarah Jean said, speaking very slowly. "Marry him...that's what you been taliking about? I thought th-"

"I can't see a better wife for him, than you," interrupted Mama Nandie. "But you'll have to make him see you...just as I made Nekozi see me. Men don't know a good woman from a bad meal. Left on their own they always eat what makes them sick. It's up to a woman to make the choice, and convince the man that he made the decision. That is the only way a woman can have a good marriage and strong descendents. She must choose correctly."

51.
"Oh, I understand what you mean," said Sarah Jean. Not understanding at all, but wanting to please Mama Nandie, and give herself time to sort it all out. And sort it out, she would. As they walked along Sarah Jean begin to realize that Mama Nandie had put into words thoughts which lived inside of her heart. She had felt an attraction for Daudi from their very first encounter, but refused to think that anything would ever come of it. She knew too, that he was interested in her, and always contrived a way to be near her, and yet he never spoke more than a few words. "Mama Nandie, what will Miss Cleo have to say about all this marrying?"

"Amen!" Answered Mama Nandie, pleased with herself for convincing Sarah Jean to consider her suggestion of marrying Daudi. Miss Cleo had already given her approval of the idea. "She'll say amen, Sarah Jean, and even help you make your wedding dress."

"Maybe," said the young woman. Her mind already formulating a plan of attack on Daudi's shyness.

* * * * * *
"John Fofana, you still sittin' where I left you!" Miss Cleo exclaimed, entering the kitchen. "And my meat jes' ah burnin'up!" She reached for the potholder and pulled the roast from the oven. "And who been in it, dis knife ain't walked to the wrong rack all by itself."

"How is Mama doing...musta' been old Queen Victoria, I heard some rattling behind me. Didn't you hear it too, Seneca?" The old man winked at the boy. "You ought to set this table, we're hungry."

"Grand D, you didn't say if white people are evil animals or not," Seneca said trying to distract his grandmother. He got up and helped her bring the meal to the table; potatoes, gravy, green peas, and apple pie.

"Mama jes' fine, she cookin' tea cakes waitin' on dis chile. Now who been at my roast?" She asked again as she placed it on the table; stopping to look from one to the other, finally rest- ing her eyes on Seneca, certain that he wouldn't lie to her. "And I thought ya'll was talkin' 'bout Kinya, Africa when I left, how ya'll come to talkin' 'bout white folks and they ways?"

Squirming under his grandmother's truth stare, the boy said, "Zakia said it?"

53.
"Kia ain't here...what she say?" asked his grandmother. She bent down, eye level with Seneca, "Ain't I told you 'bout gossipin', even if yo old granddaddy don' know-"

"Ain't no gossip, this boy need to know certain things to make his way in this world," looking now, directly into Seneca's eyes, the old man continued. "White folks ain't evil animals... animals kill for food or to protect themselves. White folks are evil 'people', most of them anyway...not all."

"Well I do declare John Niko Fofana!" Exclaimed Miss Cleo. "You gon' set right here in my own kitchen at m y own table and fill dis chile's head wit foolishness!" She turned to bring the remainder of their meal to the table, slamming a plate of pie down in front of her husband. "And here I thought you was teachin' dis boy 'bout his peoples!" John Fofana just kept nodding his head as if he were listening, and in complete agreement.

"Well, grandma, we were talking about Africa," said Seneca, in defense of his grandfather. "White folks came up when I asked Grand D about something Zakia said."

"His sister and Mama are his people, and he must be taught that an African woman, an African man, an African child; all, all are in constant danger when they are among white people!" Said the old man. Undaunted by the expression on his wife's face,
he fixed his plate and began to enjoy his food.

"Seneca, say grace for us, honey," said his grandmother as she seated herself beside him ignoring her husband, for the time being. She knew how far to push certain issues with him.

Seneca and his sister, Zakia, saw their grandfather and their father belabored by women on all sides. Although neither of them were brave enough to make their observations known to the adults in question, they frequently discussed these views secretly. He couldn't wait to tell Zakia that Grand D had finally had the last word with grandma. It was a first.

* * * * * * *
Zakia, at the moment, was bursting with excitement and filled with pride in route to Mama Nandie's house. Excited at the prospect of telling Seneca about her frightening brush with the county law. Filled with pride, because her father had refused to cower, and faced the deputy down in spite of his bluster and viciousness. They had taken a right turn off of highway 28, onto farm road #17 which led to Enterprise Lane. The fact that they were going to Mama Nandie's instead of home made Zakia realize the seriousness of the incident she had experienced. It probably meant too, that she would be remaining at her grandmother's home until she left for school. Which wouldn't be until this coming July, a full eight months away, when she turned fourteen.

Riding in the rear seat of her father's old Model-T-Ford, she felt like a caged lioness. Restlessly she slid from side to side peering out of the car windows as they passed each cross road; periodically pausing mid-seat, furtively glancing through the rear windshield to see if the deputy was still following them.

"Girl, stay on one side or the other," Sarah Jean told her daughter. Looking over the passenger seat at Zakia, she asked. "Jessie Lee ever tried to make you get in his car before?" Daudi, who never took his eyes off of the road while driving,
shot his wife a warning glance telling her with his eyes not to blame their daughter.

He knew that most white men, poor or otherwise, that became policemen, did so because they were too stupid and too indolent to be anything else, and all of them were innately sadistic. There wasn't anything a young African girl could do if one of the ignorant sons-of-bitches decided to rape or murder her.

"No ma'am, Mama," the girl answered. "I've got sense enough to stay away from rabid dogs... I know they'll bite anything that gets in their path."

The rabid dog in this case was county deputy Jessie Lee Maddox; infamous rapist of Negro women and girls and practitioner of government sanctioned police brutality throughout every Negro township and hamlet within Harris County; largest county in the great state of Texas.

Jessie Lee Maddox was a thirty-six year old white, non-descript, illiterate son of indigent, backwater, freebreeding morons. At nine he was introduced to rape by his idiot Uncle Ollie Ray Maddox; who bent the naked boy over, spit on the head of his cock and shoved it up Jessie Lee's butthole. "Goldang Uncle Ollie, 'at sho' hurts!" Was his sole memory of that first intimacy. At fourteen he discovered sex more to his liking, between his Auntie Lilly Anne's doughy, fat, greasy, white thighs; 57.
and thereafter flat out refused to let old idiot Uncle Ollie Ray, or his older brother cornhole him ever again.

Now a proficient rapist himself, but seeking to broaden his experiences; he practiced fucking chickens, Elmer the family goat, several sheep, both of his younger sisters, numerous cousins, and finally, his good neighbor's prepubescent daughter.

Being a typical white, Southern Christian man, and a patriotic American to boot; Jessie Lee could not quite understand it when good neighbor, Caleb Beard, caused such a big ruckus over the deflowering of his seven year old girlchild: Even going so far as threatening the whole Maddox clan with a loaded shotgun and saying they were all idiot hillbillies.

Not waiting to find out just what had made old Caleb Beard go crazy, Jessie Lee Maddox ran from the hills, and landed penniless, in Houston, Texas. Being poor and white he did what any self-respecting white man should. He went to the county courthouse and signed on as a deputy sheriff to "keep uppity Niggers in they place so's decent white folk can rest easy." Said, High Sheriff Joe Bob Simmons upon handing Jessie Lee Maddox his shiny new badge.

His place in the world now secured, Jessie Lee Maddox began raping Negro women and girls to stay in shape; stealing from
Negro businesses and beating Negro men and boys senseless: (Whenever he had some backup.) Alone, he was a Pure-T-Coward; just another typical white, Southern Christian man. His credo: "No matter how mad a coon git he cain't do a dang thang to a white man 'bout gettin' hisself a lil' Nigger poontang, "sides 'at, I is de law now!" Then he would caress his black revolver and billy club to affirm his power to anyone in doubt.

The only certainty here is that Jessie Lee Maddox would have been better off had he actually raped a raccoon; and left African women in peace.

Jessie Lee's propensity for brutality and rape were well known, and his appearance within areas peopled solely by Negroes: The Bottom, Fairbanks, (where Mercyvale Colored Hospital was located); and Jersey Village, into which Daudi and his family had moved shortly after his marriage to Sarah Jean; always created a watchful, silent terror. Everyone poised for flight like fearful birds, and only returning to their duties once assured a kill had been made, and that they were not the victim this time.

Zakia's co-worker, Lula Mae Ward, a sixteen year old Negro girl had been only eleven when Jessie Lee Maddox first raped her. She was now considered by him, his 'personal property' and was the reason for Zakia's run-in with him.
Lula Mae, at sixteen, now had two children; the result of being raped repeatedly over the years by Jessie Lee Maddox. He refused to acknowledge that the children were his and did not offer up any support for their care. Lacking family or assistance, Lula Mae, at thirteen had taken a job at the Negro hospital, emptying bedpans, scrubbing floors, windows, and tending the hospital's food garden for which she was allowed a few vegetables from time to time. She earned two dollars a week working fulltime. Her rent for a one room tar-papered tin-roofed shack in Fairbanks was one dollar and fifty cents per month. The white landlord usually cheated her and she always found her rent in arrears.

Trying to feed and clothe her two children and aged grandmother on eight dollars a month was impossible for the child to accomplish with any consistency, so she developed a plan to escape her terrible living conditions.

The previous night she had put her plan into action. Jessie Lee Maddox, drunk as always, had arrived at her dilapidated one room shack, taking his pleasure with her as usual, while her two children and grandmother huddled together on the other side of the room; afterwards, she claimed fifty-three dollars from his coat, long overdue child support payment. Immediately after Jessie Lee Maddox left, (still in his alcoholic haze) Lula Mae Ward and her pitiable family made their escape to The Bottom, and hid along the river among Negeros that lived in tents where Jessie Lee Maddox
Even in her child-like innocence Zakia recognized immediately, the imminent threat he posed to her health and well-being, not to mention the fact that she knew who he was. Without acknowledging his presence, she walked quickly toward the road because he occupied her usual waiting area. Hugging her coat tightly around her body, Zakia looked straight ahead hoping to see her father’s car coming up the lane. Just as she passed the deputy’s parked patrol car, Zakia realized her mistake in leaving the lighted hospital grounds, and jumped the shallow ditch to farther separate herself from the road, then quickened her pace along the fence line. She considered ducking through the fence and running toward the line of pine trees and hiding there until her father arrived. Quickly realizing that would only make matters worst, she rejected this panic reaction, steeled her nerves and prepared for the coming confrontation. Hearing the motor of his car start, she glanced furtively over her shoulder and found herself trapped in the car’s head lamps.

Stopping the car slightly ahead of the girl’s position, Jessie Lee got out, jumped the ditch and walked slowly back to Zakia. "Nigger gal don' you 'ere de law talkin' ta' yo' black ass?" He stopped directly in front of her effectively blocking her path. "I oughta' 'rest you fo' tryin' ta' run from de law."

Just as he reached for Zakia, the lights of an approach-
ing car fell across them stopping his arm in midair. The car rolled to a stop and Daudi Fofana exited. He jumped the ditch and walked toward his daughter.

"Nigger, what you wont 'ere?" Asked the lawman. "Dis' 'ere's law bidness, git on back 'cross 'at ditch!" Ordered the lawman, placing his hand on the grip of his pistol; his face red with rage.

"My name is Daudi Fofana, deputy," said Zakia's father as he continued to advance on the lawman. "This is my daughter and I'm here to pick her up from work." Daudi's left hand in his coat pocket fingered open the straight razor used to square off his canvases, and he moved closer, placing himself between Jessie Lee and his daughter.

"I knows who you is, Nigger, you 'at Afcan Nigger 'at wittles and paints and such." Jessie Lee, had to lean his head all the way back in order to look up at Daudi.

Sarah Jean, now standing at the front bumper of the Model-T-Ford called to Zakia, "Baby, come and get in the car." Glancing once at her father, she took a backward step turned and jumped the ditch obeying her mother; and went to stand beside her. Sarah Jean knew that whatever happened, her husband would cut that white man to pieces before allowing him to harm his
family. Unknown to most outsiders, the Fofana men were very gentle with their women and children; and generally deferred to their women (without argument) on most things. They were strong and confident men who felt only strength in allowing their women room to exercise their own strengths and intelligence on an equal basis with themselves. But when it came to physical confrontations with other men (white or black) threatening their families, they were extremely chauvinistic, fearsome warriors to be dreaded. Sarah Jean was not worried one bit about the present situation, one white man on a lonely road was of little concern. So thinking, she guided her shaken child into the car. Then she herself got into the front seat, started the motor and slid into the passenger's seat to await her husband.

Seeing his intended victim replaced by this giant of a man, the lawman's resolve wavered as his eyes darted from Daudi to his daughter, and back again trying to decide if the girl's poontang was worth the trouble of being mauled by this big Nigger. Deciding finally, that he was outsized and out numbered, (Lord only knows how many Niggers in that car."
) he tried another tack. Jessie Lee said, "Ah'ma' let you off wit a warnin', boy, but iff'en I ketch 'at gal a' yourn' hitchin' long 'ist road ah'ma' skin ma'self a' coon." Stopping to spit a stream of tobacco juice at Daudi's feet, and jamming both thumbs into his belt; Jessie Lee Maddox saved his own life as he brushed by the silent man.
and walked toward his car. (He had plans for that uppity Nigger, yes lordy; he had big plans for that coon; and he would get himself some of that little fat gal's poontang too! Oh yes he would!)

Emerging from the deep mental killing zone into which his mind had sank, Daudi realized that he was standing alone. He shook his head and breathed in the cool night air clearing his lungs, expelling the poison of anger; pleased that he hadn't had to kill the lawman in the presence of his beloved daughter.

The lawman was seated in his patrol car preparing to drive off. His intentions were to cold trail the Niggers and then go for some help. Even as ignorant as he was, Jessie Lee Maddox knew in his heart that he was 'every white man' and had plenty of help, for the asking, when it came to keeping uppity Niggers in line.

All in one smooth motion Daudi turned and jumped the ditch, reaching his own car in three strides. ("So like a black panther" thought Sarah Jean, "silent but deadly.")

Smiling confidently at his daughter, and giving her a slight nod which said 'there's nothing to fear', he drove off.

Against his better judgement, Daudi had consented to Sarah Jean's proposal that Zakia be allowed to work three days a week.
at Mercyvale. The only Negro hospital within Harris County. Zakia, at thirteen, wanted to be a nurse and had gone as far in school (sixth grade) as possible. There were no secondary or high schools available for Negro children in Harris County. But under the tutelage of Mama Nandie and her mother, Zakia was already doing high school level reading, composition, and math, and she wanted to work for practical experience until she turned fourteen at which time she would join her sister, Kandi, at Bethune-Cookman college in Florida.

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Just as Seneca finished his supper and prepared to go visit
Mama Nandie, his hounds began howling. He could hear them rounding
the house in pursuit of what, he had no idea. But thinking they were headed to attack some unsuspecting visitor, he ran
down the hallway and crashed out of the front door calling to
Queen Victoria. Stepping out into the yard he recognized his father's car approaching the house. Hearing his grandparents
coming through the parlor, he called out. "It's just Poppa,
Sarah Jean, and Zakia!" Not understanding why his family had
arrived a day early, Seneca moved aside with downcast eyes to
permit them into the house. Certain they were here to cut his
visit with the old folks short; he remained outside with his dogs,
and was surprised when Zakia, eyes shing, remained beside him.
He knew that look. She had something to say and could hardly
wait until the front door closed on their parents.

"Don't leave this yard!" Admonished their mother closing
the door. She wanted the children out of the way until they'd decided what action to take for Zakia's protection. She knew
that this was only the beginning, she'd seen the deputy trailing
them when they crossed Little York Road.

"Seneca, you won't believe what happened!" Zakia exclaimed,
and proceeded to tell her brother every last detail of their
ordeal with Jessie Lee Maddox.
"Kia, if he ever come round here me and my dogs will kill him."
Declared her younger brother, in a voice far more mature than
Zakia had ever heard. She believed him. "I won't ever let any-
body hurt you." He said turning to pet Queen Victoria who stood
silently beside him.

"Do you think Poppa had that razor in his pocket?" Asked
Zakia, taking a seat on the steps and rubbing her hand along
Prince Albert's back. He was her favorite of her brother's dogs,
and seemed to know it.

"It's cold, let me get my coat," the boy said, stepping
inside the porch to retrieve it. "Poppa lefthanded...if he
didn't take his hand out of his pocket like you say-

"What's all this racket?" Interrupted their grandaunt,
Miss Essie, as she came across the yard, "why were those dogs
causing such a fuss...Kia is that you out here after dark?"

"Hi, Aunt Essie," said Kia, rising to meet her with a hug.
"We had some trouble with Jessie Lee Madox," continued Zakia,
explaining her unexpected presence.

"What happened, where's your father, is everyone all right?"
Her questions coming too fast for the girl to answer, Zakia simply
pointed toward the house.
"They in there discussing it," said Seneca, wishing she would go inside too. He didn't care for his Aunt Essie, who'd caught him in the woodshed one rainy afternoon, with his pants down. She had beaten him and then related the whole story to his mother, even though Grand D had asked her not to.

"Well let's go in, Kia," said Miss Essie, taking the girl by the arm and starting up the steps; "you shouldn't be out here this late." Outside trouble made Miss Essie overlook the fact that she was still upset with her sister. She could always find time, energy, and a reason, to reestablish her anger with Cleo; she'd did it (off and on) for the past four decades. Guiding her niece through the doorway, Miss Essie gave Seneca the same admonishment Sarah Jean had, and one of her own. "Seneca, don't leave this yard, and stay out of that woodshed."

"It's not late." Seneca whispered to her back after she closed the door; his timepiece showed quarter past eight. (But he knew that Miss Essie considered it late when the sun went down; and her old-fashioned beliefs said that good girls went 'inside of the house when the sun went down.) And even though it was cold, he wouldn't venture into the woodshed. Once his favorite hideout, (Until Miss Essie caught him and Edna Faye Stuckey looking for differences between boys and girls. "You're on your way to Hell!" His Aunt had shouted.) on long rainy summer days when a boy couldn't run wild and free with his dogs. 69.
Now the woodshed only made him think of going to hell. The day Seneca embarked on the road to hell, had started out to be a really good day. He was nine years old, it was the middle of summer, and the fish were biting fairly well in his great-grandmother's pond. There were several other boys and girls fishing along with him, and his dogs chased the occasional rabbit into the woods; everyone, man and beast, having a grand old time on a lazy summer day. Then all of a sudden the sky turned ugly and mean, opened its big mouth and rained down cats, dogs, and a few pigs mixed in with crashing thunderbolts and flashing yellow-white lightning; all of which served to run a boy and his dogs into the woodshed for safety and a dry place to wait out the rain.

Seneca, a boy always prepared for any unexpected situation, kept ongoing rainy day projects at the ready in the woodshed. After stowing away his fishing pole and bait, he took up an unfinished carving of a bear that he intended to make look like the one his father had carved. Just as he was seated and reaching for his knife to begin, the woodshed door opened and in stepped Edna Faye Stuckey soaking wet and grinning. At twelve, Edna Faye Stuckey, a full head taller than Seneca, thought she was a whole lot smarter too, and always had some newly gained knowledge to share that she was certain he didn't possess.

"What you doin'...you can't whittle like yo' daddy." She said; her way of saying howdy do. "I know where wimmen folks
"Carving not whittling that's what I'm doing," he answered. "What you say about babies?"

"I know where wimmen git'em from," Edna Faye Stuckey put her hands on her wide young hips. "And you don't, you so smart."

"The grandmama and other old women bring them." Seneca said.

"Naw they don't!" Shouted Edna Faye. "All they do is git'em outta' the mama." She explained.

"They come out of the mama? How they get in the mama in the first place?" Seneca stood up and walked over to Edna Faye Stuckey leaving his carving; this was more interesting.

"The Poppas put'um in there wit they thang they pee outta', then grandmas go git'em out when they ready." She corrected the buckeyed boy. "Sometime they git'em out the nabel and sometime outta' where wimmens pee from."

"Get them out of where?!" Seneca held both hands out waiting for the answers to drop into them, "a navel ain't no bigger than a grape."
"I knows that. But the Poppa does has to put his thang in the Mama to make the babies git ta' growin'." Stopping to think for a minute, Edna Faye said, "You thank I'm lyin'...we can make a baby if you want to."

"But don't it hurt?" Asked Seneca. "A big old baby coming out of a little navel and where you pee from?"

"I ain't had one, maybe it do hurt," answered Edna Faye. "But tryin' to make one feels real good, I knows that!"

"I don't know," said Seneca. "I need to finish carving my bear."

"Come on, let's make a baby," said Edna Faye. "I'll show you what to do." Raising her damp dress, revealing the fact that she wore no bloomers, Edna Faye laid down on the dirt floor waiting for him to make up his mind.

Seneca saw immediately that she was a lot different 'down there' than his, she had some little hairs; his was smooth and looked like a pig's tail with no hair. "Well, okay," Seneca said, and began pulling his pants down.

Edna Faye Stuckey, having had ample practice with several older boys, quickly taught Seneca the best way to accomplish
their desired connection. They went on trying to make a baby throughout the summer, without much success. Ever so often Edna Faye Stuckey would thump her stomach like a ripe watermelon, especially those times after a huge meal, and declare that a baby was in progress. Then a week later (on a rainy day in the woodshed) she would inform poppa to be Seneca, of their need to try once more because they must not be doing everything just exactly right, since the baby had stopped growing.

As the attempts increased and still failed to produce a baby, Seneca became bored with the whole baby making business. One rainy afternoon, while pushing in and out of Edna Faye Stuckey with all of his might, in the middle of yet another try; he let his discontent be known.

"I'd rather be carving on my bear this is a waste of time," said the disgruntled boy.

"But Seneca, you do it longer and gooder than Buddy Joe," complimented Edna Faye, holding Seneca in place with arms and thighs. "And you don' be peein' in me like he do."

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73.
ELEVEN

It was at that exact instant that Miss Essie, in a mighty big hurry to find her sister and finish a heated argument interrupted by the rain, yanked the woodshed door wide open. Finding not her sister, but her naked nephew entwined with one of them 'Fucky Girls' (as Edna Faye Stuckey and her sisters were known in The Bottom) sent her into an even greater rage. And she let it be known by commencing to beat Seneca with the first thing that came to hand; which, unfortunately for him was his cane fishing pole. The cane fishing pole refused to break and she was able to keep whipping Seneca's naked butt, no matter how fast he ran, all the way from the shed into the back porch.

As the porch limited her ability to swing the fishing pole, she began to shot religious phrases interspersed with words created by sailors: "BOY, YOU ON YOUR WAY TO HELL! GODDAMNED HEATHEN! THOU SHALL NOT FORNICATE! DOWN THERE FUCKING LIKE GROWN FOLKS IN BROAD DAY LIGHT! AND WITH THAT TRASHY UNDER AGE WHORE! MAY GOD STRIKE YOU WHERE THE SUN OUGHT NOT TO SHINE! BOY YOU ON YO' WAY TO HELL!"

Upon hearing this mixed up sermon, preached one second and cursed the next; John Fofana could not tell if it was Miss Cleo, her sister, or both, as they sounded as much alike as they looked; but he sure knew who was screaming for mercy. That was his grandboy, so he came running.

"Here now, let that boy loose," said the old man entering
the back porch. "Stop all that cussin' and preachin' and turn him loose right now!"

Upon seeing his grandfather, Seneca ran behind him and peered back at his enraged Aunt. "We was just trying to make a baby, that's all." He pleaded. "What you hittin' me for? That's all I was doing. Trying to make a baby."

Hearing Seneca voice what she had seen, sent her charging for him again. "Now you move out the way John Fofana!" Ordered Miss Essie, trying to land another blow on the boy's backside.

"This my house woman, you better come to your senses!" The old man took the fishing pole from his irate sister-in-law and ushered her out the screen door and into the back yard where she continued to rage at the boy through the porch screen. Seneca, now free from her grasp, ran into the house and quickly got dressed.

As soon as the old man got rid of his overheated sister-in-law, he entered the house in search of Seneca. Whom he found hiding beneath a pile of clothing inside the closet of Daudi's old bedroom. After coaxing the shaken boy back downstairs into the kitchen, he washed the welts on his shoulders and butt with moonshine. Which stung worst than the beating and made the boy wonder if Grand D had teamed up with the enemy
to make sure that he never tried to make babies again. But the old man quickly applied oil of Aloe, and assured the boy that all was well.

Just about this time, two look alike, out of breath, very upset sisters burst into the kitchen to double-team the old man for his part in assisting the boy in his onery efforts to get into hell as soon as possible.

Miss Essie, it seems, had located her missing sister, Miss Cleo, in the smokehouse and related the story of the devil's work she'd discovered going on in the woodshed. "Being carried out by none other than your 'own' grandson," said Miss Essie, emphasizing the your "own" grandson', twice. Upon hearing this distressing news, Miss Cleo forgot that she was upset with Essie and they joined forces for the task of ridding Seneca of the devil, saving his lost soul; and setting old man John Fofana straight for interfering with the process. They both agreed that saving John Fofana's soul was a lost cause, due to his love of moonshine and lies. But they had no intention of standing by while he took Seneca to hell right along with him. Not wanting to waste time sending for Preacher Morris to pray over the boy, the twins decided to do battle with the devil themselves, and headed up the pathway for the house.

Upon seeing Miss Cleo and Miss Essie storm in, both spitting fire and shouting God's holy words, Seneca ducked beneath his Aunt's out stretched hands, ran for the safety of the closet.
sparing no time for a backward glance, and hid again. Seneca hoped his grandfather could forgive him for running out on him; he'd apologize for that later, when things settled down just a bit.

Seneca, on his own, came to a few conclusions about all this baby-making business that he'd live by for life. The old women sure did seem to take it hard if somebody else tried to take their job of getting the babies; girls could not be trusted to keep their word; Edna Faye Stuckey did not produce a baby as promised, so all of his hard work was wasted, and he didn't even finish his bear. And now he was headed to hell just like his grandfather, at the age of nine. At least that's what his grandmother always said to Grand D about drinking moonshine; he sure knew it wasn't because Grand D had tried to make a baby with his grandmother, she wouldn't stand for it; she never did anything that could get her sent to hell. Going to hell had him really worried because he wasn't sure just what he could do to reverse the process, and he didn't much like real hot days, much less a place with the fire going all the time. But on the bright side of things, at least he'd have his Grand D there to tell him stories when he got lonely.

Seneca promised himself three things: He was dead sure that he would most certainly finish carving that bear for his sister, Zakia, without allowing any additional interruptions; he wouldn't ever drink moonshine; and girls could count him out of their baby-making schemes, he was forever done with that silly business!
These three promises he made to God, thinking: "Maybe, just maybe, God wouldn't send him to hell after all, and might, just might, spare his old Grand D the trip also."

Finally, the combination of baby making, going to hell, a whipping, moonshine fumes, and praying for his sins overwhelmed the boy and he slept, soundly. So deeply was his slumber, that even the three screaming adults downstairs did not wake him from it.

The old man, thinking of his father, Nekozi; and how he'd dealt with him in the same situation when Mama Nandie caught him with his pants down; playing (show me yours-I'll show you mine) intended to show the same gentle love and understanding with Seneca. He's shown restraint and love with his own son, Daudi, on the afternoon he'd chanced upon him in the barn, playing the exact same curiosity game with Millie Anne Simmons, a little white girl around his age. He hadn't told his wife then, because he didn't want her perception of their son to be altered; and he did not want her living in fear of old man Simmons, the farmer that her father worked for. And he had no intention of telling her now. Boys and girls would always be drawn together, it was Nature's way of making sure humans didn't die out, at least that's what he believed. But beating them was not the correct method of teaching children about something so natural; no matter what the Bible said about the 'rod' and 'correction'- the only view his wife seemed to believe.

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78.
TWO

John Fofana was quite sure that if one checked close enough, there were inaccuracies to be found in the Bible, and as far as he was concerned, beating children was one of the most blatant errors contained within his wife's favorite book; if indeed it said one should beat children or anyone else for that matter. He didn't know because he had never read her book. The only intelligent thing to be done, was to inform children of the need to wait until maturity made them capable of choosing a proper mate and enabled them to care for the resulting offspring; and that mutual love was the foundation of sex, unless you were an animal acting out of instinct.

He found it amazing that life continued to repeat itself generation after generation, different circumstances same situations. That was the beauty of life, its continuity, its purpose.

The old man also thought it was time that he cleared up a few of his own skeletons—skeletons not found in the woodshed on a rainy day—with the sisters since they were in the mood for chastisement. It was rare that he saw them at peace with each other and he knew exactly why; he'd change that now, there would be a permanent peace or a breaking so profound it could never be overcome; the truth had a way of freeing the soul, feeding the heart and ascertaining love in one's life, far better than all of the pious Bible verses learned by rote, and practiced haphazardly.
"John Niko Fofana!" Screamed the twins in unison.

"I'm right here," John Fofana said. "Seems you look alikes are mighty upset, what with all of this screaming, running, an-

"You get out of the way, John Fofana!" Interrupted Miss Cleo, taking a step toward her husband. "Dat chile got the devil in him; and you round here puttin' my own sista' out my own house!"

"He need a beating, that's what he needs!" Declared Miss Essie. Judging by her indignant expression, John Fofana was sure she meant him rather than Seneca.

"You ladies want to talk?" Asked John Fofana. "Let's sit down at the table." He eyed the irate pair, walked between them and seated himself at the head of the oak dining table. "But you're not whipping that boy or preaching to him about pleasures you both enjoy well enough...We'll leave the punishment and preaching to his daddy."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, talking to us like that!" Exclaimed Miss Essie. "You don't know what I enjoy!" She yelled, moving quickly toward him, hand on one hip, the other pointing an accusing finger at John Fofana's stony face.

Miss Cleo stood looking from one to the other, speechless,
her expression flashing through all of the seasons, freezing when it came to winter; she finally said, "I cain' believe you talkin' lak dat befo' my own sista'...Ima' go git Preacher Morris." She rushed past her husband and sister; their eyes still locked in battle. Instinctively Miss Cleo knew that the electric tension welding their eyes together had nothing to do with Seneca.

"You do that," said John Fofana, breaking eye contact with Essie; a decision made. His eyes shifting to his retreating wife's back. The flat tone of his voice caused Miss Cleo to stop and slowly turn around. "And when he gets here I'll horsewhip him." Said the old man in the same deadly, cold voice."Oh yes, I've known for years." He stated, staring up into his wife's eyes, which no longer burned with anger, their sienna fire damped by his words.

"Known what?" Asked Essie. Both sister's chilled and weaken by the insidious insinuation left hanging in the silent, hot air, took chairs on the opposite end of the table, across from each other; and as far away from John Fofana as possible.

Miss Cleo, eyes downcast, folded her hands in her lap, mentally preparing her defence; "if" what she thought her husband thought he knew, was in fact what he intended to horsewhip the preacher for; while her sister's eyes, flew rapidly around the room looking at everything, except her sister, seeing nothing,
wondering if she too, would need a defence or an excuse to offer her sister for the "one" indiscretion she was guilty of; waiting; both women thinking that the fabric of their respective lives—well kept secrets—were about to be exposed.

"What are you talking about...you've known...known what exac..." Essie's voice trailed off. Now she too, folded her hands mirroring her sister. Not quite certain if she should push John Fofana into answering. "What else was he prepared to divulge? Surely not that!" She prayed that he wouldn't be so cruel; not after all of these years of silence.

Finally, having composed herself enough to speak calmly, Miss Cleo looked at her husband and offered. "John honey, we don' have to talk 'bout mattas' of a private nature wit my sista! settin' here..."

"A nine year old boy doing grown-up business is not a matter of privacy," said Miss Essie, hoping they were back to discussing the original problem afterall. "Seneca's Mama needs to be told about his behavior." She looked toward John Fofana for a response.

Taking his pipe out and lighting it, the old man looked down the table at both women for a long moment before speaking. "Life and circumstances have a strange way of replaying them—
PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

...elves. Seems it was just a few years back when I had to decide if I ought to tell my wife about a game I caught our son playing. Of course, I decided not to tell her."

"What game are you talking about?" Asked Essie, shifting in her seat to face her brother-in-law. "Sarah Jean needs to know, Daudi won't do a thing about it."

"You know Sarah Jean sees to instructin' her chirren, not Daudi." Added Ms. Cleo. Both women seemed to think they understood, at last, just what concerned the old man. He was worried that his daughter-in-law would be far too hard on the boy.

"The reason I didn't tell my wife...it was a Sunday, she was too busy--" John Fofana began.

Realizing that her husband was about to expose her deepest fear, Miss Cleo screamed: "NO! NO! NOoo. John...please don't say any..."

"Girl! What is wrong!" Asked Miss Essie, coming out of her chair and running around the table, she fell to her knees beside her sister and wrapped her arms protectively about her. "John Fofana what in the name of God is going on here?" She snapped at her brother-in-law. Clearly her sister could not speak, she had completely broken down and was having difficulty getting a breath.
between deep, chest wracking cries.

"He saw you Cleo, and ran down to the pond crying, thinking that preacher was murdering you..." John Fofana, surrounded by a cloud of pipe smoke, appeared to be a fading apparition, his voice the only tangible evidence of reality. "Daudi was crying and begging me to save you, he said: (get that man off my Mama, please Poppa! He's killing her Poppa, he got her pinned to the floor killing her!) That's what he said...and I ran up to the house..." The old man got up and slowly walked into the hallway. "Leave my grandboy be, he's still innocent; just leave him be that way."

"Oh Lawd Essie, look what I done," sobbed Miss Cleo, clutching her sister for support. "Dat's why he didn' won't to learn the piano for me...and hates preacher Morris...my chile been hatin' me all dis years long..."

"Hush child," said her sister. Essie's eyes followed the path of John Fofana's smoke. "They both still love you. You've just got to love yourself, that's all...just love yourself...this will pass into the river of life."

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84.
"Seneca!" Called Zakia, as she ran out of the front screen door. Sarah Jean had immediately overruled Miss Essie's edict and sent her daughter back outside. "Seneca!" She yelled again, "Mama said we can go see Mama Nandie if it's too cold out here." Determining that her brother wasn't in the front yard, Zakia headed toward the back of the house and was met by an ecstatic Prince Alberi. The dog circled her twice, his heavy tail beating against her legs, and then he ran in the direction of the smokehouse. Zakia followed and soon discovered her brother sitting on the ground beneath the Chinaberry tree Prince Alfred and Queen Victoria seated on his left and right sides.

"What they decide?" He asked his sister. "Sarah Jean tell you to come get me?"

"Didn't you hear me calling you?" Zakia sat down on the old wooden bench and looked down at her brother. "They're all in the kitchen, I didn't get that far."

"Well then, how did you get round...mean old Aunt Essie?" Seneca's rekindled dislike for his Aunt over the baby-making incident two years back, almost made him curse.

"Let's go," Zakia said. Standing and reaching for her brother's hand, she added. "Mama said we could go see Mama Nandie...what time your watch got?" She asked, pulling him up.

85.
"It's strange how they look alike and talk alike..." Seneca dropped his sister's hand, "...but one mean as a copperhead, and one sweet as Mama Nandie's tea cakes."

"Aunt Essie just set in her ways...what time is it?" Zakia asked again, trying to see the blue moon. "Mama Nandie may be already asleep."

"No she isn't." Seneca fumbled his greatgrandfather's old watch out of his pocket. "Grand D was beating the drums today, she knows I'm here...it's nine exactly, exactly nine o'clock."

"Let's hurry anyway, I haven't seen her since last month." She walked quickly down the pathway with Prince Albert leading the way. "I hope that book she mail-ordered is here." Zakia said, looking over her shoulder to see if her brother was following.

"What book?" Asked Seneca, trying to catch up with her. "I memorized a poem she gave me last week."

"I sure wish I could come over here every Friday and stay until Monday like you do," said Zakia. Now clear of the trees, she stopped and looked up at the bright blue moon. "What's the title of the poem?" She asked; still staring at the bright purple sky surrounding the moon.
"Why you always asking me questions and you don't never answer mine?" Seneca began walking, leaving his sister mesmerized by the moon.

"It's a book by a young Negro writer named Jean Toomer, he's twenty-nine, and the title of his book is "CAIN"; Kandi mentioned it in her letter," Zakia answered, now running to catch her brother and walk beside him. "Miss Bethune invited him to read it at the college; Kandi said he was good-looking, and smart."

"I don't know what the man look like that wrote "IF WE MUST DIE", that's the poem Mama Nandie gave me, but he sure must be mad at white folks." The boy stooped to pick up a stick and threw it. Queen Victoria ran in search of it. "Why you keep looking at the moon?"

"It ought to be red like a ruby," said Zakia, taking another glance. "That would be so beautiful, a ruby colored moon in a purple sky."

"That's silly, you couldn't even see it then," said the boy, looking toward the sky. "It's just fine like it is."

"When I get married I'm going to name my first baby girl, Ruby," mused Zakia. Taking little notice of the shocked expression on Seneca's face, she continued, "there's no more precious
stone as beautiful as a ruby...do you know why?" She turned to
look at her brother, when he didn't respond, she said, "because
they've already bled for their life and beauty."

"Maybe," said a doubting Seneca. "Just don't let Grandma
and Aunt Essie catch you trying to make no baby!"

Before Zakia could answer him, the door of Mama Nandie's
cottage opened, throwing a wedge of soft, yellow light, and warm
air mixed with the scent of cinnamon sticks, oranges, and tea
cakes, into their faces.

Mama Nandie's little cottage was furnished, to her liking,
with old fashioned pieces that her late husband had made. The
low chairs had colorful little hand-made pillows attached to their
seats and backs. The scarred little tables held miniature carvings
of lions, gazelles, and elephants, and were polished until they
glowed warmly; oil paintings of Nekozi looked down from three of
the walls.

The kitchen contained a small four burner wood-stove, an old
hard pinewood dining table with six matching ladderback chairs,
all painted blue. The cabinets along the side wall were also
light blue, and filled with home preserved food and spices.

In the right corner stood a four foot high carving of a Fante
ceremonial mask. Across from it was a traditional African drum,
fronted by an authentic Fante spear and shield; all made by
Nekozzi as a way of remembering his African homeland, and his stolen heritage. This kitchen too, was a favorite gathering place for all of the family members. It was where they had laughed, cried, and been comforted when tragedy struck. It was where they sat holding hands, wondering how they would make it through another year when crops had failed. It was where they had congregated in joyful celebration after Daudi's wedding; and where they'd sent Kandi off to explore the world of college and beyond. It was in this kitchen that they reaffirmed their love and faith in each other. It was here that they miraculously overcame the pressure of racism and oppression from the outside world.

Smiling with delight, their great-grandmother reached out and hugged them both simultaneously. "Zakia, what are you doing here, have I misplaced Monday?" Asked Mama Nandie, stepping back to allow her smiling great-grandchildren inside.

"We're here a day early because of some trouble with Jessie Lee Maddox." Answered the girl.

"He tried to make Kia get in his car!" Seneca declared, as if he'd been present. Heading for the warm tea cakes he could smell in his great-grandmother's small kitchen, he added. "I'm going to kill him if he ever come round here bothering my sister."

"Hush your mouth, boy," said Mama Nandie. "Don't ever speak your intentions, or innermost thoughts aloud, you just might have to see them through, and evil spirits may take your words to your enemy, long before you carry them out." Turning to Zakia, "are you all right, child?"

89.
"Just a little concerned about my daddy, he made that deputy real mad." Zakia put her arm around the old lady's shoulder, kissed her wrinkled cheek and they walked into the kitchen to join Seneca.

"Your father will be just fine, but you'll have to stay here until you leave for school." Said Mama Nandie.

"Well, Mama and Poppa are up there with Grand D, talking things over." Zakia took one of the little brownish-yellow tea cakes and began nibbling on its darkened edge.

"You forgot somebody," said Seneca. "Aunt Essie came over too."

"They can talk all night," said Mama Nandie. "You'll be staying here with me, until your birthday on July 23rd, which is a Thursday. Saturday evening, the 25th, you'll be on the train to Florida."

"But my Mama hasn't...well she said tha-" Zakia looked uncertainly at her great-grandmother.

"Child, with that crazy deputy's mind set on you; I know all about him, I'll see to it that your Mama sends you to Florida. I've made up my mind about that!" Mama Nandie turned and left the room; certain that they understood that she had the final word in all family decisions; even when Sarah Jean was involved.

Zakia smiled at her brother, and took a seat beside him.

90.
"Now I know for sure that I'll really be going to Florida."
"Sure wish I could go too," said Seneca. "I really want to see my sister."
"You should start writing to her like I do," said Zakia as she removed her coat. "She always sends you messages in her letters, but you never take the time to answer them; you want me to tell her everything."
"Writing is so slow, I just want to see Kandi, she been gone three whole years." Seneca got up, removed the linen cloth from the pail of fresh milk, and filled two cups. Placing one in front of his sister, he said. "When you leave, I'll be all alone, just me, my dogs, and the old folks."
"What old folks?" Asked his great-grandmother. She entered the kitchen carrying a small package, which she was busy opening. "Did you learn that poem that this old 'folks' gave you?"

Seneca stood and cleared his throat:

"IF WE MUST DIE—BY CLAUDE MCKAY
IF WE MUST DIE, LET IT NOT BE LIKE HOGS
HUNTED AND PENNED IN AN INCREDIBLE SPOT,
WHILE ROUND US RANK THE MAD AND HUNGRY DOGS,
MAKING THEIR NOCK AT OUR ACCUSED LOT.
IF WE MUST DIE, O LET US NERLY DIE,
SO THAT OUR PRECIOUS BLOOD MAY NOT BE SHED
IN VAIN; THEN EVEN THE MONSTERS WE DEFY
SHALL BE CONSPIRED TO HONOR US THOUGH DEAD!
o kinemen! we must meet the common foe!
though far out numbered let us show us brave,
and for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
WHAT THOUGH BEFORE US LIES THE OPEN GRAVE?
LIKE MEN WE'LL FACE THE MURDEROUS, COWARDLY PACK,
PRESSED TO THE WALL, DYING BUT FIGHTING BACK!"

Mama Nandie and Zakia gave the elated boy a standing ovation, and he took several proud bows at their approval.

91.
"That was just perfect!" Exclaimed his great-grandmother. "A Broadway actor couldn't have recited it any better or with more depth!"

Zakia went around the table and gave her brother a long hug. "You really speak well, Seneca, that was beautiful."

"Miss Bethune sent this copy of "CAIN", it arrived yesterday evening." Mama Nandie passed the book to Zakia, who opened its cover and began to read silently.

"Mama Nandie, is that poem about all of those Negro riots that happened in 1919?" Asked Seneca. "Grand D said it was written because of the violence. He said that it's Claude McKay's way of expressing determination for racial equality. But it sounds more like he wants to kill white folks."

"Ubora wa vijana ni nguva zao, na uzuri wa wazee ni kichwa chenyi mvi," answered Mama Nandie.

"The excellency of young men is their strength..." said Seneca, translating the first half of her statement. "...and the beauty of old men is a head of grey hair."

Said Zakia, looking up from her book to help her brother complete their great-grandmother's words.

"Does that mean that Grand D was right?" Asked Seneca. "His hair is all grey."

"What does your heart tell you, Seneca?" Asked Mama Nandie, going over to the stove to make herself a cup of tea. "Always listen to it, your heart often answers correctly, before you even know what the question is."

92.
Zakia, laying aside her book after reading quietly for several minutes; looked up with tears spilling down her dark brown cheeks. Blinking her huge burnt umber eyes and focusing again on the passage she read: "Karintha is a woman. She who carries beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down."

Slowly, (as if she thought the words would, once she lost sight of them, fall from the page) Zakia raised her head and mouthed a quiet "Thank you, Mama Nandie, she's so beautiful and she's black, just like me."

"Why you crying if she looks like you?" Seneca asked her; nearly moved to tears himself.

"This is the first book I've ever read that actually says a black woman is physically beautiful, and black." Zakia's smile, bright as the full moon on a starless night, spread across her face. "These are joyful tears!" She said.

Seneca smiled too, "sometimes Kia act like she crazy Mama Nandie." He got up, kissed his sister and Mama Nandie goodnight, and walked to the front door. "Since Kia spending the night, I'm going up to Grand D's, I'm sleepy."

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93.
PART THREE: AFRICAN SISTERS
FOURTEEN

On Easter Sunday, April 12, 1925, when numerous people, (black and white) were dressed in their best and headed to their respective churches to celebrate the rumored resurrection of their lord and savior, Christ; the Fofana's were involved in their usual lukewarm debate over "white folk's holidays", (as John Fofana called them) and the value of Christianity to African people.

"Good morning everybody, Seneca, why aren't you dressed for church?" Asked Zakia, entering the kitchen behind Mama Nandie. Who rarely came up to the big house; and was only escorting Zakia. Since the incident of November last year with Jessie Lee Maddox, Zakia was accompanied by someone everywhere she went, and she lived with Mama Nandie in her cabin.

"Where is my dog?" Seneca got up from his breakfast to give Mama Nandie a hug, "Good morning Mama Nandie...I'm going hunting, Kia, that's why I'm not dressed."

"Prince Albert never leaves my side," said Zakia. "You know that. Why aren't you going to Easter services with me and Mama?"

"I don't like hard-boiled eggs," Seneca resumed his seat beside his father and took up his fork. "After I finish my

94.
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hoe-cakes and sausage, me and my dogs going hunting."

Zakia, making her way around the breakfast table greeting her mother, father, grandmother, and Aunt Essie, took a seat beside Mama Nandie. Fixing herself a plate, she said, "You always went to Easter services with us when we were at home in Jersey Village."

Looking across the table at his Aunt Essie, Grama Cleo, and his mother, Sarah Jean; who were all dressed for church and looking at him with controlled anger, Seneca said. "I'm staying with the men, I'm too old to hunt Easter eggs and that was the only thing I ever liked about Easter anyway." Seneca was taking full advantage of the fact that his great-grandmother, Grand D, and his father, refused to celebrate holidays. Although his father still went to church occasionally, he never went on holidays. Mama Nandie and Grand D flat out refused to celebrate any holidays or set foot inside of a church; but didn't prohibit anyone else from doing so. On the other hand, they supported those who chose not to attend. "I don't see what bunny rabbits and decorated chicken eggs got to do with Christ or Easter, it's all pretty silly to me."

"It's not about rabbits and eggs!" Exclaimed Zakia. "It's to celebrate the resurrection of Christ."

95.
Maybe," responded Seneca. "But Grand D said Christ would be hard pressed to make up his mind about which church to visit first..." The boy looked at his grandfather for assurance, "...the white folk's church or black folk's chur-"

"That's enough boy!" interrupted Sarah Jean. "I'll give you a beating if you don't shut up righ-"

"Please, please, let the child finish, Sarah Jean," interrupted Mama Nandie. "He has the right to express his opinions. The world beyond these walls is going to beat on him, to shut him up, all of his life, so please let him speak."

"Why did this white man, this Jesus, get a second life when a black man can't even live his first one in peace?" Asked Grand D, looking at his daughter-in-law for an answer. "Is that what you want your son to celebrate?"

"To redeem our sins," said Miss Essie. "Jesus is the savior of the world; he died on the cross for all of us."

"Hmmm...I've got a strong feeling that I'll be doing my own dying," said John Fofana.

"Is that why white folks keep on killing innocent Africans all over the world," asked Mama Nandie. "Because the sin is 96.
already paid for in full?"

"When white folks lynch Africans, Mama, whose sins are they
dying for?" Asked Seneca, emptying his plate of scraps into the
bucket for his dogs. "Shouldn't we try to get murdered African
people resurrected too?"

"Well, the world needs an impartial savior!" Declared John
Fofana. "Far as I can see, white folks got the world under their
fist, and would kill Jesus all over again if he tried to save
just one African from being raped, beaten, or murdered." Getting
up from the table, reaching for his pipe, John Fofana said, "If
there was a Jesus, he couldn't take one African into River Oaks
First Baptist Church and make it out alive. Those white folks
would hang him right there in church and keep on celebrating his
resurrection." The old man headed for the parlor, "Seneca, I'm
going to get your little shotgun, the twenty-gauge ready for you,
I got a taste for some quail or partridge."

"Son, I'm not sure you'll understand this, but, an ancient
Roman fertility ceremony is where the eggs and rabbits found in
Christianity came from. Paganism is intergal to Christian cere-
monies;" Daudi, always hesitant to enter religious or political
conversations finally answered Seneca's first question.

"Oh Lord! I swear before God and three other responsible
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Nandie. "Holidays, Christian or otherwise, make people spend money on foolishness when they can least afford to. None of it bodes well for Africans."

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Shortly after the women left for church, Seneca joined his Grand D in the parlor. When he entered the room, his grandfather was putting his weapon back onto the gunrack, and replacing the lock.

"Aren't you going with me?" Seneca asked, picking up his twenty-gauge and a box of shells. "I thought you wanted some fresh meat."

"Not now," John Fofana said. "I'm feeling a little tired. You take your dogs and make an adventure out of it. I'll do the cooking when you get back."

Seneca grinned up at his grandfather and headed out of the door. Rousing his dogs, the boy ran toward the wilderness beyond the backyard. His dogs going wild at the sight of open fields and the shotgun. They knew it was time to flush out game. He left the pathway and headed through the pecan grove toward the field of broom grass a mile or so past the pond. He was sure there was a covey of quails just beyond a big blackberry patch at the edge of the pine trees this side of the prairie grass and scraggly mesquite shrubs.

He walked with pride and confidence over a sandy rise, where pine trees hid a small creek bordered by bluebonnets on each 99.
sided. As the dogs, led by queen Victoria, fanned out ahead of him, he stopped beside the cool water near the bluebonnets which his sister Kandi loved. The flowers brought both of his sisters to mind. This was the spot where the three of them had been together for the last time before Kandi left for school in Florida, nearly four years ago.

They were having an afternoon picnic. The three of them had just finished eating fried chicken, fire baked potatoes and sour-dough. Seneca was putting out their little fire, when Kandi screamed and ran back from the creek. She had eaten a peach and gone down to the creek to rince the sticky juice from her hands. Zakia was still sitting on the quilt eating a Brown Dog; a home-made candy made of pecans and burnt sugar. Without giving it a second thought she ran toward the water behind Seneca to see what had frightened their sister. They both began to laugh at the same time when they discovered a small, very small adder snake. Even puffed up it was smaller than Seneca's forearm. Zakia picked it up and took it across to the other side of the creek and set it free among the flowers. Kandi still couldn't be persuaded to stay for another minute; they'd packed up and gone home.

Kandi, tall, beautiful, and intelligent; a voice so soft and gentle he could barely hear her when she spoke; it floated past his ears like a warm, quiet, summâtr breeze that meant to slip by unnoticed. Her manner of looking at him and making him believe he was the most important person in the whole world; was what
caused Seneca to really miss her. And yet, he felt responsible for her well-being, she seemed afraid of everything; appeared to need protection from the noise of the world. Almost as though she doubted her right to exist.

Zakia was fearless, a lioness; she had fought many of the girls and boys in the Bottom, and was undefeated. She did not hesitate one second in talking back to grown folks when she thought they were wrong, and unlike other children, she flat out refused to allow any adult except her mother to give her a whipping. Zakia, up until a year ago, had beaten him climbing trees, fighting, shooting, and she could run much faster than he could. He'd always seen her as an honorary older brother. But now that her chest and but were starting to look more like a woman's, Sarah Jean refused to let her climb trees with him, stay out past dark or hunt.

Even though she was always talking about silly stuff like getting married and having babies, he knew he'd really miss her when she left for school in a few months.

Had the boy been more mature, he would have realized that the longing he felt for his sisters, was primal-love. But all he could think of was that he'd be deeply lonely once Zakia left. Little did Seneca know; life never followed a straight line.

The baying of his hounds finally got Seneca's attention. He charged through the shallow creek in the direction of their cacophonous howls. His heart beating like Grand D's drums, and nearly 101.
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As loud, was filled with excitement. Checking his shotgun, and clicking off the safety, he walked up behind his hounds. They were showing signs of anticipation and nervousness, so he commanded them to flush the prey. Queen Victoria sprung forward into the middle of the leafy brambles, birds exploded skyward; Prince Albert and Prince Alfred charged around either side of the shrubs; an armadillo waddled out of the other side and was brought to a dead stop by Prince Albert who flapped the animal over and went for its throat. Seneca fired twice, and scored a snappy double, just like Zakia used to. He quickly reloaded, and as he closed the breech another quail took flight behind him. Seneca whirled and fired, dropping the bird in a cloud of feathers. He was shooting with great confidence, pleased that he had managed to bring down the quails his Grand D had a taste for.

His dogs retrieved the birds. Seneca headed home with meat for his Grand D's supper, and an armadillo that would be roasted with yams before the week was out.

Instead of taking the path back through the prairie and woods, Seneca set a course that would bring him out on Jewel street in the Bottom. He wanted to stop off at Malone's butcher shop and skin the armadillo. Even though it was Easter and most of the stores in the Bottom were closed, he knew that Malone's was open year round and would pay a nickel for the armadillo shell and head. Just as he reached the road, a county police car sped past. He was able to catch a glimpse of Jessie Lee Maddox before the car
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disappeared around the bend in a cloud of dust. He saw that the
deputy was alone, and decided to rush home and tell his father
instead of going to the butcher shop.

The deputy didn't see Seneca, as he was focused on his dis-
tination. Ever since November Jessie Lee Maddox had been hiding
out in a small stand of pines that bordered the western end of
John Fofana's property; just below Meads Creek. After being
told by Sheriff Joe Bob Simmons to stay clear of Daudi Fofana
because he worked for Judge Jedediah Hargreaves. Jessie Lee de-
cided that he would wait for his chance to kidnap and rape the
girl instead of trying to kill her father. He'd been sneaking
onto the Fofana land for six months, and watching from a safe
distance, making sure fellow deputies didn't know where he was and
couldn't report his actions to the Sheriff. Staying clear of the
hounds had been difficult, but he'd managed that by wading in
the creek to mask his scent and hide his tracks. This was his
secret and no one would be able to blame him when her body was
found.

He had just left the nigger church, Mount Sinai Second Baptist,
where he had been watching for the girl, and was now speeding to
his hideaway before the niggers came along the road. They were
standing out front of the church talking with other niggers when
he'd last seen them and left. He had a feeling that all of his
patience and ingenuity would finally pay off.

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103.
"...And behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from Heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it!"

The preacher screaming the words sounded like he was the mighty angel that caused the earthquake and opened the sepulchre. Zakia knew it was only preacher Morris, a small, dark skinned, bald man who talked too slow when he wasn't preaching. She couldn't see much of him because the Easter service was crowded as usual, and Henrietta Stuckey, wearing a huge hat with feathers sticking straight up was sitting on the bench in front of her, blocking her view. If she leaned to the right, the hat got there first, if she leaned to the left the feathers beat her. So she contented herself with just listening and fanning herself to keep cool in the hot, crowded church. Easter service was always crowded; farmers from twenty miles away harnessed their mules and were waiting in the grassy field beneath the pecan trees long before the church doors opened. Negroes from all walks of life who never came to church; showed up on Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving to prove to white folks that they were good Christians too. Zakia wondered if her father wasn't correct when he said they were just a bunch of hypocrites who, like ancient Roman pagans, came simply to celebrate the fertility rites and eat free food.

Despite Mama Nandie's position against Christian holidays and going to church, Zakia loved church. She found the Bible stories and songs very inspiring, if not entirely believable. But she did not like it when grown folks decided to 'PRAY THE DEVIL'
out of someone; they kept you on your knees for hours; screaming, begging, sweating, demanding, and finally threatening the devil in the name of Jesus. No wonder the devil finally got tired and just left the tortured soul in peace. But it wasn't a lasting peace; before the week was up, that same soul, now free of satan, would either steal, kill or be caught in bed with someone else's spouse; and be chased out of the Bottom by an irate husband or wife. To Zakia, it all seemed like a lot of wasted time that produced nothing more than sore knees.

Whenever the preacher talked about hell, Zakia thought of Mama Nandie's declaration that there was no such place. "When your spirit leaves your earthly body, it goes to reside with your ancestors and guides those left behind. If there is a hell, it's right inside the home of man, you'll find all the evil possible right inside the hearts of men. Your true peace awaits you in the bosom of your ancestors."

Zakia liked that much more than the picture in her Bible illustrated with little pink-faced children with wings in Heaven playing with little golden balls, and leaping from one fluffy white cloud to the next. "Nigger, what are you doing here!?" Would probably be the first thing out of their mouths, she thought, if she did end up there. At the very least, they'd expect her to keep their little golden balls polished for eternity.

Her grandfather also shared her doubts about hell and Christian beliefs of its whereabouts.
"I'm not about to change my way of life because some crazy, confused preacher is shouting about a hotter place than Texas, called hell. Any fool knows better!"

The Easter service was coming to a close and people began to stir restlessly in their seats. The church was small, hot, and crowded, and as the minister began to talk about the games, activities, and Easter egg hunt planned for the children after service; adults began to whisper among themselves.

"That's the Stuckey gal I was tellin' you 'bout," someone behind Zakia whispered. "She's a ho just like her mama was."

Zakia had to steel herself to keep from turning around to see who had the nerve to call someone a whore right in church on Easter Sunday.

"Say what chile!"

"The lawd's on truth! She ain't but fourteen and in a family way," said the gossip.

Her mamma got kilt by some street woman, she gon' come to a bad end too."

"Well the lawd do punish evil, ain't that her sister, Henriette settin' wit her?"

"I can' tell, what wit all dem feathers; but Henriette jes' as bad, got all dem chirren and no husband, it jes' a shame how some wimmin lives in sin."

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations..." said preacher Morris, bringing the service to a close; "...baptizing them in
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the name of the father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Zakia shot to her feet and looked at the faces of the two gossips behind her. "You both ought to be ashamed of yourselves, passing judgement on other women, calling them whores right in church!"

"Chile, ain't nobody said nothin' 'bout nobody!" Lied Miss Williams, the gossip who'd started the conversation. "You needs to stay in a chile's place."

"And you need to stay in a Christian's place!" Retorted Zakia, leaning closer to the old woman.

"Girl, hush," said Sarah Jean. "Don't argue with these goddamned gossiping old hateful hypocrites!" Sarah Jean took her daughter by her arm and guided her out of the church.

"Them niggers thanks they better than other folks..." Miss William's words faded as Zakia became lost in the crowd moving toward the exit.

In route to their old ford, Zakia was brought up short when someone called out her name. Stopping and looking over the crowd she recognized the subject of the mean spirited gossip, slowly walking her way through the mass of children.

"Happy Easter!" Zakia greeted a smiling and very pregnant fourteen year old Edna Faye Stuckey.

"Hey Kia, I didn't see Seneca, is he here?" Asked the girl; as she scanned the crowd.

"He gone hunting with my grandfather."
"Oh," Edna Faye hesitated and pressed her hand to her stomach. "Well, could you give him this," she held out a yellow egg with little hearts painted around its middle. "Tell him I said Happy Easter."

Zakia took the offering and hugged the girl. "I'll make sure he gets it, and thank you." She turned and ran to the car. Her mother had already started it, and was preparing to drive off without her.

"It's for Seneca," she explained to the questioning looks on the faces in the car.

"Hump!" Said her Aunt Essie. "What that boy supposed to do with her yellow egg. She already fertilized!"

* * * * * *
"Mama, I'm going to see if Seneca is out back." Zakia said as she got out of the car and headed toward the side yard. She knew that her brother and grandfather would be dressing any game they'd killed, on the big butcher's table in the backyard.

"Just don't go into the woods looking for him," Sarah Jean went into the house with Miss Essie and her mother-in-law.

"I...Okay, Mama." Zakia was about to ask her mother if she could go down to Meads Creek and pick some bluebonnets for Kandi. She'd forgotten that her sister asked her to send a pressed bluebonnet in her next letter. Seneca's Easter egg from Edna Faye had somehow made her think of Kandi's request. Discovering that her brother wasn't back yet, she absentmindedly drifted toward the creek. As she walked past Mama Nandie's cottage and veered to the west, around the pond, Seneca was entering the house, out of breath from his three mile trot.

He gasped out his news of seeing Jessie Lee, "Not twenty minutes ago." He panted, "Where's Kia?"

The adults erupted into a swarming hive of activity until Sarah Jean said, "Kia out back looking for you."

Seneca dashed down the hallway and out into the yard still carrying his shotgun, "Kia!" He yelled when he didn't see her. Hearing his voice, the hounds ran around the house to him. Only Queen Victoria and Prince Alfred stopped beside him.

109.
Prince Albert streaked by howling as if he had the scent of a prized coon. The dog was running so fast until it took Seneca a moment to realize that something was wrong; he finally stopped calling the hound, and ran after him.

In her determination to find the prettiest bluebonnet possible, for her sister, Kandi, Zakia didn't hear Jessie Lee slip up behind her. She was barely able to manage one small muffled scream when he placed his large, filthy, greasy hand over her mouth and pressed the blade of a bowie-knife to her throat.

"I knewed I'd git you," Jessie Lee breathed into her ear. "Ain' no coon bitch ever been able to git away from me." He spun her around and slapped her with all of his might and threw her onto his shoulder.

"Where are you taking me?" Zakia refused to show fear, even though her mouth and nose were bleeding, and she knew that he intended to rape and murder her. "Please put me down, I won't run or fight." His touch revolted her, and his rotten body odor was making her nauseous, breathing became very difficult.

He carried her across the creek and into the shadows, tossing her down under a low branched pine tree. When she cried out, he covered her mouth with one of his filthy hands and tore her bodice. "Now you shut yo' goddamn mouth and open yo' legs!"

Finally fearful, Zakia struggled to keep her legs closed, which only seemed to incite him to greater cruelty.
"Please don't break my brother's egg," she tried to hold the gift from Edna Faye out of harms way.

Pinning her arms to the ground, he reached out and crushed the little yellow egg then struck her in the face with a closed fist, "you want it rough I see." Grunting with arousal, he forced her thighs apart, tore her pantie away and relieved her of her virginity with a single vicious thrust.

Zakia screamed. Jessie Lee grunted and stabbed into her even harder, again and again until he reached his perverted peak. The child lay crying beneath him; broken spirit, bitter tears spilling down her dark brown face.

He rolled off of her and was fixing his pants when Prince Albert slammed into his chest burying long yellow canine fangs into his throat. The hound shook its head viciously, ripping deeply into muscle and bone, crushing the lawman's trachea. Jessie Lee's hands found nothing but excessive skin as he attempted to dislodge the animal. Choking on his blood, he tried to scream as he rolled, attempting to shake the dog off. He felt something strike his back, before his mind could register what it was, he felt it again, and now there was pain. Suddenly, his lungs swelled with unbearable heat, and he realized that he was being stabbed...his last thought..."Oh God...please." Went unanswered. Seneca methodically stabbed the lawman repeatedly. Queen Victoria ripped the deputy's groin open and began to disembowel him. The boy continued hacking at the body, lost in
anger and blinding tears. Finally Seneca realized that his father was holding him against his chest. Looking around he saw that the old folks were gathered beneath the pine tree. But his eyes continued searching until they found his sister.

Zakia, one arm around Prince Albert, sat brused and bleeding against the trunk of the tree. Her spirit shriveled within her. For the first time in her young life, she thought of dying to ease her pain. She did not know that sex could be so filthy and painful. "You bastard, you filthy bastard, you evil hateful bastard!" Zakia screamed at the eviscerated corpse. Painfully getting to her feet, the girl made her way to the dead thing and spat on it. "You evil beast! Why did you have to destroy my brother's egg?"

Seneca went to his sister, put his arm around her and led her away. She'd refused to allow anyone else to touch her, but she leaned against her brother and let him take her to the house.

The old folks, at Mama Nandie's urging, went and got the double blade axe, meat cleaver, and bone saw; Jessie Lee Maddox disappeared from the good earth...leaving nothing?

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Several weeks later an abandoned patrol car was pulled out of the Brazos river, thirty miles south of Huntsville, Texas. It was assumed that Deputy Jessie Lee Maddox, driving drunk as he was known to do, crashed into the guard rail and drowned.
"You're drunk Ernest Ray!" Screamed Millie Anne, "you've been gone since Easter Sunday!"

"Would you shut your goddamned mouth!" I interrupted her husband. "I tell you I done seen a buncha' Niggers choppin' up a white man, and I ain't drunk neither!"

"Well, you sure do smell of it," said Millie Anne. "Today is Tuesday, where have you been for two whole days? I had to go to church alone, and on Easter Sunday at that." Holding her husband's torn suit coat as if it were a dead rat, "coming from Niggertown... that's where... talking foolishness... your clothes filthy and all. What's that you said about Negras chopping up who... who'd they chop up. Negras always cutting each other to pieces; why I remember when I was a litt--"

"Will you shut up! You always talk too much when I'm tryin' to tell you something!" Interrupted her husband. "Just go call Joe Bob like I'ma' tellin' you to do, woman!" Ernest Ray Ferguson stumbled into the kitchen and slumped down at the table. "That Nigger boy done killed a white man right there in Niggertown. Nate! Where's that Nigger at? Nate get in here and fix me a drink!"

"Well, I'ma' call my brother, but I'ma' tell him to arrest you!" Declared Millie Anne, "you just lying... lying to cover-up
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your doing Negra whores and coming in here filthy drunk and all such as that." Millie Anne, going through her husband's coat pockets, continued, "And quit telling me to shut up! first you said a bunch of Negras was cutting each other, now you saying some Negra boy cut another one...what do you care? It must of been one of your bastards got cut up."

Ernest Ray Ferguson considered himself just another good ol' boy, God fearin' and all; who did right by folks, even Niggers. He rented his houses in Niggertown cheap; so what if he fucked a few Nigger gals when they rent was in arrears. Lord knows that was about the only way he'd get his due. "Millie Anne, don't start with your nasty innuendos and rumors, my head hurts something fierce...ain't no decent white woman got no business talkin' about such as that. Where'd you get them notions anyhow?" Ernest asked as he returned to the vestibule where his wife stood, still holding his torn coat. "I'm first cousin to the governor of this here state, do you honestly think I'd lay down with a goddamned Nigger gal?"

"Yes I do!" And Miriam Ferguson being governor of Texas don't change my mind about what you doing one little bit!" Millie Anne Ferguson nee Simmons, baby sister of High Sheriff Joe Bob Simmons, a country-bred woman of good quality; refused to have colored girls working inside of her home. Growing up on her father's large cotton plantation she had seen too many little high-yellow-Negras that looked like her father and uncles. Unlike most Southern Belles of the time; Millie Anne did not turn a blind eye or keep

115.
quiet about all of the peculiar shades of skin tone, eye color, and hair texture found among Negroes; Millie Anne knew that most white men were helping themselves to Negra girls every chance they got. And like her mother, (never one to bite her tongue) Millie Anne had no compunction telling her husband what she thought 'he' was up to with Negra girls, decency be dammed. And she certainly did 'know for a fact' he was doing Negras; especially them light skinned ones. Hadn't she heard just about everybody at River Oaks Country Club talking about his goddamned high-yellow Negra bastards living right there in Niggertown.

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Recalling her recent trip to the colored section of town, when she'd gone and found his little Negra bastards for herself; Mrs. Millie Anne Ferguson was convinced that: Niggertown was a filthy little village full of nothing but stinking, lazy, shiftless Negras. She didn't see how Negras could lower themselves to live in those two room shacks that white landlords (like her husband) called houses; and pay two dollars a month for the privilege of doing so. And that was for one of the better shacks; most were fronted by an open ditch, had a front porch that leaned to one side or the other, about to fall onto rotted or rotting steps or someone's head, and there were no windows. Every front yard was nothing but naked dirt filled with little multi-hued, naked or near naked Negra babies playing with mangy old mongrel dogs. The strong scent of frying
chicken, frying pork and fish; boiling cabbage, mixed with the invariable sulfurous stink of outhouses, hung in the humid air, like poison gas.

Scrawny chickens, and rangy pigs trying to scratch a meal out of the naked dirt scattered when she rounded one of the houses for the backyard.

There seemed to be a huge black cast-iron pot, big enough to scald hogs or do the wash, bubbling hotly in every backyard as far as she could see. Which was clear to the end of the road for there were no fences to obstruct her view.

It appeared to her that all the women in Niggertown were congregated in their backyards; they were shelling peas, skinning rabbits and coons, cleaning fish, nursing babies, or some other activity that she couldn't imagine herself ever doing; and they were all laughing—about what?—she had no idea.

The men were squatting in clumps beneath trees, shooting dice or sitting around makeshift tables on tree stumps laughing, drinking moonshine, and playing dominos or cards.

Walking over to a big black woman nearest to her, who held a small baby, Millie Anne asked. "Which one of these... umm" She looked around with distaste, hesitant to say houses. "...houses, does the girl named Maybelle live in?"

"Ma'am is you talkin' 'bout the one what works up at that feed fac-tor-re or the one what works up at River Oaks Country House?" The child looked up at Millie Anne, turned its head toward the black woman's breast and began crying. Pulling

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out one of her huge brown breast and gently teasing it into the baby's mouth, she continued..."they's two Maybelles, which one does you wants, ma'am?"

Removing the perfumed hankie from her nose, Millie Anne said, "The maid, and it is the River Oaks Country Club not house." Looking with revulsion at the exposed breast in the child's mouth, she demanded. "Well! which shack is hers?"

"Ma'am, she probably gon' to work," the black woman willfully dodged the question. Like most Negroes, Miss Fannie Johnson (no one dared call her anything but Miss Fannie) did not trust white folks and said as little as possible to them. "I don' know when she might be comin' home."

"I did not ask you when she was coming home gal!" Millie Anne, angered and uncomfortable that Negra men and children were slyly observing her, spoke harshly and took a threatening step toward the woman. "What is your name? Do not get uppity with me, gal!" Standing over the black woman, her right hand raised as if to slap her; Millie Anne waited for an answer. Her Mama had taught her how to handle Negras.

Taking her time, Miss Fannie stood and laid the baby on a blanket beside her chair, moved a step closer to the white woman and said, "No ma'am, and I don' know where 'bout she lives at."

Millie Anne, shocked that the black woman had gotten to her feet, and closed the distance between them, took a backward step dropping her hand. "I...well, she works for my husband."

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Unknown to Millie Anne, Miss Fannie, a very large, sweet, but fearless woman, was known for whipping white folks; and would have beat the brakes off her if she had struck her. There weren't many men in the Bottom with nerve enough to face Miss Fannie in a fight. "Do you know who I am...my brother 'is' the sheriff of Harris County."

"I knows Joe Bob Simmons," said Miss Fannie. "And he knows me," taking up the baby and sitting back down, she continued, "But I still don't know where that Maybelle you wants lives at."

"Would any of these other Negras know?" Millie Anne asked in an easier tone, "I am thinking of hiring one of her picanin... one of her children." Millie Anne thought it best not to use that derogatory term with this Negra who seemed to dote on her baby.

"Ma'am they's right there, why don' you ask one of them?" Miss Fannie pointed to the men playing dominos beneath the pecan tree.

Millie Anne looked toward the men and called out, "Do any of you boys over there know where Maybelle lives? She is the colored gal who works at River Oaks Country Club."

"She live ova' on Depriest street." Millie Anne couldn't see which one was speaking. "It the house wit a big Chinaberry tree settin' on de' left side de' yard rat 'cross da' ditch."

Losing hope of locating the girl's house because there were no street signs, Millie Anne offered, "If one of you Negras
would run along beside my car and show me where it is...I'll pay you a nickel." Taking two steps toward the men, she stopped when no one came forward and they all looked away from her. Frustated and angry she turned and made her way back to her car. When she rounded the side of the house she heard some say.

"Dat red-hair green-eyes heifer don' know: iffen' you cain' keep up wit de' bull you is got to run wit de' cows, cause Peter Skinny is gettin' a plenty!"

"Ain't dat de' truth!"...and I had a big dog name Dash...I'd rudder be a Nigga din rich white trash!"

"Hello now! Tell de' truth snaggle tooth, jes' make sho' you don' lick on Ruth!" Breathing easier with the white woman gone; they all laughed. Ribald statements directed at each other and white folks was their way of relieving their stress and tension non-violently. It was quite clear to all of the Negroes present that the white woman was trying to find her husband's bastards, bastards 'forced' on some poor Negro woman or girl. Negroes were accustomed to white women, rich and poor, caught up in the social scandal caused by their husbands fathering Negro children. Negroes only felt pity for Negro women snared in a trap that they were powerless to prevent.

The awful scent emanating from her husband brought Mille Anne back to the present, she rang for the butler, who appeared instantly and stood in the doorway awaiting instructions.

"Ernest why don't you bathe," she said. "I'll go call my brother." Starting toward the phone she stopped, "Who was the
Negra boy that 'you say' killed a white man...what will I tell Joe Bob?"

Ernest, stopping mid-way up the stairs couldn't see the butler and yelled, "Nate! Nathaniel Johnson! Get your black ass upstairs and run me a hot bath." Looking down at his wife. "I don't know who the Nigger was or the white man he killed, but it was near Meads Creek just behind that old Nigger, Uncle John's place." Moving aside to allow the butler to pass, he continued. "Jes' tell Joe Bob to come on up the house, I'll tell him myself." He turned and proceeded up the stairs behind his butler. "Nigger, I could of swummed to China by now, get me some decent clothes."

"Yessuh, Mista Ferguson. Will yo' cream-colored suit be alright, suh?" Asked the butler after making sure the bath water was the correct temperature and laying out a warm towel, thick robe and leather slippers.

"Set my whisky and ice up," said Ernest. "Then you can go...what's wrong with yo' grandboy now?"

"Thank ya' suh, I reckon nobody but God and the doc knows what's wrong wit 'em." Answered the old butler. Placing the whisky and ice bucket on the long dressing table, he quietly closed the door and ran for the stairs. He wanted to warn his friend before the sheriff got there.

* * * * * * *

121.
NINETEEN

Nathaniel Johnson, driving as fast as his old car would go, felt that his heart was pounding even faster. The news he just heard, could only spell terrible trouble for his life long friend, John Niko Fofana.

* * * * * *
After his bath and two stiff shots of Jack Daniel's (minus the ice) to steady his hands, his body felt squeaky clean, but his insides writhed with maggots of guilt. Ernest shuffled over to his mirror. Turning slowly, he stared at the birth mark on the back of his upper left bicep, which looked like a pecan pie viewed from overhead. He then turned and closely inspected the pattern of freckles across the bridge of his nose. Suddenly he ran to the commode and vomited; his leg muscles gave way and he slumped to the floor hugging the bowl; crying out, "I knew, goddammit! I knew, and I still couldn't help but do it! Oh Lord God, please forgive me..." His pleas faded into sobs and he tried to regain his feet. Fighting through his self-pity he managed to recall the very moment when he could have made the right decision.

* * * * * *

"Mista Ferguson, please, don't do that," Maybelle pleaded with him five months ago. He knew that she could sense his lust for the budding young girl. "That's one of-

"Shut your goddamned mouth!" He interrupted, and slapped Maybelle. "I just gave her a quarter. What's wrong with that?"

"You...Mista Ferguson, please, Benni Jewel just eleven, and you touching her behind like that." Maybelle pleaded. She was about to say (don't touch my child like that!) but didn't want to upset him to the point that he would hit her again, with her
children looking on. He was just as mean, as spoiled, and demanding as the little white children she attended at the Country Club, they too, would strike her when they couldn't have their way.

Maybelle had just given him her monthly rent, and they were standing inside the front room of the shack; her four children watching from the small, dark, back room where they all slept on wool pallets. Turning to her child she said, "Benni Jewel, take the children up to Malone's and get a nickels worth of brown dogs, ya'll play in the backyard when you get back."

Maybelle knew that she was going to have to do something to protect her daughter from her father, Ernest Ferguson. She saw that he'd started touching Benni Jewel improperly, and now he was giving her money. Maybelle's sexual antenna had been fine-tuned since childhood. Though she hadn't been able to protect herself, she fully intended to protect her daughters from the dangers she'd encountered during adolescence from neighbors, uncles, white men, black men, boys who grabbed and those who just stared; all with one thing in mind: (getting between her thighs as quickly as possible).

Shortly after her mother died, she'd taken her mother's job at River Oaks Country Club's nursery. Ernest Ferguson started in where he had tried and failed while her mother was alive; she was only a year older than Benni Jewel was now.

Eventually he forcibly raped her one afternoon; right there in the nursery closet, while little white children napped.
on the other side of the door. That was fifteen years and four children ago.

"Maybelle," said Ernest, watching Benni Jewel. She had hips almost as full as her mother's and her breast were filling out. She was a very tall girl, much lighter skinned than her mother, with light-green eyes that glowed and sandy red hair and freckle dusted, creamy complexion that gave her a porcelain doll appearance; she sure didn't look much like a Nigger to him. "Maybelle, haven't I been real good to you for years? Been there for you ever since your sainted mother passed...made sure you kept a job and plenty of food for your children." He took her arm and led her to the pallet pushing her down onto it.

"Mista Ernest, my rent paid! What you trying to do?" Maybelle, attempting to keep him from raising her dress; pulled her legs underneath her body and sat on them.

"You want me to just wait till Benni Jewel gets back?" Ernest said, opening his pants. "She look like she could do a better job with this than you been doin' lately." He was fondling his stiffened little cock. "Ain't I the one sees to it that you makes four dollars a week, ain't many Nigger women earn that much doin' a easy job like yours. Most out pickin' a thousand pounds of cotton from dawn to dusk."

"Mista Ferguson, please don't mess with my child like that, please don't do it," begged Maybelle. She looked at him and made two decisions that she'd never spoken aloud. "That's your daughter, too! I don't care if you beat me to death, she still
going to be your child! You seen that mark on the back of her arm, exact same mark as the one on you; her freckles across her nose exactly like yours! All my children yours! You know that! Don't no Negro men come round me for fear of the mighty lawyer, Mr Ernest Ferguson, first first cousin to the governor of Texas! I'd rather die here and now than watch my child go through what I've been forced to live through!" She stood and advanced on him. "One more thing, I'm going to tell my children who their father is!"

"I ain't got no Nigger kin," Ernest zipped his trousers and turned to leave. "You ever...ever in your black life, say that I got Nigger kids...say that to me again and I'll kill you and them bastards of yours, too! I swear to God, I'll do it, Maybelle." He backed out of the shack, turned and ran to his Cord. Starting the big engine, he gunned it and considered driving it through the thin walls of the shack, killing Maybelle right along with her pack of black lies.

Now that she had voiced her truth to him, Maybelle made up her mind to tell her children that very day that Ernest Ferguson was their father. "Mista Ferguson is your daddy," she told them later that evening. "But he's white, so you can't ever tell folks who your daddy is, this stays in the family."

"Mama, can we tell Mista Ferguson?" Asked her ten year old son, Royal Earl. "Maybe he be nicer and don' hit you no more if he knows we his."
Hugging her little brown, freckled faced son, she said quietly. "He already knows it baby. We got to let him come to his own understanding of what blood means."

"Do we 'posed to love him, Mama?" Asked a smiling, six year old Soferia, her arm around her twin sister, Althea; who promptly added. "Jesus say love everybody!"

Without hesitation, Maybelle answered her children, 'yes, he is half of you and I am the other half. You love me, don't you?"

"You know we love you, Mama," said Benni Jewel, "and if you want us to, we gon' love our daddy, too. Come on ya'll, Mama need some rest." She took her brother and sisters outside.

* * * * * * *
Five months later when Ernest Ferguson again came to the little shack, evil intentions within his heart; the prevailing attitude among his Negro children was one of love and uncertainty, laced with fear induced respect.

He could see the children walking up the lane, coming from Easter service. The quality of their clothing may have been poor, but they were all neatly dressed. The boy was wearing what clearly was a homemade little black suit, made of some type of cheap dyed linen, and all three girls wore dresses made from flour-sacking, bleached and sewn in a way that made them look like ruffled white store-bought dresses. Benni Jewel made the dresses, she was exceptionally creative. And made most of their clothes from what material her mother brought home.

None of the children wore shoes, Maybelle hadn't been able to afford four new pairs, but the children didn't seem to be any less cheerful being barefoot. They touched, teased and frolicked like four little puppies playing in the warm April sunshine. Protectively clutching their little straw Easter baskets with several brightly colored eggs inside of each, they fell silent when they came up beside his car.

"Hi Mista Ferguson, Mama ain't here," said Benni Jewel. She motioned for her siblings to continue into the yard. She was in charge and took her duties very seriously.

"I know, she's at the Country Club," said Ernest,

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sliding across the seat and getting out of the passenger door next to Benni Jewel. "I just left there, they having a Easter egg hunt for the children."

Smelling the whiskey on his breath, the girl took a hesitant step toward the yard. "Mista Ferguson, I got to go see 'bout these children, and fix them something to eat. I'll be sure to tell Mama that you came by." The child quickly walked into the yard, and was going up the rotting steps when his voice stopped her.

"Benni Jewel, I want you to take a little ride with me," seeing the uncertainty on her face he added. "I'll have you back before your Mama gets here."

"Mista Ferguson, I can't, Mama told me to stay here after church and watch these here children." Benni Jewel was slowly backing toward the door where her brother and sisters stood watching.

"Gal didn't you here me!" Ernest screamed, and took several steps toward the frightened girl. "Now, you get on back over here and get in this car."

"Yessir," mouthed the girl. Turning to pass her little Easter basket to her brother, the child whispered some quick instructions to him and did as she was ordered.

As she passed Ernest Ferguson, he noticed that she was as tall as he was, nearly taller. "Not in the back, sit up front," he said when she reached for the rear door.
Walking quickly around the car, he entered and drove away. Through the rearview mirror he saw the other children running into the road; they stood huddled together, watching until the car turned onto the highway.

"I'm just goin' to collect some rent," he said, looking at the girl for the first time. "Give me one of them cigars (he pointed to the glove compartment) outta' there." When she reached forward he saw it. There it was! The birthmark...exactly like his and in the same place, a little faceup pecan pie. He quickly averted his eyes and closed his mind and heart to the truth. But not before also noticing that the girl was left-handed, just like he was.

Pulling the compartment open and taking a cigar out, Benni Jewel asked, "You want me to take this shiny paper off for you, Mista Ferguson?" Clearly the girl was starting to relax, and seemed anxious to please him.

"Just pull that little red tab all the way round," he said. Watching the road, he slowed behind a mule drawn wagon, checked for oncoming traffic and passed it. Speeding up, he took the cigar and clamped it between his teeth then rested his right arm along the back of the seat; his fingers inches from the girl's hair.

The warm breeze coming through the open window caused Benni Jewel's waist length hair to blow across his hand. He caressed it between his fingers, marveling at its softness. Approaching 130.
his turn off at Ringold Road, he released her hair. She pulled it behind her back and moved closer to the passenger's door staring out at the beautiful countryside.

"Don't lean against the door like that, you're liable to fall out." Ernest couldn't help but notice how quickly the child complied; she smiled at him and immediately moved several inches from the door. His eyes were drawn to her thighs as her short dress rose slightly with her movements. Realizing that she was looking at him, he said, "give me that bottle out that glove box." When she passed it to him, he placed his cigar in the ashtray and drank nearly the entire pint of hundred proof in one swallow. Cradling the bottle between his legs, he realized that the sight of her upper thighs had given him a hard-on. Glancing again at the child's thighs, he finished the liquor and tossed the empty into the road. Benni Jewel, following his eyes, pushed her dress to her knees and folded her hands across her lap.

A few minutes later they reached the cabin of the Nigger that maintained his private still on Meads Creek. He pulled the car up beside the little cabin beneath an old hickory tree, went to the rear of his car and opened its trunk. "Now where's that Nigger at?" He asked himself, his words beginning to slur. He stumbled toward the closed cabin door, pushed it open and peered inside. Seeing no one, he turned and made his way unsteadily back to the car. "Come on gal, we got to go find old Uncle Moonjack." He fumbled with the door handle until it finally came open.

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Benni Jewel slowly got out, looking at Ernest with a mixture of apprehension and sadness. "Mista Ferguson, I don't know where nobody at." The girl looked around at all of the trees and fields of grass.

"The still down that way," he pushed Benni Jewel toward the trees; "Moonjack probably down there." Ernest was too drunk to see that he had crossed the road and was heading onto John Fofana's property. Walking and pushing Benni Jewel ahead of him, he finally came to a shaded area near the creek. He stopped beside the water and looked up at the sun as if it would tell him which direction led to his still. Shaking his head, he grabbed the girl's arm and headed west, following the creek.

After fifteen minutes of walking, they came to a stand of pine trees that grew right down to the water's edge blocking their pathway. As he was trying to make up his mind about which way to turn, they heard a high-pitched short scream. It came from somewhere within the trees.

Ernest turned and ran unsteadily up the embankment dragging Benni Jewel behind him. When they reached the top of the sandy rise, they heard dogs snarling as if they were fighting. Ernest went down onto his knees and crawled into the thick pines toward the sounds.

Benni Jewel, seeing a road from the rise, ran toward it. When she reached it, she stood in the middle looking in both directions trying to determine what she should do next, she finally decided to wait for Mista Ferguson. Looking around for a 132.
suitable place to sit and rest her feet, Benni Jewel noticed smoke rising into the air through the trees on the other side of the road, and walked toward it. Just as she reached the tree line a very large Negro man came into view.

"Lil Miss, Ma'am, wha' you doin' way out c'here all by yo'self?" Moonjack looked around for her family, wondering how a white girl got there. He was carrying two large pails filled with what looked like water, but smelled like moonshine.

"Mista Ferguson brung me out here," answered Benni Jewel. "He down yonder where some dogs is fighting." She turned and pointed in the direction of the sandy rise,

"Well, ma'am, you sho' does looks lak him," said the man, walking toward the road. "But I ain' knowed he had no chile yo size...ain' knowed he had no chile a'tall."

"My name Benni Jewel Ennis, I ain't his child," said the girl, remembering her mother's instructions. "My Mama Maybelle Ennis, work for him, that's all."

"You's colored?" Moonjack stopped and took a closer look at Benni Jewel. Understanding finally dawning in his eyes when they reached her bare feet. "Umm. I sees it now...well I works fo' 'em too. Folks calls me Moonjack." Sitting the moonshine down he crossed the road and went in search of Mista Ferguson. He couldn't figure out why he'd be on John Fofana's land. Looking back at the pretty colored girl, he shook his head and plowed into the trees following the bare prints left by the child.

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Presently he found the trail left by Mista Ferguson, and in less than a minute was pulling the drunken man up the sandy rise. When he reached the road he hoisted Mista Ferguson onto his left shoulder and walked toward his cabin. The inebriated man mumbling incoherently, and throwing up; Benni Jewel following close behind.

Moonjack, not quite sure just what Mista Ferguson had in mind for the girl, decided to feed her when it was clear that she would be staying the night. He avoided talking after he learned that she was only eleven years old. He put her to bed on the back seat of the Cord when she said she was sleepy.

He did know that he was supposed to deliver two hundred fifty gallons of moonshine. He loaded five empty fifty-gallon wooden kegs onto the back of his truck and filled them with whisky. This done, he went into the cabin and checked on Mista Ferguson. Seeing that he was still passed out, Moonjack got his keys, looked in on the girl and drove off to deliver the whisky to Mista Ferguson's whorehouse in Galveston. This he'd been doing for the past twelve years, and had never been late with his cargo.

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Monday morning dawned lovely. The sun burned softly through
the glass, reflecting an easy blue glare from deep blue skies.
A warm breeze brought the singing of red-winged blackbirds to
Benni Jewel's ears awakening her. For several minutes she remained
curled up on the comfortable back seat, she'd never slept on any-
thing quite so soft and was reluctant to rise. But the harsh
caw-caw-caw of a passing crow forced the child to open her eyes.
Hunger and a very pressing need to pee gave her the nerve to leave
the car and search for Moonjack. "Mista Moonjack!" She walked
toward the cabin door. "Mista Moonjack, I got to use the toilet,
and I want something to eat," she knocked softly on the door and
waited. Finally she walked around behind the cabin looking for an
outhouse and found it located down a short pathway. The girl ran
down and relieved herself and returned to the cabin. Seeing that
the door was still closed, she decided to wait in the car for Mista
Ferguson to get up and take her home.

After sleeping fifteen straight hours, Ernest Ferguson
awakened screaming. He screamed so loudly it awakened the child
who'd fallen asleep again.

Benni Jewel ran into the cabin thinking Mista Ferguson was
hurt. "What's wrong Mista Ferguson?" She asked, kneeling down
beside the man. "Is you hurt?" The child reached out a tentative
hand and caressed his brow.

His hand flew out and locked onto her small wrist. "Them
Niggers-get them Niggers off me!" Eyes focusing on the child,
"where are they?" He asked, his frightened eyes searching her face.

"Where who, Mista Ferguson, it's just me, Benni Jewel...what's the matter with you?" She tried to free her arm from his painful grasp and stand, but he held on tightly, looking around the dirty little cabin.

"Where is Moonjack?" Realizing where he was Ernest Ferguson released the frightened girl and sat up. "Go bring me a bottle of whisky!" He covered his face with both hands, his entire body shaking violently. "Get me some goddamned whisky!" He shouted.

Benni Jewel rose and spun around frantically searching for the bottle he wanted. "I don't see no whisky, Mista Ferguson, where is it?" She moved away from him and began looking on the few shelves and empty table.

He rose and stumbled over to a red wooden trunk sitting behind the door. Throwing the lid up against the wall he reached in, grabbed a gallon jug, ripped the cork out and drank deeply. As the whisky burned its way down his throat, Ferguson stared at Benni Jewel and thought of Maybelle's lies, and hatred filled his eyes. Without warning he charged the girl, threw her onto the filthy pallet ripping away her little Easter dress, and violently raped her.

"Please Mista Ferguson!" The girl screamed and screamed as he violated her innocent body, ripping into her, trying to tear her apart. "Please, please, Mista Ferguson-you-don't-have-to-kill-me-I-didn't-tell-nobody-you-my-daddy..." He finally removed his weight and the child could breath. "...Mama told us not to..."
please...don't kill-" The child went silent. Seeing her blood and feeling it spill down her thighs, her screams filled the cabin anew. "Oooh! Mista Ferguson you done killed me!" She wailed and hugged herself rocking from side to side in great physical pain. "I'm your daughter and you done killed me...even after Mama told us...she told us we got to love you." Whimpered the terrorized girl. She rolled herself into a fetal ball and cried, and cried.

Her little handmade Easter dress of flour-sacking was now ripped to shreds and covered with her blood. It was no more than a rag and failed to cover her body; and he stood watching her immature breasts shudder as she cried. "You ain't dying Nigger, you get up and go down to that creek and wash yourself up!" He turned and walked over to the jug, picked it up and went to his car where he sat peacefully drinking and smoking cigars for the next two hours.

He raped his daughter several more times throughout that Monday because while he was raping her he couldn't 'see' those Niggers killing. Tuesday morning he gave her a dollar, his wife's cape; and dropped her off at the corner of Depriest street, half a mile from the shack in which she lived.

Benni Jewel watched with blank eyes as her biological father drove away, then turned and made her way home filled with molten hatred that would never cool or stop flowing through her broken heart, as long as she lived. Opening her fingers as she walked along she let his dollar bill float away on the April breeze, and dried her tears. Now she knew what it meant to be a black woman.
TWENTY-THREE

After completing her call to Joe Bob, who said it would be a couple of hours before he'd get there. Millie Anne crept up the stairway and peeked into the master-bathroom. She discovered her husband, naked, sprawled on the floor, vomiting and weeping. The overpowering sweat-whisky stink of him which clung to the walls and filled the steamy room was sickening. With a look of contempt and disgust, she pulled the door shut and went up the back stairway to her servant's quarters located on the third floor; where Ernest never ventured.

Besides the fact that Millie Anne did not want Negro women readily available to Ernest, she did not want them distracting her Negro men either. Millie Anne 'needed' all of her Negroes she employed, totally devoted to her and only 'her'. And they were, she ruled her domain with a steel hand concealed within a velvet glove, and a firm young body caressed by silk panties.

Millie Anne employed only Negro men, (fifteen in all) to maintain the huge Ferguson mansion, grounds included, and to relieve her frequent tension, stress, and disappointment of being married to such a weak, coward of a man. And right now, she needed to relieve her tension before she could face her brother. She fully intended to tell him about Ernest's Negra children and make him do something about the uncomfortable position it forced upon her socially. But right now she needed to be filled up; revitalization was her next order of business.

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As she walked down the long hallway, Millie Anne looked briefly at the beautiful paintings she'd collected over the years, wishing as she always did, that the man who'd painted them was still her lover. She hid his painting up here in plain sight because it gave her the feeling of being held by him when she looked at his work.

Entering the huge sitting room with its connecting bedroom, Millie Anne pulled a cord three times which rang a little bell located inside of the mechanic's office in her four car garage. Then she reached under her dress, slid her panties off, and walked toward the huge bed to await her laudanum of choice.

Impatient with the wait, she slipped her middle finger into the warm folds of her vagina, and squeezed her short thick thighs around her hand. After several minutes of pleasuring herself she heard the sitting room door open and close.

"What took you so long?" Millie Anne asked, reclining and opening her pink thighs. "Don't bother getting undressed, just get it out and inside of me, I'm awfully upset."

"Silly Millie, I was in the hot-house...your African violets-" James Broadax stopped as soon as Millie Anne opened her mouth. He knew it was out of the question to say anything more once she decided she had something to say. He climbed onto the bed between her legs and remained on his knees, his erection bobbing up and down. She grasped it and gently pulled him toward her inner thighs. Her carrot-red pubic hair still fascinated him.

Millie Anne brushed aside his explanation. "Now I know you've been overseas and in the Army and all...but I told you to talk like

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a Texas Negra, you talk like that around Ernest and he'll send you packing. Now just hush...the only African Violet I'm interested in right now is right here!" She caressed his erection and rubbed it up and down between her inner lips, wetting the tip. Then pushing him back up..."let me just taste it." Taking only the head into her mouth, Millie Anne tongued him for several minutes, watching his eyes as she did so, "Mmmm, taste like real chocolate. Now let me guide this little soldier into his foxhole." Pulling James up between her thighs, she laid back without releasing his cock and shifted her body into position. She kissed him all over his face as she impaled herself with his full length. Frequent practice made them perfect together. They were immediately in synch. He took control, letting her know it by driving into her forcefully, exactly as she desired. She was losing herself, letting go of the tension, reaching for the razor's edge that always cut her off from reality.

Clutching James, she stared into his brown eyes while he fucked her with long quick strokes, her legs wrapped around his, her fingers digging into his black muscles. She obsessed about black men like this. Fantasized that he would be the one to make her feel like Daudi Fofana had. The thought of Daudi caused Millie Anne to moan and began to climax. To sustain this altered-state and prolong her pleasure she turned her head and closed her eyes trying to see only Daudi's beautiful black face and body. She was mad with desire, she tore at his shirt, begged to be kissed and thrust her hips in a frenzy as she exploded inside. "Arrrg! Daudi I Love you!"
Millie Anne screamed as she nearly rose off of the bed in her crazed orgasm. Opening her eyes and seeing James instead of Daudi, she said, "Get off of me and get back to work!"

"I'ma' cum frist, ma'am," James pumped faster and squeezed his orgasm into her. Smiling down at her he added, "Iffen'yo' don' mind, ma'am."

"You get off of me and get back downstairs!" Said Millie Anne, "and no more of that uppity Negra talking. You here me boy?"

"Daudi don' talk lak no Nigga," said James closing his trpurers. "I knows him real good, Silly Millie."

"You just hush and get on out of here." Millie Anne got off of the bed and fixed her dress. "You are not half the man Daudi is, so do not try to talk like he does. I wish I was a Negra woman, I'd marry him...now you get!" Millie Anne appreciated James' devotion and playfulness; and she liked the fact that he had the nerve to call her Silly Millie, a childhood nick-name that only her brother and Daudi dared to use. James had great possibilities, but he was no Daudi, especially in bed, and he lacked intelligence.

Decending the stairs Millie Anne felt the coolness of James's sperm sliding down the insides of her thighs and realized she'd forgotten to put her panties back on. She decided to leave it, and pretend that it was Daudi's sperm. Rubbing her thighs together spreading the wetness, she shuddered with pleasure at the thought of talking to her brother and husband while Negra sperm
Dribbled out of her vagina and dried on her inner thighs.

Millie Anne, in a much better mood, singing 'IT HAD TO BE YOU' off key, walked into her husband as he exited his bedroom.

"What you so damn cheery about?" He asked. "Joe Bob down there?"

"For Heaven's sake, Ernest!" Exclaimed Millie Anne, "you're drunk again. What 'is' wrong with you?" She proceeded around him and went into the parlor, Ernest stumbling after her.

"I just asked you if your brother-"

"NO! He's not here yet, Ernest! I do not want to talk to you in your present condition." Sitting on the wide low windowsill swinging one leg back and forth, Millie Anne stared at her husband. "Why don't you just go on downstairs and wait?"

"Did you make one of your Niggers..." Ernest walked over and sat down. "...Where's my car...did you make one of your Niggers clean it up?"

"Whose blood is that on your car seat?" Millie Anne stood and moved to another windowsill. "And where is my Bombazine cape, did you give it to one of those Negra bitches?"

"Where's my goddamned car!", Ernest yelled, going over to the ornamental bar and fumbling for a bottle.

"Well, it ain't on the goddamned verandah where you parked it, now is it!?" Millie Anne stood facing him. "I searched that car...where'd that flour-sacking with blood on it come from? It looks like somebody stitched it together." Looking out of the window, Millie Anne turned and left her husband holding his
bottle of whisky; and wondering if he would ever be able to clean his mind of the last two days.

Ernest stumbled to the window and saw his brother-in-law coming up the long tree-lined driveway.

* * * * * * *
Hearing a car stop out front, Zakia made a final entry in her diary; one of five she was writing to her unborn child telling this extention of herself all of her pains and fears. Unknown to her, she was already pregnant from the incident with Jessie Lee Maddox; but she was indulging her passion and need to plan and share, so she told this unknown child all about the pain of being raped and by whom; and the fact that her loving brother and his hounds had killed the monster.

Praying with all of her heart that it was her father and mother returning with her brother; she pulled the curtains aside looking out to see who had arrived this late in the evening.

Her father and mother had left Sunday night to drive Seneca and his dogs to New Orleans. The old folks (as Seneca called them) had decided after the incident to send him to live with their Uncle Leroy, Sarah Jean's brother who was a preacher in Louisiana. It was only three hundred and fifty miles, but it seemed a world away. She missed the hounds too, everything had changed so quickly. But at least there was Kandi's homecoming to look forward to next month.

Seeing that it was Mr. Johnson, her grandfather's old domino partner, she started to return to her diaries, but a woman's voice caused her to look again. It sounded vaguely familiar. A very light-skinned woman and four children were getting out of his car. Zakia knew one of the children, and raised the window to speak. Before she called out, Mr. Johnson
started talking.
"...unt Essie. Maybelle, she probably here at her sista' house," Nate rounded the car blocking her attempt to leave. "Why don' you and yo' babies come on in wit me.? These here is Essie's folks, they's nice." Zakia wondered if he'd said your aunt Essie.

"I appreciate the ride, Mr Johnson," said Maybelle, reaching for her oldest daughter's hand and starting off. "But I can't ask strangers to get involved with white folks."

"Hey, Benni Jewel!" They all looked up toward the second story window. Zakia leaned out, "wait, I'll be right down!" Zaciah hadn't seem Benni Jewel for over two years and was anxious to be around a friend her own age. She also wanted to know more about their possible kin-ship with her Aunt Essie. This was new! That meant they were related to her in some way or another. Stopping to put her diary with the others, Zakia ran down the front stairway nearly colliding with her Grand D, who was walking out of the front parlor door.

"Girl, slow down, what you doing out of bed?" He smiled at her, and placed an arm around her shoulders. Pleased to see her beautiful eyes shining with anticipation instead of the emptiness of the past two days. "Somebody bringing you a book...that's the only thing I've ever seen you run toward." John Fofana opened the front door, his arm still around his granddaughter. "Hey here, Nate...you looking for a game on a Tuesday night?"

"Naw, need to jawjeck wit you a bit," Nate gently pushed

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Maybelle and her children onto the porch ahead of him. "This here is Maybelle, Maybelle, this Mr. John Niko Fofana... John, she lookin' fo' her Aunt Essie. I had to stop by my daughter's and pick up my rod; I run into Maybelle and her lil' ones walkin' all the way out here. Lucky I come up Little York."

John Fofana, seeing more in Nate's dark eyes, than he heard in his voice, turned to Maybelle and hugged her, "pleased to see you again. I know you, but you were an arm baby the last time I saw you...welcome home."

With teary eyes, "I'm pleased to finally meet you," said Maybelle. "My Mama told me about ya'll, and said I should visit if I ever had a problem...I'm sorry for not coming to visit before now."

"That's quite all right sugar," John Fofana knelt down face to face with the children. "Now who's this handsome young fellow and these cute little look alikes?"

"That's Royal Earl, he sh-" Maybelle's twins interrupted.

"He shy I ain't, my name Soferia, this Althea." Before Soferia finished, Althea added. "Ennis, that's our last name. We twins!" They both hugged the old man.

"I know all about twins," said John Fofana, smiling at the little girls. "It's nice meeting two more. This is my granddau- ghter, Zakia." John Fofana rose addressing Maybelle, "Your Aunt Essie back there in the kitchen with her sister and my mother." Turning to Zakia. "Take Maybelle and her children to the kitchen."

Zakia, having waited patiently until introductions were made 146.
and she was acknowledged, reached around Maybelle and took Benni Jewel's hand pulling her into the house. "Miss Maybelle, please make yourself at home, just go straight down this hallway, it's the last door on the right." Zakia was heading up the stairs, dragging Benni Jewel behind her. "Come on cousin! I guess we're cousins? I thought all of my relatives in Texas were old folks... that's what my brother cal-"

"Kia!" John Fofana interrupted her monologue. Seeing Maybelle and her other children hesitate, "Kia, I could have 'told' Maybelle how to get there." The old man smiled. "You'll have plenty of time to spend with Benni Jewel."

"Right this way," said Zakia, with a flourish of her hand. "Before my Grand D has a fit." She gave the old man an affectionate pat on his arm and led the way to the kitchen.

"Nate, what you doing with that mind-changer in your pocket?" John Fofana pushed the parlor door closed, and remained on the porch. "Here, sit down." John Fofana offered Nate his rocker.

Waving his hand no, Nate leaned against the porch beam. "That peckerwood came home this afternoon, drunk, dirty and talkin' 'bout colored folks killin'...some white man." Nate proceeded to tell John Fofana everything he knew. When he'd finished, John Fofana remained silent; his mind on Essie and Big Red. He'd heard little of Nate's tale.

John Fofana, watching lightning bugs flash their way across his yard to the tune of cricket sonnets, turned to his friend after hearing him out. "He must have been at Moonjack's cabin.
That's why he said it was near my place. That's clear on the other
end of Ringold road, the west end of my property."

"Where's yo' jug, man," said Nate, looking beside the
rocker where John Fofana usually kept it. "You sho' is takin'
this easy."

"Didn't you say he don't know who the boy was?" John Fofana
opened the parlor door and produced a jug. "Kia! Bring me two
cups." He called. "You still haven't told me what you planning
to do with that mind-changer." John Fofana pulled the cork and
sniffed the brew. "Man, Moonjack really put the mash on this one!"

"Look John, you tellin' me you don' know nothin' 'bout no
white man gettin' kilt-"

"Do me a favor, Nate," John Fofana interrupted. "Thank
you dear..." Miss Cleo gave each of the men a disapproving look
as she sat their cups down.

Howdy do, Nate," Miss Cleo spoke as she gave her husband
a napkin. "Kia upstairs wit Benni Jewel...I needs to talk wit
you when yo' comp'ny gon'."

"Essie will be fine..." He hesitated until his wife left,
"...like I was about to say, are you thinking that I'm planning
to shoot it out with white folks?"

"I'm sorry. Listen, we grew up together, if you got trouble,
I got trouble, that's why I got this here gun." Nate looked
around in search of something to hang his feelings on.

"Well, take it back to Fannie, I don't need extra guns." John Fofana drank from his cup. "If you're not going to drink

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my hooch, pour it back in this jug." Even though John Fofana trusted his friend, he was not going to take him into his confidence. His family was far too important to risk it, even with Nate.

"What you gon' do when Joe Bob comes round asking-"

"Didn't I just tell you that I don't know anything." John Fofana refilled his cup. "Joe Bob will get the same answer. I appreciate you coming out, and your willingness to stand by my side, but there's nothing...nothing, nothing at all. If there was, me and my family could handle it."

Well, suppose Ernest come out here and point the finger at your grandboy?" Nate, finally tasting his shine, grimaced and shook it off. "Whew! Man, you ain't lyin', Moonjack gon' kill somebody wit this gas!"

"Seneca been in New Orleans for over a week." John Fofana lied. "He's going to school there." To cover his lie, John Fofana quickly switched topics. "Maybelle is the spitting image of her Mama, life truly runs in circles."

"She look and sound like Essie to me...let me get her stuff, and I'ma' head on home 'fore Joe Bob gets here." Nate passed his empty cup to John and went out to his car. "You know he come running when Millie Anne holler."

"You sure you can see well enough to drive...what things...Maybelle's things?" John Fofana followed his friend to the car.

"Everything she owns," said Nate, passing John Fofana the smaller of two bags. "Something 'bout her girls, she didn't make it clear. But her and them children was walking along Little York,
carrying all of this stuff, trying to get to Essie's.

John Fofana took the other bag, shook Nate's hand and started toward the house, "you ought to find another place to work, Nate. That Ferguson fellow is bad news; you do know about his hooch and whorehouses...lay down with dogs and scratch your own fleas soon enough. Give my best to your daughter." Carrying Maybelle's belongings into his home; John Fofana recalled why he'd carried her few belongings out of Essie's house twenty six years ago.

* * * * * *

Jim Ennis, known as Big Red, worked on the railroad with Phillip Reed, Essie's husband, and had witnessed his lynching in Georgia. Big Red quit the railroad afterward and brought the news of Phillip's murder to Essie and his younger sisters in East Texas, whom Phillip had been supporting. Big Red had met, and fell in love with and married Vivian Reed, Phillip's baby sister. For a few years the young couple did fairly well truck farming, but when crops failed them in 1899, their debts pushed them under and they had to sell at a great loss. Vivian and her husband's debt forced them to leave East Texas. They decided to move to Houston, and wrote Essie requesting her assistance.

Essie relished the opportunity of having Phillip's baby sister live with her. She was terribly lonely and considered having Vivian with her as a way of alleviating the loneliness of living without Phillip; whom she had loved more than her very life. For Thirteen years Essie had lived within a dream of 150.
what should have been. Constantly rejecting advances from potential suitors, refusing to even speak of marrying again. Her female nature dead for all intents and purposes. Until Big Red, in all of his male sensuality invaded her private world; and brought a rebirth of female need.

Not only did she open her home to her sister-in-law, she eventually opened her bed to her brother-in-law and destroyed everyone involved, when she became pregnant and gave birth. Maybelle was ten months old when Essie put Vivian out in a fit of self-righteous rage. Thinking that Big Red would remain with her; she was devastated when he took the baby and left with Vivian. "Every fool knows that a dog will lick a cat if it holds still long enough, and Essie stayed still just long enough for Big Red to satisfy his lust and return to his heart's desire." Thought John Fofana, as he walked into the kitchen behind Essie's secret daughter.

* * * * * *
Millie Anne stood aside as Joe Bob entered the foyer. She thought her older brother was the second best looking man in the whole world after Daudi Fofana. At forty-one he still had the broad shoulders that she had ridden with such joy as a child. She watched his muscles bunch as he unconsciously clenched his fist entering the house. He was preoccupied with something, and it wasn't her. Unusual too, was the fact that he was dishevelled, wearing faded Levi's, his old cowboy hat, shirt sleeves rolled back to his elbows, and a day's growth of whiskers. Millie Anne was affected by the power of his craggy, square-jawed face. Her throat suddenly went dry wondering if he could smell the sexual scent wafting up her thighs as she did. She stared at the pistol holstered on his right side thinking: "He'd kill me if he knew I loved his old Negra play-mate's son, had fucked him, and lots of other Negras too."

"Joe Bob, what's on your mind?" Asked Millie Anne. "You just walked right on by me and didn't even hug me." She spoke in her little girl's voice which usually turned him to butter. A dozen years older than her, he was more like a surrogate father than her brother. Millie Anne had always sought his affection if not his approval.

He appraised her with fatigued, deep-set blue eyes. "Where's Ernest, Millie Anne?" He spoke sharper than she was accustomed to. "What's so all fired important that ya'll can't tell me over the damn phone?"

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PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

Taking two steps back, placing her hand over her breasts, Millie Anne whined, "I'm your Silly Millie and you cursing and hollering at me like that." Turning and walking toward a panel of golden push buttons mounted in the hallway, she said over her shoulder. "Silly Millie will just have to feed you, butter you up a bit...just go se-

"I got a hillbilly deputy and a patrol car missing since Easter Sunday!" Interrupted her brother, "I didn't come way out here to eat." Walking behind her Joe Bob noticed again, how much his sister was built like a Nigger woman. Big rump, small waist and thick legs. At twenty-nine she wasn't his little red-haired pesky sister, she was a voluptuous woman, the type he felt uncomfortable touching. "Silly Millie, will you simmer down...I didn't hug you cause I'm all dirty," he pleaded with her.

"Well, you don't have to curse and holler at me," she stopped, still facing away from him. "Why do you smell of tobacco and liquor...and your clothes are dirty?" Millie Anne had never known her brother to drink while he was on duty. His jaw was always full of Battle Ax, but he didn't smoke; and she smelled smoke, cigarette smoke. "And look at your boots! You're tracking mud just everywhere!"

Joe Bob started for the front door, "I wiped 'em, but I'll go do it again."

"Oh, never mind," she slipped her hand under his arm and guided him down the hallway into the library. "Just sit down 153."
and I'll go get Ernest. You sure you don't want a drink or something to eat? I can have Nate...well, wait a minute. Nate left early. I'll just get Melvin—he's my cook— to bring you something. How would you like roast beef and som—"

"Millie Anne, please," said Joe Bob. "Please, just get your husband down here. I got other stuff needs attending to."

"See, I knew you were upset with me," she held the door open, looking at her brother, pouting. You're hollering at me again. I need to tell you something, but with you hollering and such, I haven't had a chance to."

Joe Bob sank down into the rich leather couch, and sighed with relief as it conformed to his body. "Millie Anne, push one of them buttons, have your Nigger bring whatever you want, and some lemonade for me...then you come over here and tell me what's bothering you." Joe Bob knew that his baby sister wouldn't be satisfied or shut up until she had his full attention. Ever since their Pa died, when she was nine, he'd raised her, catered to her every whim, and made life too easy; even after nine years of marriage she still refused to grow up. What she needed was a couple of children. "Why ain't you and Ernest got no children yet? Is something wrong with one of ya'll?"

"Well, if he'd stay in the saddle more than a min—" Millie Anne threw her hands up, shocked at the harshness of his interruption.

"Millie Anne Simmons!" Joe Bob shot to his feet and closed the space between them. "Don't you dare talk like that...what is 154.
wrong with you? His eyes remained locked on hers in anger, "There's your Nigger."

"It's Millie Anne Ferguson!" Looking behind her at the rotund black man. "Melvin, I have told you not to sneak up on me like that! I'll fire you the very next time you creep up behind me."

"Ma'am. I'm sorry... yo' bell kept on ranging in the kitchen... Nate ain't here-" Melvin backed up when it appeared she might slap him.

"Just fix up some roast beef sandwiches!" Millie Anne touched her finger to a dimpled cheek as a new idea took shape. "Mmm... better yet, set the dining table. What did you cook for this evening's meal?"

"Millie Anne, I told you th-"

"But Joe Bob, we haven't eaten yet," Millie Anne whined. "And it's been just ages since you last had dinner with us... please, pretty please." She went over and placed her hands on either side of his face and brushed his chin with her lips.

"Melvin, I asked you a question!" She took a seat beside her brother and crossed her legs, taking one of his large hands into hers.

The cook, not sure whether to enter or speak from the doorway decided to shout from where he stood. "Ma'am, I fixed them steaks, baked potatoes, corn-on-the-cob, and lemon mer-

"Stop yelling so, and go set the table... the one in the small dining-room, not the ballr-" Millie Anne looked up, Melvin had left the doorway. "I don't know why Ernest lets Nate go home

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before he serves dinner."

Looking for an excuse to take his hand from his sister's lap, Joe Bob stood up and patted his pockets for his chew. Taking a plug of Battle Ax from his shirt pocket and biting off a sizable chunk, he said, "I sure do wish I had a nephew or two."

"That's what I was trying to tell you, and you started hollering again." Millie Anne went over to the liquor cabinet and poured a glass of sherry.

"You having a baby?" Joe Bob looked around for the spittoon, "You oughta' quit drinking if you're pregnant."

"Next to the desk," Millie Anne pointed to the silver bucket. "I'm not having a baby, Ernest got too many already."

Making the spittoon ring from eight feet away, her brother spun around and stared. "He got what!?"

"He's got Negra children!" Millie Anne sipped her sherry. "I saw them with my own two eyes right there in Niggertown! They're his!"

Her brother swallowed his tobacco juice and gaped. She ran over and began pounding on his back. "Ah...ah...what, how did you get to Niggertown?"

"Two months ago, the first time I went out there, this Negra woman...a real big Negra woman, black as night," she moved around in front of him and peered up at his reddened face. "Well, she just about hit me! Got real uppity and all, said she knew you too. She wouldn't tell me which shack was Maybelle's."

"Maybelle? Big Red's gal that lives on Deprie-" Joe Bob
threw his chew away. "Lives on Depriest Street?"

"Well I remembered Lula May-she's the cook-Lula May brings her to work-"

"Brings who where? Asked her brother, confusion clearly written on his face. "You ain't got no colored gals cookin' here or even workin' here."

"The Country Club...Maybelle. Joe Bob, you are not listening to a thing I'm saying." Millie Anne refilled her glass. "Maybelle Ennis, that's who-Lula May showed me where she lives and I went and looked at those four little bastards. Four little redheaded Negra bastards. They all...every one of them I tell you...look just like Mr Ernest Ferguson, first first cousin of Ma Ferguson, first woman governor of Texas." Millie Anne downed the entire contents of her glass and poured another.

"Jesus H Christ! Well, what did Ernest...I'm hungry now...and I can't think with my gut rumbling at me!" Joe Bob walked toward the door. "Come on, let's find Ernest...see what he got to say. Is this what ya'll called me for?"

"I told you he can't stay in the saddle more than a minute with me, that's why we don't have any babies." Millie Anne, on the edge of being drunk, turned and threw her sherry glass against the wall and stumbled after her brother, crying. "Now he's talkin' about dead white men, and Negras cuttin' each other to pieces. And he gave my pretty French cape away to some Negra bitch, and there's blood on some flour-sacking somebody had sewn together and ...and I am so sick I could just die."

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Millie Anne stumbled up to her brother locking her arms around his middle. She looked up at him and laid her head on his chest, dry, racking sobs bursting forth.

"Silly Millie, what are you talkin' about?" Joe Bob, stiff with discomfort, stroked his sister's head with one hand, as one would touch a snake. Unsure of what to do with the other hand, he shoved it into his pocket. Crazed laughter broke the intimate moment.

Earnest, leaning against the wall at the far end of the long hallway began clapping. "Janet Gaynor couldn't have given a better performance! Did you see her in 'WINGS', brother-in-law?"

"Are you drunk too?" Asked Joe Bob, untangling himself from Millie Anne, "You got Nigger Kids, is that what ya'll called me way out here for?"

"Nigger killin' a white man," stammered Earnest. "That's all I want you to 'vestigate...what's this 'bout picaninnies...seems to me your baby sister drunk on innuendoes."

"Well if you do boy, you done married into the wrong family!" Joe Bob pushed his sister toward her husband, trying to remember where the small dining room was. "Let's get to the table and eat. What Niggers killed what white man...and where 'bouts?" After walking aimlessly through several hallways he turned to the Fergusons, "Where is ya'll's goddamned dining room?"

* * * * * *
TWENTY-SIX

When the little group, led by Zakia entered the brightness of the kitchen; pandemonium struck like a flash of lightning, just as old man John Fofana knew it would. The instant Zakia stepped inside and turned, she did a triple take from Maybelle, to Miss Cleo, to her Aunt Essie and back again. Miss Cleo, staring at Maybelle, sprang out of her chair and looked at her sister who had slipped out of her seat onto her knees, crying. Zakia's mouth formed an 'O' the question stuck in her throat. Benni Jewel's eyes remained on the two women across the kitchen, one standing in shock, the other kneeling, sobbing quietly. The little twins, jumping up and down and pointing from their mother to Miss Cleo and Miss Essie; shouted: "Mama, Mama!, them ladies look just like you!"

"But they old!" Exclaimed Royal Earl, his shyness forgotten for the moment.

Mama Nandie, the only person unaffected by the confusion of seeing a younger version of the twins, slowly rose and made her way over to a stunned Maybelle and took her in her arms. "I see Oya has brought you back home. Come and sit among your family." Mama Nandie led the shaken young woman to the chair beside Miss Essie, "sit here child, beside your mother."

Zakia, looking at Benni Jewel and her brother and sisters finally spoke, "girl, I knew your Mama looked and sounded like them, but I was so distracted with seeing you...it just did not register." She took Benni Jewel's hand, and spoke softly to
Sofeira, Althea and Royal Earl. "Let's all go up to my room and let the old folks talk this out, they're pretty smart."

The minute the children entered Zakia's room, the twins got to talking. "Kia what is a Oya?" Asked Sofeira, "that real old lady told my Mama that Oya brought us here-

"Mr. Johnson rode us here!" Declared Althea, looking around daring anyone to prove otherwise.

"Oya is an African Goddess," answered Zakia. "She rules the rivers, families are rivers of life, they flow continuously and Oya guides them when they lose their way. That 'real old lady' is my great-grandmother, she's from Africa and still believes that spirits from her culture rule her life." The children all stared at Zakia and drew closer, wanting to hear more about Africa.

Zakia became their teacher in the ways of life, and gave her heart to them for the few months of life she had remaining.

Because life's roaring river would soon cast her earthly body onto its rocky shores as it flowed on toward eternity. Deeming Zakia's beautiful spirit's contribution to the river of life complete; Oya would sweep her into the peaceful bosom of her African ancestors.

Hearing Mr Johnson's car drive off, Zakia whispered a silent 'Thank you'; and returned her full attention to her new cousins spread around her bed. It wasn't Seneca, but it was her family just the same; a small part of her river, her life's blood.

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PART FIVE: AFRICAN BROTHERS
TWENTY-SEVEN

Seneca had been living in Louisiana for over four years, much of which was blurred in his mind. Tragedy after tragedy seemed to chase him, as well as the rest of America. Factories and mills were closed, bank presidents were being sent to prison for stealing, and some were killing themselves.

In every newspaper he read, there were accounts of economic downfall, especially in the South. Everybody expecting something to turn around. Some white people couldn't wait for things to turn around and decided to kill themselves instead of black folks.

They somehow found the nerve to leap from tall buildings, cut their wrists or blow their brains out because they'd lost all of their money. Those who did not kill themselves, killed their families instead and went off to some sanitarium or other to count flies in lieu of dollars. Seneca did not understand much of it, but he found himself affected by it through the death of Zakia and his Uncle Leroy.

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The house that Seneca first lived in with his Uncle Leroy from 1925 til 1927 changed overnight. It was owned by a white man who decided to partition it off into small rooms, both up and downstairs. Where they'd had the entire house at four dollars per month, they now had two small rooms, a community kitchen and bath, at six dollars a month. The man called them apartments,
and rented mostly to young Negro women, school teachers, nurses and domestics because nobody else could afford to live there.

Seneca had began to smoke like his fahter, and had an active interest in girls. The young single women in the building had lots of male visitors. Even with his lack of experience, Seneca knew that all of the laughter, music and late-night chatter meant more than just innocent fun.

One evening after school he was in the communal kitchen when the young lady in the room directly across the hallway peeped out, then ran down the hall to the communal bathroom, naked. Two minutes later a young white man left her room and went out the street door. Seneca's mind went back to his baby making period with Edna Faye Stuckey, and he decided there must be some fun to it after all. This girl was a beauty and if she was doing 'it' then maybe just maybe; he thought.

The next evening the pretty young Negro woman blocked Seneca's path down the hall. "Hello handsome," she said. "If you forget what you saw last night, and don't tell Mr. Lewis, I'll give you some money."

"You tellin' me that you're a whore?" asked Seneca. "What, I look like a pimp...look girl, I don't want your money, I got a job on the docks."

"Not a whore, Seneca," she said. "Just a woman choosing and trying to get by." She looked up at him and he avoided her eyes, "you go ahead and tell, little boy, but you'll understand when you're a man."

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"I been a man since I was twelve, and you are a loose woman that can't be trusted, and I ain't never been a snitch! Just stay away from me as long as you got white boys running in and out of your room!"

The boy didn't know it, but he was having his first brush with puppy love and was upset at being hurt for the first time. He had been watching the young woman and dreaming of being with her as a friend or something. And seeing that she was interested in pleasing men, especially white men got under his skin.

Seneca had gotten a job after school in the second year in New Orleans because it seemed that his parents had stopped sending monthly cash and his Uncle was always complaining that money was short. He usually got home around nine o'clock each evening, and went out back to feed Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and Prince Alfred. One evening he called and his dogs didn't appear. He went into the apartment to tell his Uncle Leroy that they were missing. When he knocked on the door where his Uncle and Aunt slept, there was no answer. Seneca pushed the door open and looked inside. He noticed immediately that his shotgun was not hanging on the wall where it was supposed to be. In panic he ran to the kitchen where he found his Uncle Leroy. "Uncle Leroy, somebody stole my gun and dogs!" Exclaimed Seneca. "The dogs always come, but-"

Leroy staggered over to the boy. "I don' sold dat gun and dem dogs."

"Who in the Hell gave you permission to sell what's mine!?"
Seneca advanced on his Uncle. "Who did you sell them to? I want them and my gun back!"

"Look boy, I'm yo' Uncle," Leroy braced himself on the kitchen counter. "We needs money fo' yo' keep, you eat enough fo' three peoples, you big as a house too."

The boy looked at his drunk of an Uncle for a long stretch. "Out of respect for my Mama, I'm not going to whip your ass, but don't ever in your life try me again." Seneca turned and walked out of the kitchen. He knew that he would soon be leaving, otherwise he'd kill again.

He began to keep all of his pay from work, saving for the time when he would leave. He also began to think of the young woman upstairs and quickly rejected that idea. Women couldn't be trusted to keep their word. If it wasn't for the few letters he received from Benni Jewel, he'd be lost. When Sarah Jean and his father had dropped him and his dogs off...was that really two years ago? his mother had said, "you're a man now, you're on your own, I'll be sending money every month to help until you finish school and find a job." Well, he had a job, and school wasn't teaching him anything except how to work for someone else. It was almost impossible for Seneca to understand the events of 1927.

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The latter part of 1929 was worst than 1927. The United States was in the death grip of economic credit. For the last decade America had asserted its economic dominance, the panacea 164.
for the decade of the 1920's was credit. Banks had a policy of lending, generously, against future earnings to increase expansion and production. This policy created the first generation of installment-plan buyers; many of which treated luxuries as necessities, and purchased them on the promise to pay later. The Wall Street panic of 1929 burst the magic bubble, and the world's economy collapsed, pandemonium reigned.

The few years he had been with his Uncle and Aunt had been the worst years of his young life. Uncle Leroy was no preacher; he was a weak selfish man who constantly drank and lived off of whatever his wife, Kate brought home. His mother had proven to be just another lying woman who hadn't kept her word of sending money every month to help him get by. But he was determined not to be some worthless bum that sat around waiting for others to feed him. His Grand D had told him how that would sour ones stomach in the long run.

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Seneca was sickened by the sights he saw in the streets of New Orleans. Men, women, and children poking through garbage cans, trying to salvage discarded rags, bundles of newspapers to sleep under, or burn for warmth; and searching for food.

Any scrap of food found, they would immediately eat for fear it would be taken by someone stronger. Some were bold, others stealthy, as though ashamed to be seen in the act. Others were too broken and beaten down by the hard-times to care about pride.
No false pride; just dog eat dog, just like Grand D said it was. On one humid, overcast morning he pushed his way through sad hordes of black people along Canal Street and began walking toward the docks to his job. He stopped to allow a horse drawn dray to pass and noticed a nearly naked little girl of four or five, foraging through a line of trash cans. She was covered with dirt and sores. In his mind she seemed to personify the condition of suffering and starvation brought on by the depression. Without thought he quickly reached into his pocket and pulled out the catfish sandwich his Aunt Kate had made for his lunch and passed it to the destitute child. In silent disbelief the child accepted the gift, turned and ran a few feet away. The sad, tiny brown face looked fearfully around and gingerly unwrapped the sandwich, her haunted brown eyes filled with tears as she began to eat. Seneca, moved to tears himself, stood and watched as the starving little girl, after eating only half of the meal, carefully rewrapped the remainder and held it in one tiny hand continued her search through the refuse cans with the other.

His eyes still filled with tears, he turned and began to think about the smokehouse, the pond filled with fish, the woods and its abundance that he'd grown up believing were endless. Now he wondered if the world would ever make sense again.

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The smokehouse; where he began and ended his final walk to the pond with the kindest old African man on earth.

The smokehouse; his Grand D had found him there beneath 166.
the Chinaberry tree with his dogs, after getting rid of Jessie Lee Maddox, his sister's rapist.

The light was beginning to fade, Easter Sunday was becoming Easter Night, and his world was completely altered, forever. The women were inside taking care of his sister and he was waiting for his father to take him away from the place where his heart had lived for as long as he could remember. "Come on, son, let's you and me take a walk down to the pond," said Grand D. "Get away from the crowd." Somehow, Seneca knew this was to be a final parting with the man he loved above all others.

The pond, shimmering with the last light of day seemed to be preparing for a rainstorm or a restless sleep. Bullfrogs were croaking deep-voiced messages of intent, crickets warning June bugs of passing mockingbirds singing other bird's songs to disguise their purpose. In the distance a lone crow squawked its complaint, and overhead two hawks soaring free of the chaos below, surveyed the darkening landscape for an unsuspecting meal. Nature's sonata, which usually made the boy's heart sing, went unheard. Seneca was too deeply focused on his grandfather's words to notice even the beauty of what would be his last sunset on the homestead. "I think you know..." the old man hesitated, his eyes clouded over, "...that I'll be dead long before you can come back home." John Fofana placed his hand on Seneca's shoulders. "You're a man now so there's no need for pretense or long tales anymore."

"But Grand D," Seneca knew he was not man enough to accept 167.
this reality. "How do you know? Only family was there. This will all blow over real soon and I'll come back home." There was pain and hope reflected in his eyes.

The pain and hopefulness in the boy's soft voice almost brought old man John to tears. He knew far better than Seneca, that white folks would never stop until they had murdered some African, right or wrong, for Jessie Lee Maddox's death. And he would not see his young grandson put into the ground before he'd had an opportunity to live a full life. Right or wrong, he planned to see Seneca live. His pain of having to see Seneca leave knew no bounds, he would much rather face death, but he'd deal with his loneliness easier knowing that the boy was alive and safe. "Seneca Listen," he said. "Life has been good to me, it doesn't owe me a thing." The old man walked to the old Fig tree and took a seat in the grass at its base. Taking strength from the Spirit of his father, who was laid to rest beneath the tree's soil so many years before; he continued, "On the other hand, I don't owe life anything either. I've done my best, no better or worst than most men. Maybe I was born at the wrong time, wrong color, wrong place, but maybe not; I have no complaints either way; even if I did live my life mostly by other folk's philosophy."

"What is your philosophy, Grand D?" The boy sat down beside his grandfather. "Does that mean personal rules that you live by?"

"More or less... but how I've lived my life isn't important," said the old man as he turned and faced his grandson. "Don't go
through your life trying to live by someone else's beliefs. Create your own and remain true to them. Don't let life push you around, grab it by the head and beat the shit out of it until it goes your way. Force it to work for you, because when you die, it's forever. You promise me right now, that you won't just sit and let life happen to you on someone else's terms."

"I promise Grand D, but-" The stern expression on the old man's face silenced the boy.

"Your father is like me. He won't always stand up and fight what he doesn't care for, like your mother does. He's too goddamned passive. Don't ever agree with anyone just to get along, African or white, stand up and fight for yourself. This garbage about turn the other cheek that African people learned from the Bible; somebody tries to hit you, you duck and hit first with all you've got, they'll want to talk then. Gentle warriors, clean warriors, never win anything other than a rope around their neck or hung up on a cross bleeding and begging. You stomp anything long enough, and it will understand your way of seeing things."

"Grand D, you have never..." Seneca stood, "...you're always so kind and gentle, and understanding. You never even raise your voice."

Leaning his head back against the tree, the old man looked up at his grandson, "That's what I've been saying, son. I've never had the heart to argue or stand up for what I really wanted. I have never really worked because Mama Nandie, Papa and Caimile made life so easy for me. Did you know that we own half of 169.
Goldman's restaurant-bar, half of Malone's butcher shop, both of these houses, all of this land, and quite a few of the houses in the Bottom. "My father and mother did the work. They bled, sweated and bargained with the devil. I can't look back on one single thing and say 'I did that', except, maybe the light of you.

There's enough of your hard-headed mother in you to beat down any roadblock that gets in your path. You've got to be mean, Seneca, mean and hard like your Mama, Sarah Jean.

Your mother, not your father, is the person that deals with the family's businesses and finances with both Goldman and Malone. And let me tell you, they don't even try to cheat Sarah Jean. So you've got to be mean like her and guard what's yours no matter what.

Especially now that your safe corner of the world has been turned inside out by that hillbilly mongrel. That ought to teach you that this isn't a world for nice people. Big mean dogs always eat little humble dogs, then crushes their bones to suck out the marrow."

After a long silence as they walked back up to the house, the boy turned to his grandfather and asked, "Did you really mean everything you just said?" Seneca was thinking of the five virtues his grandfather had made him promise to live by, especially compassion. "What about the five--"

"The five virtues fit better with money and power," his grandfather stopped and faced him. "The five virtues are your African birthright; you'll always act on them when the need arises. When you were born, I was there. You were black and 170."
beautiful, and you smiled...you did not cry, you are Africa. I said to myself then, 'here is the boy that has the strength to carry my African genes into the future regardless of what the white world may do to hinder him, he'll make it'. You better be that boy or my spirit will never know peace. And one last thing, promise me that you will visit Africa. When you do, bring back a handful of Her soil and pour it on my grave to keep me warm. I'll always be with you—that's my promise to you."

With that, the old man wrapped his arms around his beloved grandson and hugged him for long minutes then they entered the house arm in arm.

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"Was that really over four years ago?" Seneca asked himself as he looked back toward the pitiful little girl. He could hear his Grand D's voice as clear as day: "She would have been better off if her family had been left in Africa where God put them."

Suddenly, there was a mournful, distressed cry, which caused Seneca to glance back at the child again. What he saw made him forget that he was already late for his job, and would probably be replaced by the time he arrived.

Two men were standing over the girl, one was unwrapping her sandwich, which he'd evidently taken by force from the sobbing child who was reaching out both hands for her food. The other man was begging for a share of whatever it turned out to be. Neither man seemed concerned with the possibility that someone may come to
the child's aid; as they did not run like thieves usually did in this part of town.

Seneca, prepared to simply rescue the distraught child, ignored the men and took her up into his arms. As he turned to walk away with her, one said, "dat lil'black bitch gon' die, look de sores on her. wha' her needs wit food?"

Working on the docks for the past couple of years had developed Seneca'a muscles, and he'd grown into his full size of six feet ten, and weighed two hundred fifty five pounds; he was a real bruser and fought all of the time with other longshoremen. He had developed a love of physical fighting. He put the child down on the curbside out of harm's way. He walked up to the man and without hesitation decked him with one punch. "I was taught that a bitch got four legs and a tail." He moved into the street and stood over the fallen man, "now, get your ass up and fight somebody your size: I'ma' teach you the difference between a little girl and a bitch!"

"Ain' no scratch line been laid...'sides dat, I don' fights ova' no bitch, goin' hit me a'gin." The man just laid there bleeding from his mouth and nose, looking up at Seneca.

"This little black girl-child is not a bitch, she's an African girl...you and me are Africans, she's our sister of the blood..." Rather than anger, Seneca now felt compassion for the fool.

Both men and a small crowd that had gathered around them hoping to see some blood spilled, stared at Seneca like he was a living ghost gone crazy. One very dark-skinned man shouted, "you is a damn Nigga' boy, jes'lak da rest o' us, and a dumb one at dat!"
Callin' yo' self a Af'can, oughta be 'shame o' yo' self." He pushed through the crowd of gawkers and assisted the thief to his feet.

Seneca was amazed to see so many dark faces staring as if he were the culprit guilty of taking food from a starving, helpless little girl. Suddenly, he knew that he was her 'Africa' in this land of lost people, and that her well-being came before a street brawl with an ignorant man that thought of himself as a Nigger. Seneca picked the child up, pushed through the jeering crowd, and headed in the direction of Bourbon Street.

As he walked, Seneca wondered what could possibly make a group of adult people-African people-hate themselves so deeply that they used any excuse to rip each other apart, referred to little black girls as bitches, and denied their heritage.

"Where do you live, sugar?" He asked the little girl. Turning her in his arms until she faced him, he smiled at her. "I'll take you home, I'm your African brother."

She pointed over his shoulder in the direction from which they'd come. Her sorrowful eyes glued to his, "lives behind dem cans."

"Where's your Mama?" Seneca started back toward the trash cans, trying to follow where she was pointing.

"de rollers' done tuck my daddy somewheres, I ain' got no mammy," she looked around as if expecting to see her missing father suddenly appear. "I don' belong to nobody now."

"What is your name, sugar?" Seneca slowed and looked
around. There were no houses, only struggling businesses and empty buildings.

"Dat one," she pointed to a large brown refuse can. "I lives rat back dere."

Seneca peered between the trash cans and the empty building and saw a little tin cup sitting on a filthy pallet of newspapers against the wall. "I'm not leaving you here." He turned and resumed walking. "My Aunt Kate will know what to do. What do you want to eat?"

"My name Vera," the child placed her little arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder. "You give me yo' food already, where you gon' git mo', ain' nobody got no food."

Somewhere within his heart, Seneca knew that he was meant to come to little Vera's aid and that she was some kind of replacement for the sister he lost in Zakia. They were connected. From the first moment he saw her, in a way that he didn't quite understand, they were connected and he refused to deny or question that connection; they needed each other.

He was about to ask Vera again, what she wanted to eat, when he realized that she had fallen asleep. Unknown to Seneca, the child had seen love, safety and compassion in his eyes. Vera was at peace for the first time in the long months since the police had taken her father. As she slept, her mind kept replaying his voice calling her 'sugar', just like her father did.

Vera was not four or five as Seneca thought, she was seven 174.
and quite intelligent. She'd managed to live alone for five months among the denizens of New Orleans' mean streets, and stay one step ahead of cutthroats, perverts, and starving dogs. Her only war wounds were the sores all over her tiny body; which were nothing more than insect bites that had been scratched, infected, and gone untreated; nothing a little oil of Aloe wouldn't put right. She was a little survivor and it would take more than mosquito bites or a heartless city to kill her will to live.

Little Vera hungered for love, food and protection. Seneca hungered for his family, his dogs, and the peacefulness of home. Home, where he could not go. Zakia had told him in her first letter of four years ago, that Ernest Ferguson believed he could identify the killer if he saw him again. He rode through the Bottom, Fairbanks, and Jersey Village, Spring Branch, and all of the Wards looking at all the young Negro men he could find. On several occasions he'd accused a few, and they'd been held in County jail until they proved their whereabouts on Easter Sunday. Although Joe Bob Simmons was convinced that Ernest Ferguson hadn't seen anyone killed, because no white man was missing except his deputy, whose car had been found miles from Houston; yet he searched and followed leads supplied by Ernest Ferguson to pacify his sister. The county Sheriff had searched all around their property where Ernest Ferguson claimed the murder had taken place, and found nothing. Joe Bob questioned Moonjack, who said that he'd found Mista Ferguson drunk and hadn't seen anyone else except a pretty girl who said that Mista Ferguson had brought her there.

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The Sheriff wasn't able to locate the girl, and Ernest Ferguson swore that there was no girl with him when he went to collect his rent from Moonjack. The Sheriff arrested and beat Moonjack for lying on a white man. The judge convicted Moonjack of supplying false information during an investigation and sentenced him to three years hard labor in TDC. Jassie Lee Maddox was declared dead by drowning. But the old folks still weren't willing to take the chance of Ernest Ferguson pointing his finger at Seneca. They knew that even without a body, he could make a charge of murder against Seneca stick, if not by legal means, then he'd have the KKK kill Seneca for no other reason than to clear his own mind and convince his brother-in-law.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

When Seneca entered Claborne Street carrying little Vera, the large crowd standing in the street seemed like an impromptu New Orleans funeral. He pushed his way through and saw his Uncle Leroy laying in a pool of blood. His throat still leaked where it had been cut from ear to ear. Scanning the faces he saw his Aunt Kate standing close to the street. She did not seem upset, in fact, Kate was smiling and talking with several of her underdressed female friends from the apartment. Seneca glanced at his Uncle and stepped around the crowd to speak with his Aunt Kate.

"Dat's jes' what dat Nigga' had comin'," said one of the bystanders. "Round 'ere foolin' wit folks money...I knowed he wont worth shit, talkin' 'bout he a preacha."

"Seneca, what you doin' here, ain't you workin' no mo'?" Asked Kate, as she moved away from her girls. "Whose's chile you holdin'?"

"Aunt Kate-" Seneca began, looking toward his Uncle's body.

"You can stop that 'Aunt Kate' shit!" She declared. "I'ma' ho', yo Uncle got me to stay wit him so he could git money from his sista'. My name Ethel any goddamn way!"

Seneca could only stare. "What...Wh-"

"Yo' Mama called and told him she want him and his wife to let you stay wit dem. Chile, dat woman, Kate he married to, do left six years now. But he, Leroy, knowed yo' Mama gots lots of money dat's why he give me half to say we is married." She pointed to the other women that had gathered around her. "We's all
hos', yo' punkass Uncle Leroy call hisself a preacha, pimp. Ha! I guess I don' pimped him to da bus stop dis time." Kate began walking away, Yo' stuff rat dere by da steps, and I ain' payin' dat rent. I don' know why he don' give you yo' other mail when you moved out, but it all rat ova dere...a bunch of lettas' yo'sorry Uncle don' give you."

Seneca shifted Vera to one arm, picked up his bundle of clothes and the stack of letters from Zakia, Grand D, Benni Jewel, and others; he would read them later. For a moment he thought of going inside for his books but recalled that Uncle Leroy had sold them three years ago along with his dogs and shotgun. Then Seneca noticed that his Uncle Leroy was laying dead in the new suit Grand D had sent him for his last birthday. With nothing more to hold him there, the boy walked through the crowd of brown, animated faces and never looked back. His main concern now, was Vera. Thinking it over Seneca came to the conclusion that he needed a whore. Not for baby making, but to give Vera a bath and put one of his shirts on her. He headed back down Claborne for the house he now knew was full of whores. Once there, he went to the room across from the kitchen. When Sarita, the pretty girl he'd had a crush on answered his knock, Seneca walked in and said, "Give Vera a bath and put my blue shirt on her."

"Who baby this is?" Asked the woman. "And where you been living, I ain't seen you in a long time. Whatever, it gon'cost you a dollar, jes like everybody pays."

"Here's your dollar," Seneca reached into his pocket and
separated a dollar. "And rub her all over with that oil of Aloe you got over there." The boy pointed to the little group of bottles on her small bedside table.

"You wants me to do her hair too?" The woman was leading the child out of the room, heading for the communal bathroom. Vera pulled away from her and ran back to Seneca and hugged him around his knees.

"You gon' leave me?" Vera looked toward the woman, and moved around behind him. "I wanna stay wit you."

"Sugar, I'm going to be sitting right outside of the door reading these letters, while you get cleaned up." Seneca picked her up and carried her to the bathroom door. "I'll be right here, you go with her and then we'll go eat." Vera reluctantly entered the bathroom, trusting his eyes. He could hear the girl and woman laughing and talking. Sarita was trying to find out what the relationship was between Seneca and the child. He smiled when little Vera told Sarita that he was her African brother.

"Are you sure you don't want my 'special', little boy?" Asked Sarita as she led a clean, oiled, smiling little Vera out to Seneca. "You can get it for two bits." She smiled and passed Vera over to him.

Seneca was looking at the cute little girl that had emerged from beneath all of the dirt. His shirt looked like a choir robe draped on the tiny child. It fell from her shoulders

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and covered her little pinkish-brown toes. Her doe eyes, heart
shaped face and dimpled cheeks gave the impression of perpetual
happiness. Seneca took the twine from his things and tied it
around her waist. Then he scooped his little smiling African
Rose up into his arms and left. "We got to get some real food
into you and some shoes on your feet, sugar."

He went into a small cafe near the docks to feed Vera. The
large black woman that owned the greasy spoon joint, Big Mama
Tiny, smiled at the pair and came over to serve them. "Boy,
where you been, don't you works ova dere on dem ships no mo'?"
Asked Big Mama Tiny once she recognized Seneca, who was a regular
customer.

"Yes ma'am, at least I did until this morning, had some
trouble, may be replaced by now...got to see to my little sister."
Seneca ordered greens, cornbread, and fried chicken and got
Vera eating. Once he'd paid the thirty-five cents for the meal,
he went through his things and reread some of the old letters
that he'd never seem. He started with one from his Grand D.

November 17th 1927

Beloved Grandson:

It was so good to hear from you at last! Boy, you don't
write me nearly enough. Anyway, the family is doing just fine.
Why ain't you ever said anything about Zakia, was her death
too much for you to deal with? You got to know that we are
only able to deal with it because of this beautiful child she

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PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

birthed with the last of her life. When you see Ruby, you'll see Kia again. Ruby is the Queen around here, Benni Jewel is kept super busy trying to keep this little girl out of everything on the property. Benni Jewel is the only one fast enough to keep pace with this child. Like I said, we all doing real good, I'm moving a little bit slower, but this Royal Earl keeps me on the go just about as much as you did; telling him stories, hunting and fishing; haven't caught him in the woodshed, yet. I got him two blue tick pups, female and male; to keep the peace he had to let the little twins name them. Alpha and Omega are the names the girls came up with. The bitch is Alpha, the little twins say that's because a woman had to be here first or there wouldn't be people. Them little girls are really something else, they always got some new ideas, and don't mind telling you what they think. They all live with Essie, except Benni Jewel, she lives in Kia's old room. She was with your sister straight through everything. She has those diaries Kia left for Ruby; she told Benni Jewel to make sure to give them to you and for you to give them to Ruby when she gets grown. We went fishing last week, me and Royal Earl, he caught that big old catfish that's been stealing bait for years, thing must have weighed sixty pounds, nearly big as a well fed second year shoot. Your Aunt Essie cooked it, some bass and perch, and we put together a big fish fry the other night, down at the pond like we used to do. We had a good time, best since you been gone.

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We opened a general store next door to the restaurant. Fellow that owned the building went under, sold the whole building for $300.00 cash; wouldn't sell to Sarah Jean, so she had Goldman do the deal four months ago. That's why your mother increased the money for you to $100.00 a month. You should be doing much better with more money coming your way. Speaking of Goldman; I've been meaning to tell you: if you have any more trouble with your Uncle Leroy; I'm talking about the selling of your dogs and gun...the stuff you told me about; I didn't tell your mother like you asked me not to, I'm respecting your wishes, but don't do anything to your Uncle. Now about Goldman; what I was going to say is this: Jacob Goldman isn't white, and his name isn't Goldman. Let me explain. His daddy, I don't know if you remember old man Jolie Lafourche, used to stop and sit with Mama Nandie, he had one leg; well that was Goldman's daddy. Jolie Lafourche is the man that came from Louisiana with Mama Nandie and my Poppa; he was run out of Louisiana for trying to pass for white. Would have died if it hadn't been for Mama Nandie and Caimile.

He went to New Orleans to see his sister, Desire who was passing for white and living in the French Quarter with a rich white man. When Jolie got to her house, the overseer from the Boyett plantation in Boutte, Louisiana where him and his sister were born was there visiting the other man.

See, Jolie and Desire were what they called yard-children back then, their Mama a macaroon, octoroon or some such foolishness,
was Claude Boyett's house-slave. He was their daddy, but didn't claim them. Well, when Jolie got there the man, Mr. Winston, that lived with Desire greeted him as a friend and brother-in-law and let him in through the front door. When the overseer saw him, he called him a Nigger and asked why Winston was letting a Nigger into his house and calling him kin? He said "this fancy Nigger is Jolie Blon and he is a Nigger that came off Old Claude Boyett's plantation." I won't go into the whole story, but they ran him out of New Orleans. Mama Nandie found him in the swamp, a crocodile had ripped off his left leg; she saved his life and brought him to Texas with us.

His sister faiired better because of Winston. He died, but she still lives at 237 Gentilly Road in a big old mansion. He left her his estate so she is well off. Go see Desire Blon if you ever have problems so serious that you don't know what else to do. Tell her your grandfather, Niko sends his greetings and love. Don't worry, she knows us all very well, she had to come out here to straighten out her crooked bother when he tried to cheat Mama and Poppa out of this land. That fool, Ernest Ferguson still riding with the Klan looking for someone to blame for something he can't prove ever happened. After hearing Maybelle's side of things, I think he's looking for Benni Jewel. He raped her, you know.

Your sister, Kandi still hasn't said when she coming home. Ever since she disappointed your parents by getting married and moving to California before telling them, things have been real 183.
PREACHERS PROSTITUTE$ & FRIED CHICKEN

strained between them. I'm hoping she will bring my great-great granddaughter, Ester, to see me before she turns two next year. Her husband, Lenard Boldc is one of them travelling preachers, so they may get through Texas chasing souls for God before too long.

One more thing, I understand your need to make your own money, but loading ships isn't a career to have, you get back in school don't let anything get in front of filling that head up with book knowledge.

I do have one bit of good news, you may be able to come home real soon. Your Aunt Essie and Maybelle went up to the prison to see Big Red Ennis. That's Maybelle's daddy, Benni Jewel's grandfather. Well, he supposed to get out early in 1928, and he told Maybelle that he can't wait to meet Ernest Ferguson. What he did to Maybelle and Benni Jewel is the reason he wants to meet Ernest Ferguson. Big Red don't play. Well, I'm closing my letter to you, but never my heart.

With Love
Grand D

Ps: Your woodshed girlfriend, Edna Faye Stuckey, has a fat little boy, she named that child Justice Seneca Stuckey! Now if that don't beat the bushes for fowl...you made a lasting impression of that girl.

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Seneca smiled at his grandfather's long, rambling letter and refolded it. He then read several of the other old letters but found little that his Grand D had not touched on. He counted his money; $94.65 wouldn't get him very far now that he had Vera to care for, his Uncle Leroy dead, the apartment filled with whores, and $18.00 back rent due. Well, it was his Uncle's bill, and he wasn't going to worry about anything or anybody except little Vera. That meant going to see this Desire Blon and seeing what she could do to get a fellow on his feet.

One thing he felt sorry for was putting Sarah Jean in the liers lane, especially after Grand D said she had increased the monthly payments. Maybe his mother was the exception to the rule when it came to women, and keeping things square.

"Big Mama Tiny, do you know where Gentilly Road is?" Asked Seneca, as he came to the conclusion that any new adventure couldn't possibly be any worst than the past four years had been.

"Chile, dat's 'cross da river, nothin' but rich white folks ova' dere." Big Mama Tiny put her hands on her ample hips and shook her head, "Don' go ova dere lest you'ze workin' fo' one."

Seneca just smiled, checked on Vera who was still eating her food; so he pulled out the letter from 1926 when his Grand D first told him about Ms Desire.

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185.
AFRICAN AMERICANS: PART SIX

TWENTY-NINE

Desire Blon's mansion on Gentilly Road overlooking the lake was hidden from view by a thick stone wall. A niche in this wall proved to be an iron gate which was opened by a maid in a crisp white working apron; an elderly black woman with very beautiful hands and eyes. She looked at Seneca and Vera with slight distaste as she asked. "Boy, what you lookin' for... ain't no work here?"

"Hello, ma'am, my name is Seneca Fofana, my grandfather told me to stop in and see Ms Desire Blon. Does she live here?" Seneca explained as he set Vera down and straightened his bundle.

"Well, I know your grandfather...come on in the yard." She said, turning to lead the way through the palm-studded front garden, which was encumbered by enough marble statuary to be a cemetery. Seneca looked at the enormous tile-roofed yellow house, with its lacy wrought-iron balconies and atria, facing the lake like a formidable prow. He looked for a front porch and saw none. They moved directly into a dim broad atrium, with a staircase at the far end. A golden bowl of carnations rested on a marble pedestal beneath a huge giltframed mirror to the right, and just past a door which probably led to a music room—he glimpsed a piano—there was a life-sized angel holding an enormous spray of some blue flowers which Seneca had never seen before.

Seneca's eyes swept the length of the deep blue thick-
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carpeted hallway. At the far end a double entrance of marble steps led to a platform which flowed into what seemed to be a hundred yards of stairway. There were no balusters, just enormous handrails bolted against mahogany paneling. Only on the next floor did the balusters begin, forming a circular bow which extended two-thirds the depth of the mansion.

The walls of the second floor were mahogany as well and seemed to have a thousand doors.

Over the stairwell hung a silver candelabra so huge that it covered nearly the width of the hall, and contained pointed light bulbs shaped like stars.

As they approached the staircase, Vera said. "Where is this lady?" The maid ignored the child and led the way into a large sitting room through one of the many doors.

"Ya'll just have a seat right there." said the maid pointing to what appeared to be a church pew beneath a set of huge windows. "I'll get madame Blon."

"I want some water." Vera squirmed and got down from Seneca's lap.

Holding her shoulders between his hands, Seneca soothed her. "In a minute, sugar. You want to get up here and lay down?"

Both children heard the distant click of heels approaching on the marble floor as Desire Blon entered the sitting room. Her eyes swept Seneca as he rose to greet her. "You seem to have become a man, and a very good-looking one, too, I might add."
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Just like your dear old grandfather, Niko." Ms Desire Blon didn't look old to Seneca and he wondered why she didn't look African at all; but she looked like an elderly white woman, sort of pretty, with no wrinkles. "Ma'am, can I have some water for this child?" Seneca couldn't think of anything else but Vera's need for some water. "Oh, and thank you for letting us stop by, my Grand D told me to visit with you if I have any problems."

"Your grandfather wrote me four years ago telling me to expect you. Then he wrote me a year or so later saying the same thing. I've known your family since before your father was born. I was sweet on your Grandpa...back in 1870. When I first met him. Of course Cléo got her hooks in him before I...Oh, but you don't want to hear ancient history. Who is this child? He didn't say you had a little girl...Hattie May! stop creeping behind the door and go bring a pitcher of cool water." Ms Blon said over her shoulder toward the open door. Seneca was wondering how long she was going to talk before getting some water for the child. Seneca could hear the maid slip away down the stairs. This is Vera," Seneca said, turning the child toward Ms Blon. "She's my little sister," he continued. "I found her this morning on my way to work."

"Yes, well, you are both welcome in my home...she's a little beauty," Desire Blon gave the child a quick glance and turned to leave. "I'll just go and have a room made ready for you both. Will the child be sleeping with you?" Desire Blon stopped
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in the doorway. "Are you hungry, Seneca? I want you to meet my granddaughter. She swept out of the room and down the stairs.

"Where has Mama hid this Mr Seneca Fofana?" Phoebe asked Hattie as they climbed the stairs. "She just told me to go up and introduce myself." She continued as the maid led the way into the parlor.

"Well, madame told me to put him and the child in the large guest room in her wing."

"Oh...?" Phoebe's eyebrows lifted. She pursed her small mouth in a soundless whistle. "Well, show Mr Fofana to his room, I can still find mine myself, I haven't been gone that long. Unaware that their voices were carried into the parlor before they arrived, they entered and looked at Seneca and Vera with amusement on their faces.

Seneca looked into purple eyes and a small, rich happy, red mouth. She was a large girl, tall, with mature woman's body shape and storm tossed black hair. Her skin was that gardenia white only English women seemed to achieve. "Hi." Seneca stuck out his hand. "Just call me Seneca, not Mr."

"Pleased to finally meet you, Seneca; I've heard so much about your family I feel I've known you all of my life."

She crossed the room and stood in front of the window. "You certainly aren't the boy grandmother led me to believe. You're a giant of a man, and who is this little divine angel in blue?"

"I'm Vera, his African sister." Shouted Vera with a smile bright enough to light up the parlor.

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"Pleased to meet you, too, Ms Vera, and I hope we'll become friends." Said Phoebe turning to the maid she added, "go down and prepare them some food, Hattie Boyett."

She took his arm with her right and reached for Vera with her left as they entered the hallway and turned to descend the stairway.

The walls were papered a very light sky-blue with a design he liked, something like peach trees with gay robins perched on the branches, but neither the birds nor the blossoms resembled anything he'd ever seen. At the bottom of the stairs they turned left entering a room that had flowers everywhere, yellow roses in flat silver bowls, something he knew as delphinium from Mama Nandie's garden, and enough gladioli to start a flower store. It was the first time Seneca had ever seen what he always thought of as a parlor with more than one sofa in it, and this one had four. Two identical small sofas faced each other on either side of the fireplace. They had curved backs and tiny legs and looked a little too frail to accommodate more than one small person. The other two sofas were bigger than a single bed and it struck him as highly peculiar that they should be pearl colored since both faced the fireplace. There was a large Cherrywood table in front of the sofas, cluttered with a mess of silver pots, sugar pots, cream jugs, bonbon dishes, and other implements he couldn't name.

Two deep bay windows that you could walk right into had yards and yards of yellow satin drapery edged with some sort of
funny fringe. It seemed like a waste of a lot of material for a window. Next to the windowpane was something he had never seen before. There were two sets of curtains, like sissy-looking nightgowns, kind of blue lace, evidently for daytime, because they could be covered up at night by pulling across enough blue velvet drapes to make a sail for a big boat. Each bay had a curved window, and placed in front were matching tables made of some gold stuff with inlaid flecks of other colors, mostly blues. Little velvet chairs with deep fringe all the way to the floor were flung aimlessly around, but it was the four sofas and the enormous Rosewood piano which commanded his attention, "What kind of room is this?" He asked Phoebe. Stopping at its center.

"This is just a sitting room; the piano is to entertain guest." Phoebe moved through, extending her hands to her awe-struck guest.

Seneca had his back to the door and was studying the vast circular mirror with the eagle on top, running his fingers over the most enormous piano he had ever seen, leaning over to sniff at a bouquet of gladioli in a large vase that rested on a strip of yellow satin flung over the gleaming surface of the piano, when a cool, slightly accented voice said: "Hello there, you're enjoying, aren't you?" Desire Blon was standing in the doorway.

Seneca whirled as if he had been caught stealing. "She-Phoebe is giving us a tour...I have never seen-"

"Come, the child seems tired and hungry."
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Seneca took Vera's hand fell in behind Phoebe and Ms Desire Blon. Phoebe reached and took his arm; and as they entered the dining room he felt ten feet tall.

He expected the dining room to be as large as the parlor, but was surprised to find it relatively small. There must have been more than one small dining room in such a large home. From the high turquoise white-linteled ceiling another huge chandelier hung directly over a large mahogany table, and Seneca thought it too dangerous to sit under, if it came loose from its moorings you were done in.

The table was already laid for five and there was such an array of silver that he was certain he would never find out which fork to use on what, and he had no idea at all what the different sized glasses and goblets would contain.

Phoebe handed her grandmother into her chair, and Ms Desire Blon motioned Seneca into a seat on her right and Vera on her left. Phoebe went round to a place across from her grandmother and Hattie May entered and seated herself next to Phoebe; explaining the fifth place setting.

"Seneca, may I introduce my sister, Hattie May Boyette; she acts as our maid because she wants to. She was a maid in our father's house for over thirty years. Hattie, say hello to Seneca Fofana and Vera."

"I already met him when he rang the gate bell." Hattie said, unfolding her napkin. "And I know he Niko's grandboy."

A white man came in, the butler, removed the yellow gold—
flecked plates, and placed the heavy copper gold-stranded napkins to one side. He served a cream soup, from a silver tureen. Seneca, panicky, looked quickly to see which spoon Ms Desire used and dipped the same spoon into his soup. He was expecting some odd delicacy like Calamari soup from the Orient, but was delighted with what he tasted.

"Why," he said "it's mushroom soup!"

"Is that surprising?" Phoebe asked, smiling.

"In a way," Seneca mumbled. "Except, I was surprised because it's what we had all the time at my Uncle's house, except... when I was a kid, except..." he stopped, embarrassed.

"Didn't expect to find it here? We're a seaport town, true, but we're all alike when it comes to food. The main course is fried chicken."

"I can smell that!" Declared Seneca. "One of my favorites."

They finished the remainder of the meal in silence. Ms Desire Bion rang the bell and the butler arrived to clear away their plates, replacing them with a serving of peach cobbler which smelled delicious.

"Tell me," Ms Desire Bion said a little later, as the butler removed the peach cobbler. "What do you plan on doing since you can't go home?"

"What have you been doing, Seneca?" Asked Phoebe.

"Whoa, ladies. I don't know that I can't go home. Big Red Ennis got out of prison, he's Benni Jewel's grandfather... it's a long story; but he may have gotten rid of my problem. Since 193.
my sister, Zakia, died giving birth to her little girl, Ruby, I have got to go home some way, plus Benni Jewel says my grand D died last year. So I've got to go see about the old folks. My Uncle hid all of my mail of the past three years. Once I read the rest of them I'll be better able to answer all of your questions."

Ms Desire Blon reached for the cigarette box and offered it to Seneca, then to her granddaughter.

Seneca dived for the lighter and made an effort to light his hostesses cigarettes without sweeping the eggshell China onto the hardwood floor.

"Tell me something about what you'd like to do; what you want." Phoebe inquired.

"I'd like to be able to leave little Vera here while I go check on my family—then I want to go to sea." Seneca declared, looking, not at Phoebe, but at Ms Desire Blon.

"Is that all you want, Seneca?" Asked Ms Desire Blon as she reached for her coffee.

"Everything, I want everything!" Seneca said, suddenly, without thinking. "Everything! First I want enough money and power so nobody can ever make me have to leave a place again. I want to travel all over this world, too!"

Ms Desire Blon looked at him without amusement and gently said, "I think you will."

Fatigue had conquered little Vera who was stretched out snoring on the large couch in front of a fireplace. Phoebe 194.
rose and picked the sleeping child up and turned to Seneca, "Come, I'll show you to your room Big Mama has put you, in her wing." She walked slowly and Seneca reached over taking little Vera.

"Lead the way, beautiful one." He said.

"Are you flirting with me, Mr Houston?" Phoebe eyed him over her shoulder. "I'm thirty-four years old Mr Houston, far too old for you."

"I'm sorry," Seneca said. "I didn't mean..."

"It's all right. I'm not involved and I know you've got brains. But you're only about seventeen or eighteen judging from your skin, still a boy."

The bedroom was vast. It was obviously a woman's room. Seneca whistled. "Now, I wonder why Ms Blon put me in here?" He asked, half aloud. He looked about him keenly.

An enormous canopied bed dominated the room, a careful exhibit of casual elegance. The walls were of a foreign looking paper with very narrow satin stripes of pink and white. At the windows the undercurtains billowed in pale pink silk which shed a pink-halo quality over the room. The draperies and cornice were made of a floral print in the same scheme and were finished with wide yellow silk fringe. The rug was vast, a light pink carpet that felt fluffy like a bunny under-foot.

Seneca had a long look at the bed. The canopy seemed to be very old. This bothered him for sometime until Phoebe told him later that it was hand-crocheted by his great-grandmother,
Mama Nandie.

Seneca made the connection and understood why Ms Blon had put him in this bedroom.

Across from the bed there was a clothes press with two mirrored doors surrounded by intricately carved Mahogany, that would have impressed his father. A polished Mahogany chest with a marble top stood across one wall over which was a portrait of an unsmiling female ancestor with grandmother Cleo's skin tone. Next to the bed stood a tiny stool like the one Seneca had made for Zakia to get into her bed. A commode on the other side of the bed held a brass lamp topped with an opaque glass bowl and seemed set to provide light for the room when the two pairs of gilt sconces on opposing walls were off. The bedside table contained a miniature painting of Ms Blon done on ivory, when she was much younger. Seneca was thinking again, how impossibly beautiful she was when Phoebe said, "That was done by your great-great-grandfather."

"I can tell that you're related to her, you've got that same quality of beauty." Seneca picked the painting up for a closer look.

"You've already got me interested, Seneca." Phoebe smiled and moved toward the doorway.

There was a fireplace of black marble that seemed only decorative since there were no fire tools. Phoebe said, "look through there, Seneca."

He laid little Vera on the bed and stepped to the oak door.
that Phoebe indicated, and opened it. Inside was an enormous bath. It was done in green, red and black marble, with racks of initialed towels and a tub the size of a hog boiling tank. "Hot damn!" he said softly. "Now that's what I call a tub. I'll bet Grand D would blow a gasket if he could see me now. One day, I'll have a beautiful home like this too." He turned around to speak to Phoebe, but she had left.

He went and placed little Vera under the covers. Then he went and soaped himself and lay in the tub for an hour or so, and then he went over to the black marble washstand, still dripping, and inspected his face closely.

He wanted to make sure he was the same Seneca who just this morning saw his Uncle laid out dead in the middle of the street, and learned that his Aunt Kate was really a prostitute named "Ethel any goddamn way!" The same Seneca who received a bundle of letters over three years old, telling him he was an Uncle, and that his precious sister had died in childbirth in nineteen twenty-six; and that his sweet, beloved Grand D was gone into the river of no return to join the ancestors.

Here he was, standing in some white/African woman's home, no money and a little African girl to care for. Now was the time to pull it all together, set things to right, and win over the bad odds.

For the first time in his life, Seneca was deeply, seriously, in love, and with a woman twice his age, and someone he knew less than a full day. Was he losing his mind? Seventeen was very young to be in love with a woman, especially rich and beautiful
twice your age, when you were dead broke.

Seneca muttered: "I won't always be this young and poor."

He got into bed and pulled little Vera's head onto his chest and fell into a deep sleep.

Brilliant sun streamed through the windows when he was awakened, wondering briefly where he might be. He writhed under the soft sheets as a puppy might flex himself on awakening, stretched luxuriously, and touched little Vera curled up next to him. Then he came fully awake. He got out of bed trying not to disturb the child, who suddenly turned over and rose. "Seneca, I got to pee."

He picked her up and carried her to the bathroom, suffering his first mild doubts of his ability to care for a little girl child. When he set her on her feet, she looked around the restroom then up at him, "you need to get out, I'm a woman and I know how to use the toilet by myself."

"Well, excuse me little African Queen." Seneca smiled at her serious expression and knew that caring for her would be very easy—she only needed love.

He remembered then that he needed to ring for their breakfast, that Phoebe said nobody ever went down to have breakfast with anybody else. He got his watch off the nightstand, seven-thirty. Too early to disturb the old white butler or anybody else. He decided to go back to bed and think a little bit. At that moment little Vera came running back from the bathroom. "I'm hungry, Seneca, what we gon' eat?" she stopped in front

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of him, both hands on her hips, eyes focused on his face.

"Tell you what, I'm hungry too, so we'll ring for old
applenose and we'll have breakfast right here, and then we'll
have a look around this big old house and yard."

Thinking of looking around the house, Seneca realized that
little Vera needed some clothes. His blue shirt was wrinkled
and twisted on her little body.

Seneca pulled the bell cord summoning the bulter and got
dressed. There was a knock on the door almost immediately.
Little Vera ran and opened it.

"Good morning little Vera," said Phoebe as she entered
pushing a wheeled table covered with food. There were eggs,
bacon, croissants, hot oatmeal, jams, and a pitcher of orange
juice. Placing everything on the bedside table she turned to
Seneca. "Breakfast is served, Mr Houston, will there be any-
thing else?"

Seneca had to shake himself mentally to be able to draw a
breath. "Me, I'll just have some bacon and eggs. They look
wonderful and smell like Heaven." When he lifted the cover
of one dish, Seneca saw some flaky crisp long rolls. "What are
those?" He asked.

"Croissants. French breakfast rolls. Try them with that
plum jam." Phoebe said.

Seneca and little Vera finished breakfast. Phoebe brought
in several little dresses that fit little Vera perfectly. They
dressed and strolled outside in the warm winter sun.

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"Phoebe, I need to go over to the docks and see if I've still got my job as a stevedore, I didn't go to work yesterday and they usually fill the slots each morning." Seneca stopped.

"What do you want me to do, go with you? Phoebe came up beside him holding little Vera's hand.

"No, I was hoping you'll keep little Vera..."
"Seneca, listen," she interupped; I'm a woman that likes things straight forward. If you want something from me...just say it." She reached out and touched his arm. "Of course I'll care for little Vera as long as you need me to. I was going to tell you last evening that I'd care for her while you are in Houston."

"I would appreciate that, Phoebe, but I will most definitely pay you for your assistance. No one does anything without proper payment." He smiled. "At least Grand D wouldn't."

"Well, I like this little African princess and will gladly share my apartments with her." Phoebe leaned over to little Vera. "Would you like to stay with me while your African brother conquers the sea?"

"Just for a little while." Little Vera said. "Seneca needs me."

* * * * * * *
THIRTY

Seneca had been dropped from his stevedore job and was now depending on the kindness of Ms Desire Blon while he trolled the docks everyday looking for work. True to her word, she had allowed her gardener, Jimmy Du show Seneca around New Orleans; the docks in particular because Jimmy Du had been to sea and knew quite a bit about ships and sailing. "Jimmy Du, let's walk down to the docks," Seneca said one morning in late November. "It's too nice a day not to walk."

"You know, this city ain't a real American town at all. It's one part French, one part cracker, and one part African; they done killed off all the Indians." Jimmy Du said, as they headed out of the gate toward the docks.

Soon they were strolling down a narrow, cobbled street. It was not too far from Ninth Ward, the Negro section, and Seneca noticed how black-coal black, almost blue-black the Negroes who thronged the streets were. He had heard Grand D mention 'blue-gum Africans', but had never really seen any. These were not Negroes as he knew them, but straight West Coast Africans who talked the Gullah as their relatives a bit further South talked Geechee. He had been in the city for four years and this was the first time that he really paid attention to the real people around the docks. The sounds were fascinating. The high-pitched babble of the unseen women in little back courts, the deep bass voices of the men in the faded patched dungarees, the distant barking dog, the squalling cat, the lonely plinking of a cigar.

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box banjo all melted into the smell of frying fish and wet plaster walls that would never lose the odor of urine and rotting fish.

They walked through a dock-side warehouse, stacked high with huge crates girdled tightly with broad bands of shiny iron ribbon. Gleaming black-men, naked to the waist, with sweat-rags tied round their heads, chanted as they lifted and tooted, heaved and pushed. Seneca and Jimmy Du sauntered into the sunlight outside to the edge of the mooring dock and sat down on an ancient, smoothly-worn mooring bollards.

A ship; a tired, wave-abused ship, was anchored 'longside. She had come a weary way. She was of the ancient cargo vintage known as Hog Islander, relict of World War I, sow like and ungainly, but an eminently practical beast of burden. Her rusted name plate proclaimed her OCEAN QUEEN, and her stack wore the colors of the North Pacific Ship Line, home based in Maramar Ca. Abaft and above her foc'sle head and forward 'hatches was the wheelhouse and 'officers' quarters. A 'midships hatch separated the wheelhouse from the main deckhouse, which contained the engine room, galley, and crews mess. A ladder led downward to another stretch of hatches, to be surmounted again by the fantail, under which the crew slept; deck gang starboard, black gang port. They were separated by the steering-engine room. "Where you think she going, Jimmy Du?"

"Not Africa, if that's what you got in mind. Ocean Queen generally leave out of here headed to Liverpool, and then to Rotterdam and on to Hamburg. Or they go to London, Antwerp, and
Hamburg. But they mostly pay off in Miami and start loading a little bit there."

"How come you know so much about all this, Jimmy Du?"

Jimmy Du laughed. "In my post gardening days I took a sick urge for adventure on the high seas." Jimmy Du stood and moved toward the water. "This was just after I was run off a farm in Monroe for gitten a gal fat in the belly, I was 'bout 17, and .. wanted to see somethin' sides white folks with whips and excuses."

"What did you carry as cargo?"

"Beautiful stuff. Sheep shit, sulphur, nails, and phosphate rock, with some logs for a deckload. All I know about going to sea was how to push a broom. I was 17 and thought going to sea would make a man out of me. It didn't. It nearly made a woman of me, old bulls on the ship had a stab at me."

"A stab at you? What does that mean?"

"I keep forgetting how young you are 'cause you're so big", Jimmy Du smiled. "My young friend, there are no women on ships. There are lots of old men, especially engineers, who spend their lives at sea. To them a young boy is prettier than a woman. The thing happens on chain gangs and in prisons. I'm telling you, I pretty near had to stick a cork in my asshole when I went to sleep. That's what I'm talking about."

"But did you...I mean, why didn't?"

"I got fucked several times by a couple of guys a lot bigger than me. It hurts like hell! But you a big fellow so you probably won't have to worry about your asshole."
Dropping a difficult subject, Seneca pointed to the ship, "Jimmy Du, who are those men going up the gangplank?" Studying the shabby human line of men, he kept his eyes off of Jimmy Du. Jimmy Du lifted his head to look. "Those are men out of work, most of those guys are ex-sailors, masters, mates, engineers, bosuns. They broke and they going aboard to bum a free meal. If the cook's in a good humor he'll give'em a handout; if not, back they go over the side again.

"Sea life seems rough," Seneca said, "but I can handle it, and I'm going to see Africa one way or the other."

* * * * * * *
"Ms Blon, I'm dreadful sorry," Seneca said, a few days before Christmas. "But I reckon I better go home. Ever since I heard my sister and Grand D died I been real concerned about my Poppa. I got to go see about the old folks."

"I understand completely, Seneca. You wouldn't be happy here, worrying, and I suppose that Christmas is a time when any mother wants her child home. Especially considering you've been gone four long years. Are you sure I can't have my chauffeur drive you?"

"No thank you, Ms Blon. I'll just grab a bus. There's one leaving at 3:30, and I'll be in Houston in time for supper. Easier that way. But it has been fun and I hate to leave."

Ms Desire Blon took him by the arm and walked him gently to the patio. Vera rose to follow and Phoebe stood up looking at the child she'd come to love. Then moved toward her grandmother and Seneca on the patio.

"Seneca. One moment, please," called Phoebe.

"Yes?" He turned toward the door.

Phoebe took him by the shoulders and looked steadily into his eyes. "I will put Vera in school until you return. Don't
"You will come back as soon as you can."

"Absolutely, Ms Blon; I've got my little Vera here. You know I'll be back to get her." Seneca reached out and Vera ran into the circle of his arms.

"You be sweet and learn all you can from those nuns, sugar." Seneca said to little Vera. "And one day I'll have you running my business."

"I love you, African brother." Vera put her arms around his neck. "You just like my Poppa, Tree Top, he call me sugar too, and he tall like you."

Seneca turned to Ms Blon, "Will you see if you can find out what happened to Tree Top? That's the first time Vera said her father's name."

"We'll do what we can." Phoebe said. "That bus is going to leave pretty soon. We better get you to the stop."

"Of course. Kiss me good-bye, Seneca." Ms Blon turned a cheek.

"Kiss me too!" Shouted Vera.

"Kiss me three!" said Phoebe, stepping up to Seneca and raising her cheek.

Phoebe got the keys to the Pierce Arrow, and drove Seneca to the bridge stopping in front of a run-down filling station. "Here's the bus stop, Seneca."

"Thanks again, Phoebe. Please take extra special care of little Vera; I'll be back as soon as possible to get her." Seneca exited the car and moved slowly toward the bench beside the road.

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"I'm not going to say 'good-bye'" said Phoebe. "Only this, see you later." And she drove off with tears in her eyes.

* * * * * *
THIRTY-TWO

A sleek low-slung black car, a Cord, pulled into the filling station. The driver was a stocky Negro man. He got out like he owned the world and said to Seneca. "Fill her up, if colored folks are served here, where can I piss?"

"I don't know, sir. I just got here. Back there, I reckon."

"Oh." The stocky man looked around with distaste. "I thought you were the attendant." He looked Seneca up and down. "You colored, so I thought...."

"I'm African, sir, and waiting on the bus to Houston."

Seneca stood to his full height.

"That's where I'm going. I live there too. Can you drive?"

"Yessir."

"Tell you what. I'ma' go find somewhere to pee. You tell the attendant to fill her up, and if you drive me to Houston without both of us getting killed, there's twenty dollars in it for you. Okay?"

"Sure, thank you sir."

"Polite ain't you? I like polite boys. Now..." the stocky man ran toward the back of the station holding his pants front, just as the white attendant came out.

"Man says fill'er up." Seneca said. "Didn't say, but you better look at the oil too. These things drink it like water."

"You got one, nigger?" The attendant asked, unscrewing the gas cap.

"Not yet," Seneca said, "But someday soon I'll have a fleet."
"Well, now, ain't you jes one uppity Nigger. When you git yo' fleet I'll start singin' in a Nigger church." Laughing, he filled the tank and put in a quart of oil.

"How much?" The stocky man asked when he returned.

"Your rich Nigger boy told me to check your oil. She needed a quart."

"That was wise of him. Already earning your twenty, hey son?" He smiled at Seneca and paid the attendant.

"Let's have a coke before we hit the road. You drink whisky?"

"Nosir."

"Good boy."

"What a youngun like you doing in New Orleans?"

"Working on ships."

"What's your name?"

"Seneca Fofana."

"Any kin to Daudi Fofana?"

"He's my father."

The stocky man laughed. "What do you know? Him and me went to school together in Conroe. My name is Alvin Gatson." He reached over the back seat and said. "Shake, sure nice to know you."

Seneca, trying to watch the road as he drove along, had a difficult time trying to shake hands, but managed it at last. The stocky man fluffed up his pillow and slept all the way to Houston. "That was quite a nap. We kill anybody on the way?"

"Nope," Seneca smiled. "Not even a dog or cat."
"You must drive plenty good. Ya'll still live on Little York Road?"

"Nosir. Poppa moved us to Jersey Village back in 23. But seems we lost everything in 29; that's why I'm coming home. I got word through the mail that my Grand D died in 28 and my sister died in 26. I been gone ever since 25. My great-great grandmother, Mama Nandie live on Enterprise in Acres Homes.

"Ms Nandie still living?"

"I reckon so, sir."

"Come to think of it, used to be a girl I liked worked for Ms Nandie. Girl name of Sarah Jean Brooks." Mr Gaston sat up and began to look around.

"We coming up on Hempstead, Mr Gaston. Which way we go?"

"Just go on by where you headed, I'll drop you off first."

Mr Gaston replied reaching in his wallet he removed a twenty passing it over the seat to Seneca. "Job well done young man."

"You don't have to drop me at the front door, if anything, I owe you for the free ride...I couldn't take..." Seneca just looked at the twenty in the man's hand.

"The hell you couldn't, take this money and shut up with them Nigger excuses and politeness. And when you get straight with your family you maybe need a job, come see me."

"What you do, sir? If I come for a job; you own a bank or something?"

"Funny you make a crack like that. Me and my partner just bought one. We bought one that didn't fail back in the Wall Street

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crash in 29. That's why I had to go over to New Orleans.

"We must have had the wrong bank. Thanks for the money, Mr Gatson, I'll take it.

"You're welcome, Seneca. I got a kid around your age. A girl, she's getting out of school this spring, she's going to St. Catherine's in New Orleans. Came home last week for the holidays. I want you to come on out to the house and meet my family."

"I'd like to, where is your house?"

"Well, it's...it's in Spring Branch. You see, I own some mills, too."

"All those cotton mills?"

"Not all. My partner, Judge Hargraves owns three, I own the other two."

Still holding the money uneasily, he leaned over the seat and shoved it into Seneca's hand. "Here, take it. Get yourself something for Christmas."

"You bet, Mr Gaston! Where about exactly do you..."

"Well...I don't live at the mills. My place ain't got a name yet. It's out highway #17. Big red and white house between Gessner Road and Chickasaw Lane."

"I know exactly where you talking about. Me and Grand D used to hunt out there. Squirrels and coons was the only thing lived out there back then."

"I'll be damned, there's still plenty critters out there. I got it from Joe Bob Simmons. Do you know him? He's..."
"The High Sheriff!" Seneca interrupted "Of Harris County."

"Looks like you done had your run in wit the law! I own most of old Simmons' land. Legislatures don't cost too much these days. I got me one bought and paid for."

They came up to the crossing at Chickasaw and drove through a quiet tunnel of Oak and Pecan trees. They rounded Gessner Road and the birdsongs flooded their ears as they drove through a mass of blackbirds. They could see Lake Conroe in the distance. They arrived at the little hamlet of Spring Branch. "Turn left up there," said Mr Gaston.

"That's home?" Seneca said pointing.

"There across those tracks. There ain't no driveway. I'll get out here on the highway, Mr Gaston. And thanks, you sure you're serious about me coming out here to visit after Christmas dinner?"

"Never more serious in my life, Seneca. You're a good kid, intelligent and wise. I never finished grammar school. And here you been to New Orleans all by yourself and now going to see to your family. Merry Christmas and remember me to your Pa.

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212.
THIRTY-THREE

The past few years hadn't been kind to the Fofana clan. The nineteen twenty-nine Wall Street earthquake had sent a financial wave of destruction into the heart of Texas. The Fofana's nearly drowned in it. Sarah Jean had been forced to take a job in the restaurant they had once owned. Daudi had been forced to seek employment, as no one bought any art work. Mama Nandie had been forced to sell all of her trees and two acres of land to stay afloat.

As Seneca walked down Little York toward Enterprise, he passed the little red restaurant where he and Zakia used to eat from time to time with Grand D. It was difficult to know that it was no longer theirs.

Across the highway, he could see part of the orchard where he used to get plums, and shoot quail. It was posted and fenced in with keep out signs and barbed wire.

He crossed to Ringold Street and rounded the field across from Mama Nandie's property and was shocked to see a treeless stretch of bare ground. Even Mama Nandie's big old Fig tree was gone. He broke into a trot across the field for his great grandmother's cabin which he could see clearly.

"What are you doing back here?" His great grandmother asked as he slowed to a walk. He came up on her sitting outside shelling peas.

Seneca went up to her, leaned down and kissed her before he answered. "I decided it was time to come see about my family. 213.
Law or no law, K K K or whatever; I needed to see my blood."

"You won't find a whole lot around here now." Said Mama Nandie. "My son is resting right over there. He died like his father did, of a broken heart when you had to leave." Mama Nandie got up and reached for Seneca's hand and walked over to four graves near where the Fig tree had stood. "Your sister, Kia, right there next to Niko." She opened the little gated fence and walked into the little cemetery.

Seneca went to the mounds over his sister and grandfather falling to his knees between both graves. One hand on each.

"Grand D, I'ma go get some African dirt and bring it back to keep you warm," he mumbled to his grandfather. Turning to his sister's grave, "Sis I tried to save you, I'm so sorry I couldn't keep you with me. I love you so deeply." he rose wiping his eyes, turned and walked over to his great grandmother. "Do you think they in Heaven; Mama Nandie?"

"Don't know about Heaven, Seneca, but I know they in Africa with our people." Said the old woman. "You're as big as your grandfather, boy, I think you've grown up."

"Where's my dad and Sarah Jean? I'm alright, Mama Nandie."

"They are living back up at the house," she turned and pointed to the white house Seneca loved so as a boy. He could see it across the pond, there were no trees blocking the view. "The woodshed and smokehouse burned down in 1927."

"Looks like I should have stayed here and protected our trees, woodshed and smokehouse." Seneca smiled and headed toward the

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PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

house. As he came into view of the south-side of the house he could see some children playing near the street. Two girls and a tall skinny boy, holding a little girl. The children spotted him at about the same time, they started calling out and moving back.

"Benni Jewel! Here come a big ol' man!" The children headed toward the enclosed porch; just as the screen opened and a very light-skinned woman stepped out. She was over six-feet tall with arburn hair; in fact she looked white, except for her body shape which was very voluptuous. She reached for the little girl, taking her from the tall skinny boy and stood waiting for him to reach them.

"Hello, sir, may I help you? This is the Fofana place." She said, as he came to a stop before her.

"Well, I'm a Fofana so I must be home at last." Seneca took a guess and continued. "You must be Benni Jewel Ennis, Aunt Essie's grand-niece."

"Seneca...Seneca!" She screamed and ran down the steps putting the baby down, she hugged him. "I never did meet you but Kia always, always talked about her little brother! But you so tall! This Kia's little girl, Ruby," picking Ruby up; "Ruby, this your Uncle Seneca." She held the child out to Seneca.

He saw a little light-skinned Kia in his niece and lost his heart to her on the spot. "Girl you look just like Kia." He turned the child, looking her over, "Even with these green eyes and red hair, you are a little Kia!"

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"This bean pole is Royal Earl, and these twins are Althea and Soferia."

"I'm really glad to finally meet all ya'll in person."
Seneca said to the bright-eyed children. "Royal Earl, I hear you caught that ol' monster catfish back in 1926."

"That joker put up one hellva' fight, me and Grand D nearly 'bout drowned gittin' him in the boat!"

"You better stop cussing, boy!" Interrupted Althea

"You know Mama done tol' you 'bout tryin' to be grown!"

Soferia completed his instructions. They both squared off in front of their brother.

"Hell ain't cussin'! Royal Earl exclaimed. "Is it Seneca?"

"You better ask your big sister on that one. I don't want to cross swords with cousin Maybelle, if she anything like Aunt Essie."

Seneca's eyes asking Benni Jewel to rescue him.

"Come on in the house, Seneca, your Momma and Poppa at work."

Benni Jewel led the way into the big house.

Seneca saw immediately that the once emaculate home was in disarray and on the verge of dilapidation. The hallway walls were scarred and smugged, needing new paint. There was an odor of burned food and staleness in the air. The floor boards squeaked as they walked into the kitchen; and everything seemed so small. He felt boxed-in. It was furnished with other people's remnants, none of the chairs matched the table or each other. It seemed that meals came directly from the stove into the living-room and 216.
were eaten on two large card tables, with chairs in a state of collapse.

After living in Ms Blon's mansion, the big house, that seemed boundless in his childhood, seemed a squalid little sharecroppers shanty. Just as he was trying to decide where to sit the children raised the alarm that Ms Sarah Jean was on her way up the walkway. "Ms Fofana, your son came home!" Yelled Soferia.

"He taller than Uncle Daudi too!" Shouted Althea.

"He in the kitchen." said Royal Earl.

Sarah Jean walked straight up the walkway and did not acknowledge the children. But her heart beat increased thinking that her son was home at long last.

"Ma," said Seneca, coming down the hallway to meet his mother. "I came for Christmas."

"You've changed son...grown...what are you 6'5", 6'6"? What you weigh? You a big, fine man like all the Fofana men."

"Ma, a man gave me twenty dollars for driving him from New Orleans. That's how I got here. I'm 6'10" Ma, and I weigh 250 pounds."

"Well, you a sight for tired eyes. It's real good to see you after so long. What is all this I hear about Leroy...he never was worth spit. I don't know why I let Daudi talk me into sending you down there with his coward ass anyway. I knew in my heart that he would find a way to make things bad on you. I don't say this much but baby, I'm sorry for what you have had to go through."

"Things been okay Ma, I'd like it if you would take this

217"
twenty dollars and get something for you and daddy for Christmas. The man said it was for Christmas." Seneca reached into his pockets and found the money, he held it out to Sarah Jean.

Sarah Jean, still in her yellow kitchen uniform, took the money. She held it in her hand, as one might observe a dirty diaper or poisonousness snake. "He didn't try to do anything bad to you, giving you twenty dollars just like that?"

"No, Ma. He was just a nice fellow. Said he knew you and Poppa. He from here, too. Named Alvin Gaston. Little stocky African man.

Sarah Jean put the money in her pocket. She went over to a chair and collapsed into it. She stretched her tired legs straight out in front of her, and wiggled her feet. "I could of married him, he asked me before your daddy. I'd have everything he got instead of this." She said, looking around the dismal room.

"Who is he, Ma? He sounds awful rich."

"Rich? he's got all the money in Houston that whites ain't got. His daddy was a cropper on ol' man Simmon's cotton plantation. I used to go play with Alvin Gaston when I was a little girl. What does he look like now?"

"Kind of fat. Drinks like Grand D. But he told me he bought a bank, and he owns all them cotton mills in Spring Branch. And he asked me to come over to his house after Christmas dinner to meet his daughter. She's going to school at Saint Catherine's in New Orleans.

"Boy you go. Maybe if he wants to he can help you get into 218."
college; somebody's going to have to because we can't."

"I don't want anybody to help me get to college. I don't want to belong to nobody. Specially someone I don't even know. Who said I even want to go to college?"

"I don't reckon he's a nice man. However he got to where he is I don't know...no, I don't rightly know, but he couldn't be nice to do what he's done so fast when everybody else is broke. It's wrong to be so rich when everybody else so poor. Wrong. Look at us, lost everything, sold the car-NO! They took it back. Me working in a damn kitchen. Your father selling insurance. Selling insurance! Nobody can buy any insurance. Nobody can pay the Piggy Wiggly bill. The only reason we're making it here is I can bring back enough left-over stuff from the restaurant to keep us and these children from starving." She flourished the twenty dollar bill. "This the only money we got in the house right now and a shirt-tail boy not even twenty yet had to bring it to me. Miss Essie working as a waitress to feed her grandchildren. Where's our nice house in Jersey Village? We living in this ancient rat trap! We used to have two cars, your father had rich people who couldn't get enough of his art work." Seneca's mother burst into tears. He felt dreadfully embarrassed at her weakness and very hostile at this display of emotion.

"Don't cry Mama," he said. "It ain't all bad, things gon' get better..."

His mother glanced at him. Her tears stopped. "Better!? Me working in a white woman's kitchen like an ignorant Nigger wench?"
Your artist father peddling a security dream nobody can afford? Better?"

"One of these days I'll make it better," Seneca said. "Something, someway, somehow will come together for us. I'll make it get right, you'll see."

"Maybe you will," Sarah Jean said. She sniffled into a hankerchief. "But I doubt it. You sit here and wait for your father. I got to go back to work-in a goddamn kitchen like a Nigger wench, like a ignorant Nigger wench. My daddy raised me for better. Once I could play the piano," she said bitterly, "Before we sold it."

Seneca then noticed the empty space where his grandmother's piano once stood.

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220.
"How'd he do it, Poppa?" Seneca asked, when his father came home.

"I couldn't really tell you, son," Daudi Fofana said. "All I know about Alvin Gaston is that nobody ever beat him in a swappin' contest. Somehow he always wound up with his watch and your best knife. He was a natural born trader."

"But how, Poppa, how?"

"I told you, I don't know. We went to grade school together until his daddy took him out in level four to work the fields. Even in school he was kind of slow. He couldn't read well, he was just a sharecropper's son. Nothing special. Seems to me he started out sort of illegal. He was Tapping Judge Hargraves' pine trees and selling turpentine before he was ten." Daudi Fofana took his coat off and seated himself at the table to eat the meal that Benni Jewel had served him. Then continued; "About that time, he got mixed up in cotton trading and made the Judge a lot of money from a crop of peas. Everything he touched turned to money. God just blessed him...Including his wife."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She was skinny as a pole, half-white gal. Her daddy was a rich Frenchman and her mommy was a creole. She was his only child and he didn't see no color. She was his beloved daughter, and Alvin Gaston knocked her up, they used to meet in her daddy's cotton mills. Anyway, ol' Pierre Lafacarde,
that was his name, got his shotgun and tracked Alvin Gaston down and dragged him to church making a respectable woman out of his pregnant daughter. Ol' man Lafacarde soon suffered a heart attack, dying, leaving Lafacarde Mills to his one living child. Evette Lafacarde Gaston and her husband Alvin Gaston. Turned out ol' man Lafacarde owned a big chunk of a bank too. He was a bond-holder along with Judge Hargraves. Let that be a lesson, son-stick it to girls with rich daddies, only."

"He seems like a super nice man, Sarah Jean don't think he's nice because he's so rich."

"You can be nice when you're rich. Why the hell wouldn't you be? It's easy, all you need is money to be nice."

"I don't believe it," Seneca said. "I met some people in Louisiana, they ain't very nice."

Rising and wiping his mouth, Daudi said, "try it on me someday; I'll be the nicest black African in Houston." He searched his pockets for an Old Gold. The packet was crumpled and empty.

"Have one of mine, Poppa."

"Thank you rich son," his father said with a smile.

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THIRTY-FIVE

The holidays, poor as they were, brought joy and peace to Seneca's heart and mind. Being among his young cousins and Kia's daughter, Ruby, and Benni Jewel, made his heart fill with a warmth that he thought was long dead. In fact, he was developing serious feelings for Benni Jewel. Feelings he thought of as love. He questioned these feelings but he was not experienced enough to recognize them for what they truly were: plain and simple lust.

Sarah Jean used the twenty dollars well. She loaded up on corn, cabbage, beans and flour, cornmeal and a large Tom turkey, a fresh smoked ham and a large box of Christmas candy for the children.

"Poppa," Seneca spoke softly, hesitantly.

"Son?"

"We're about the same size, ain't we? Suit size I mean."

"I reckon, why?"

"I'd like to give you my new suit for Christmas."

"What you sayin', boy? It's my business to buy you clothes. You ain't twenty-one yet. I can't..." Daudi buried his face in his hands.

"Don't take on, Poppa. I got this new suit and I got another. Please, just try it on.

"Of course, son. Thank you for a very Merry Christmas. Where's the suit?"

The new unworn, gray-flannel suit fitted Daudi to a tee. As he
looked at himself in the bedroom mirror he said very quietly, 'Christ, I wish I was dead.' Then he rejoined his son in the living room to see Seneca already dressed in his blue suit.

"My God, we're a handsome pair of Africans. Sarah Jean going to think she in the wrong house when she see us." Seneca teased his dad.

Sarah Jean came through the door at that moment wearing her yellow uniform. It had a giant oil stain right down the front. She looked first at Seneca, then at her husband. She smoothed the front of her blotched uniform with nervous fingers. "I must be in the wrong house is right! I'm not grand enough for this Christmas party and fine looking company." She smiled with forced happiness. "I better eat in the kitchen with the help today."

"We're just kidding, Ma." Seneca said. "Come on, sit down and let me serve you. We ain't got much but us, but it's Christmas and we still got us three. That's more than most people got.

"Well, too bad Mama Nandie won't come up and celebrate Christmas, and Essie and them children said they'll be over this evening.

"I forgot to tell you, son, go look in the pantry and you'll find some pickled watermelon rinds from last summer."

Seneca went into the pantry and was hit with the sensation that his grandmother, Miss Cleo, should be here instead of at a sanitorium. Where she had been since Grand D died. She
was always the only person in this pantry. He closed his eyes for a moment until the spell passed; got the lonely jar of watermelon rinds off the now empty shelves and returned to the dining room. Seneca walked around the table and gave Sarah Jean a smacking kiss. "If for nothing else, I'm glad I'm not in New Orleans this evening."

"Well, they ain't as good as the ones Miss Cleo used to put up but don't eat too many, they real sweet."

Seneca kissed Sarah Jean again. Took his seat and said. "Let's eat."

During the meal Seneca told his parents about little Vera and about the Blon mansion. Even that he was sweet on Phoebe, Ms Desire Blon's granddaughter.

"She got money?" Daudi asked.

"Well Poppa, I guess she will seeing as how she's Ms Blon's grandchild."

"That don't mean a thing, boy, besides, at 34 she's twice your age." added Sarah Jean. "Don't you want children?"

"All right Poppa." Seneca stood ignoring Sarah Jean's concern. "I've got to get over to Mr Gaston's and meet his family." Seneca left the house.

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225.
PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

PART SEVEN: Preachers Prostitutes & Fried Chicken

THIRTY-SIX

Seneca got a checked cab and rode out to Spring Branch. The fare was only a nickle and saved his energy that a long walk would have depleted. When he stepped out of the cab Mr Alvin Gaston was standing there on Chickasaw Lane.

"I figured that was you when I seen that cab coming. If it wasn't, I was coming to fetch you. I know where 751 Enterprise is. Did you have a good Christmas?"

"Sure did," Seneca said. "Hope ya'll did too, Mr Gaston, hope Santa was nice."

"Passin' toable," Mr Gaston said. "Passin' toable. How'd he treat you?"

"Passin' toable," Seneca said. "Got to see my sister's baby girl and a passel of cousins, gave my Poppa a new suit, and ate some sweet watermelon rinds." Seneca began walking toward Mr Gaston's car. "It was kind of slim this year, but a blessing to be with kin." They drew up in front of an enormous white-pillared house, with about two acres of manicured green grass in front. Tall pines shaded an avenue up to the porch. A huge live Fir, gleaming with Christmas decoration stood to the left side of the porch.

"We'll turn on the lights when it gets dark. It's something to see. Well, let's go meet my women and drink some eggnog."

He pulled the Cord up in front of the door, Seneca noticed that the crushed-shell circular drive branched off in a Y-Shape to an enormous garage, which held three big cars and room for 226.
"You sure got a lot of cars," Seneca said, as they got out and headed for the wide steps. "What else besides this one? She drives sweet, I meant to tell you."

"Two Pierce Arrows and a Duesenburg. Mama has a Pierce Arrow, and the other belongs to my kid, Jenelle. It's her Christmas slash birthday present. She turned 18 last month, November 14th. I was going to ask you to do me a service. I haven't got time to teach her to drive. If you give her lessons over the holidays, if you're not too busy, I'd appreciate it. I don't trust Mama behind the wheel very much. She drives like she's afraid the car gon' bite her. Mr. Gaston chuckled. "And my garage bills say I'm right."

They entered an enormous room done completely in blue-blue chairs, blue-figured wallpaper, blue sofas, blue wall-to-wall carpeting, blue drapes, accented by a bright white grand piano over which a blue and brown Indian shawl was flung. Long-stemmed blue roses reaching from silver and crystal vases seemed to be prepared to play the piano. Another Fir Christmas tree, lit, stood in one corner, and underneath its boughs the carpet was heaped with presents, half-opened. "I love blue," Alvin Gaston said, "I was in a fancy house one time when I was a kid and it was done up in blue. It was the sweetest, calmest room I ever seen. Mama hates blue. So to keep peace in the family, we done five rooms like this in pink and white and one in Gold and white for Mama. A Yellow one for Jenelle and a money green one for company. I ain't been in that one

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yet. He grabbed a blue bellpull, and a Negro servant came quietly into the room. Seneca gaped. The servant was a little person, what ignorant people refer to as a midget. Like everything else in the room, his uniform was blue. He also wore silk stockings and blue patent leather boots with silver buckles. "That's Elroy," Mr Gaston said, "Elroy, go tell Mama and Jenelle we got company."

"He...he...sure is different." Seneca said. "I mean, most butlers taller and dress in black."

"I'm Nigger rich, I like things my way, not like whites live, I create my own trends. I don't want no butler looking like he on his way to a cemetery. Things ought to be cheerful and upbeat. when I look at Elroy, it makes me happy!" He walked over and filled two cups with gin. "Let's get started before the girls get here. Mama don't like to see me drink. So we'll save the eggnog until they get here."

Mother and daughter entered rather slowly, like they were expecting to be ambushed in their own home. Mother was a French beauty, with dark hair and soulful eyes that mesmerized Seneca as she looked him up and down. Her dark eyes full of questions that he wasn't capable of answering. But he could see why Mr Alvin Gaston had knocked her up, she was sex uninterruped and unfufilled. Seneca thought, trying to break eye contact and look at daughter.

Jenelle was a complete female copy of her dad. Except from
her neck down, she was Mama with luscious plump curves that promised a future of pleasure for the man of her choice. Unlike Mother, her eyes were a deep dark brown with blue high-lights around the pupils. Seneca overlooked her body for now and tried to concentrate on greeting both women correctly.

"This here is Seneca Fofana," said Mr Gaston, "I told ya'll I been knowing his folks for years, he the one drove me all the way from New Orleans. Honey, Seneca gon' teach you to drive your new car."

"Pleased to meet you Mr Fofana," said Mama Gaston, "I trust you didn't let my husband brow-beat you into teaching my daughter to drive."

"Ma'am, you can just call me Seneca." Said the boy, "I love driving and it will be a pleasure teaching your daughter to drive."

"Merry Christmas, Seneca, pleased to meet you." Said Jenelle, shyly looking down at his feet. "And thank you for agreeing to teach me to drive." She finally offered a sweet smile, and Seneca could see that she was a very beautiful girl.

"You want some eggnog, Mama?" asked Mr Gaston.

"How much rum did you put in it?" Responded Ms Gaston, "You know I get tipsy very easily...just a half cup, dear."

"What about you, my sweet?" He asked his daughter.

"Yes, daddy, please give me a cup too." Jenelle moved up beside her father and waited until he'd filled her cup.

"Jenelle, just drink that one cup, you can't handle rum."
Mama looked at Seneca as she instructed her daughter. "Seneca, do you drink anything besides rum?"

"No ma'am, and I only drink rum as a holiday treat with my eggnog." Seneca sat his empty cup down and took a seat on the blue sofa beside Jenelle. They all sat in a semi-circle, and conversation lagged. Finally Jenelle asked, "Seneca, do you go to high school?"

"I did a couple of years ago, but I quit to work loading ships in New Orleans."

Jenelle crooked her little finger as she drank from her cup, trying for a look of sophistication, "that sounds really adventurous, but don't you think an education would be better than loading and unloading ships all of your life?"

"Won't be doing it all of my life... I got plans." Seneca was on the verge of telling her of his intent to go to Africa, but thought better to keep quiet because Ms Gaston seemed ready to say something.

"Jenelle, you're too young to be asking a man about his life's plans." Ms Gaston stood and repositioned her skirt. "Come, I'm sure these men have things they want to discuss, and looks like your father wants something stronger than eggnog to drink." She stopped in front of Jenelle and held her hand out to assist her up.

"When do you want to start your driving lessons, Jenelle?"

Asked Seneca as she began to rise.

"Tomorrow afternoon!" She looked at her father for an okay.
"Sure, that will be fine, the sooner the better," said Mr Gaston.

"I'll come about 1PM, then, if that's all right, Jenelle."

"Fine, I'll be ready. Pleased to meet you, again, and have a Merry Christmas." Jenelle then followed her mother out the door.

Alvin Gaston heaved a gusty sigh of relief and went for the bar and got some whisky. "I did some checking around and I know your Poppa is having a rough go of it. We're laying off hands at my mills, mostly sweat labor, but I can always use office help. It won't pay much, but better'n he's doing now trying to sell insurance."

"That sounds like a plan, Mr Gaston, I'll tell Poppa to stop by the mill on Monday." Seneca stood and moved toward the door.

"Look, son. I taken a shine to you the other day, I don't know why, but I did. I like your daddy and your Ma, and I'd like to help ya'll get straight."

Seneca stood still and rocked on his feet. "I don't know how to thank you, Mr Gaston. I just don't know what to say... about Poppa and me and everything. I'll do my best for you always."

"I know you will, Seneca. Monday, don't forget, tell your father to come by Monday, and we'll get him working. This is your Christmas present. Don't open it until you leave." He handed Seneca an envelope. "Here are the keys to my Cord, use it until you get my girl driving like a champ. Save on taxi fare."

Seneca almost ran out of the door. He jumped into the car 231.
Mr Gaston told him to use and eased it gently onto the road. He did not see the curtains move as someone watched him leave. As soon as he turned the corner he stopped and ripped open the envelope. It contained five fifty dollar bills and a short note which read: "You seem like the son I'd like to have... Have a MERRY CHRISTMAS and look to a positive future. Happy NEW YEAR'S 1931."

He didn't want to spoil the greatest Christmas he'd ever had so he sat until his eyes dried and his heart settled down before trying to drive the Cord across town to share the good news with his parents.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

Seneca parked the Cord and walked down to where the woodshed once stood. His mind drifting back to happier days. He began to stroll toward the pond where he'd had his last conversation with Grand D. "Don't go through life with other peoples' philosophy as your guide. Create your own and remain true to it. Don't let life beat you down. Don't let it just happen to you, like I did. Grab it by the head and beat the shit out of it until it goes your way. Big dog eats little dog." The old man's words beat a tattoo in his head like a drum.

"And why not now?" Seneca fingered the five fifties in his front pocket. "Why not go get the rest of it? Jenelle will have it all-I can have Jenelle. Her father wants me to have her..."

That noon, arriving an hour early to teach Jenelle to drive, Seneca was dressed in his blue suit. He had a flower in his buttonhole and under his arm he carried a two pound box of Whitman's Chocolates. Seneca had come to get it all.

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233.
One Sunday afternoon, nearly five months after Seneca had taught Jenelle to drive, he and Jenelle were playing the gramophone after lunch. Jenelle was looking slightly sick and down.

"You don't look like you feel like dancing, baby girl," Seneca said. "What's the problem? Girl trouble?"

"No," Jenelle said, "I wish it was. That's the whole trouble. It isn't...that, I mean. It hasn't been for three months now. Seneca, I think I'm pregnant. Here, feel."

Seneca touched her stomach and thought of his days of baby making with Edna Faye Stuckey. "It could be you ate too much... It could be one of a thousand things." He said. "why don't we get a doctor to look you over?"

"Oh my God! NO! If I am—and you know I am—everybody will know. Seneca, we have to get married and keep it a secret. We have to get married right away. Don't you love me like you said?"

Seneca kissed her on top of the head. "Of course I want to marry you, sugar. It isn't a matter of want or don't want. It's just that you know how things are. I'm not making enough to support me, let alone three of us."

"Oh, that?" Jenelle snapped her fingers. "We've got the house. I've got a little income from the mills. And dammit, Daddy said they were mine anyway! I'm sure he will find you something to do in one of my mills."

Seneca began to pace the room. "I don't know anything about cotton mills. And I don't want it said that I'm living off of my wife. If we could wait a bit I could get a better job."

234.
Times will get better. Just be patient, baby girl, we can wait-

"Goddammit Seneca Fofana! This thing in my belly won't wait for times to get better." Interrupted Jenelle, turning red-faced with her emotions. "It's your baby I'm carrying and I aim to see it has its father!" She grabbed his collar. "I love you, baby or no baby, and I don't want to be alone any more. Never again any more!" Jenelle began to weep as she fell to her knees and covered her face with her hands.

Seneca patted her head and shoulders. "Don't cry, baby girl. Hush now. Of course we'll get married. We'll take your car and run off to New Orleans. Right now, if you'd like to. We can live with Ms Blon. Just please get up and stop crying."

Jenelle rose, her face emerged tear-streaked but glowing with happiness. "Oh, Seneca, you will? Oh darling. I'm so happy..." She began to weep again. "Think how happy this will make Papa. He has always loved you, and he wants us to be a family; he told me that he wants you to work with him."

"But there's one thing, honey. I haven't got but five dollars until next payday. Have you got any money. It cost money to get married and to drive to Louisiana."

"Sure I have. Almost a thousand dollars here in the house. We can have a tiny weensy honey moon. Wait! I'll go pack, and we can stop off for your clothes on the way through town..." Jenelle dashed happily up the stairs.

"Hey, baby girl. You've got to be careful, that's my future.
in your stomach." Seneca sat down and thanked his Grand D for opening his eyes and mind to see his future clearly.

* * * * * *

They left that very afternoon for New Orleans. Seneca didn't bother to tell his parents. He knew that his father would okay now that he was working for Mr Gaston as the office manager at the main mill. Times were hard and he knew what he had to do to set things straight. His only regret was leaving Benni Jewel. He knew in his heart that he loved her, but they needed money and this was worth the wait. He had to think of his sister's daughter too. After reading all of Zakia's diaries, and understanding how deeply she loved a child that she would never know on earth, he was going to do everything in his power to make life sweet for Ruby. He had all of Zakia's diaries, and planned to safeguard them for his niece, they were her legacy from his beloved sister. He was pleased to see that she had explained how and why he had killed her biological father. Although he felt badly that things had to be as they were, hopefully his niece would understand the hatefulness of some whites once she became an adult. All Seneca really wanted was to bring his beloved family back to the days of plenty that Mama Nandie had created through her blood and sweat.

It was not a real hardship at all, not at all, finding love with Jenelle. It was not hard at all, Seneca kept telling himself. She was beautiful, very beautiful, and amazingly affectionate,
and almost insatiable in bed.

Once they reached New Orleans, he planned to join the public library, find a small house for him and Jenelle and little Vera. Then he would read all the literature he could find on cotton and cotton mills. He would make sense out of pickers and feeders and bobbins and frames and looms in relation to the long dirty-white tufts that were ripped from the bales and emerged, finally, as a pile of greenbacks. "What did that sign say, baby girl?"

"New Orleans, sixty miles," Jenelle said. "Honey, I got to pee again-can we pull over?"

"Sure can, baby girl." Seneca said, looking in the rear-view. "Let this truck pass us and I'll pull over by them Pine trees up the road."

* * * * * *

"Hi daddy." Whispered Jenelle. "This your little girl calling from New Orleans... but, daddy, me and Seneca got married first thing." She talked over whatever he was saying. "Yes, he's right here"."Daddy wants to speak to you." Holding the pay phone toward Seneca.

"Yessir, Mr Gaston." Seneca turned to face away from Jenelle. "I do love Jenelle, I don't know for sure if she is pregnant." Seneca changed hands and pulled Jenelle closer. "We got to go see a doctor to know for sure." Hold on, Jenelle. "Yessir, I will, in a few days." Seneca squeezed Jenelle.

237.
"Yessir, I'll tell her right now...we love you too." Seneca hung up the phone and put both arms around Jenelle and drew her close to his chest. "Your father told me to bring you back to Houston right now. He don't mind us being married but he don't appreciate that 'we' stole away like thieves in the night."

"Well, Seneca, I just don't want to bring shame on him and Mama being pregnant and all before we got married." Jenelle leaned her head on his arm and pulled his hand into hers. "Are you going to take home like he said? You're the boss of me now, it's your decision, husband." Jenelle smiled. "Remember, I said I would honor and obey." she walked toward the car, leaving Seneca standing by the telephone.

* * * * * *
Seneca stood stunned and unable to draw a breath. "Phoebe, say that again!" He breathed.

"You told me and Big Mama to find Tree Top, little Vera's daddy, that was the very last thing you said before you left us." Phoebe looked around the parlor and then continued. "I found him on the Mararo chain gang, paid his fines and he came and took little Vera. I thought you wanted to find her daddy so she could be with her family. Seneca..." Phoebe pleaded. "She happily went into his arms, and she would not let him go!" She continued. "What was I supposed to do? That is her legal father."

"Phoebe, where did he say they were going?" Seneca tried to control his anger, but it showed in his eyes.

"Seneca, for God's sake, you got your own baby on the way." Jenelle interjected. "Why you worried about another man's child?"

"You all go on and get settled in." Said Ms. Blon. "Seneca do you remember how to get to your bedroom?" She turned to Hattie Boyette. "Hattie, would you be a dear, and help Seneca and his wife with their things?" I'm pleased to meet you Mrs Fofana, we really missed Seneca."

"Please don't be upset with me, Seneca." Pleaded Phoebe as she reached out to touch his shoulder to get his attention. "I was just doing what I thought you'd want me to do."

"I'll speak with you later, Phoebe. I'm not upset, just brokenhearted- I love that little child, and I can't know that she's safe." He guided his wife out to follow Hattie up the stairs.

239.
"Seneca, what you got going on with that woman, Phoebe?" Jenelle asked as she unpacked their clothes. "She got real big eyes for you—I saw that!"

"You seeing blind, baby girl." Seneca moved toward the door. "Don't start that kind of rumor in your own head." He exited into the hallway and went in search of Jimmy Du.

Phoebe was extremely hurt that Seneca had returned with a wife, and pregnant. She had finally talked herself into giving her heart leeway to fall in love with a younger man. She certainly knew that he was a better risk than what she'd had with Mason Wade. Mason turned out to be a gambler/pimp and she'd spent ten long months in Ohio thinking she'd found real love. Then he had the nerve to ask her to run his whorehouse; he trusted her because she was Ms Desire Blon's granddaughter and had no doubt learned from the best. Would grandmama's profession never die? She was angry as she approached Seneca and Jenelle's bedroom door and knocked with force.

"One moment, please." Called out Jenelle as she crossed to open the door. "Well, who's there?"

"It's Phoebe, I'd like to speak to you, Jenelle!" Came Phoebe's answer.

"Come in Ms Phoebe, I'd like to speak with you, also." Jenelle said as she opened the door.

* * * * * * *

240.
Jimmy Du was shocked to see Seneca cross the walkway calling out to him. "Seneca, man I thought you'd be in Africa by now, what brings you back to New Orleans?"

"Got a few problems, Jimmy Du. One, I believe you can help me with." Seneca stopped in front of Jimmy Du, placing his hand on the rake stopping its motion. "Quit raking and let me ask you this: Do you know Tree Top, the man who came here and took little Vera?"

"Just so happen I do. But you too late. Tree Top left here headed to Mobile Alabama. That's where he from. He love that little girl of his, thought he had lost her for good when the rollers took him in a raid. Tried to get somebody to see to her, but never did; she be alright with her daddy. Why you ask?"

"Just gave her my promise I'd make sure she be okay." Seneca headed back to the house. "Thank you, Jimmy Du."

"Seneca, come on in here and get this damn ally-cat out of our room!" He was met with loud shouting from his wife as he entered the bedroom. Phoebe was standing between Jenelle and the doorway.

"What's going on...Phoebe...Jenelle." Seneca entered slowly closing the door. "Ladies?"

Phoebe brushed by Seneca and left the room without saying a word. Jenelle sat down on the bed looking confused and upset. "What did you do to that crazy woman, Seneca—she came in here..."
and threatened my life!" Jenelle jumped up and walked into the
bathroom slamming the door. Seneca could only stand rooted beside
the door like a tree trying to decide what had just happened.

"All right, Grand D...what now big dog?" Seneca asked
the stale air in the room. The answer that came into his young
inexperienced mind was to get them apart for the sake of his un-
born baby's life. He couldn't figure what Phoebe was up to. He
had never even touched her or really made known that he was inter-
rested in her, to cause her to want to kill Jenelle. These Louis-
iana women were an enigma far beyond his understanding and he had
had enough. He was getting out while the air still held no gun-
smoke. "Houston, here we come." He said as he packed their things.

* * * * * *
In her seventh month, Jenelle flat out refused to leave the house, despite doctor's orders or Seneca begging. She regarded her huge stomach as a badge of shame, despite her earlier protestations to Seneca that it happened all of the time and you could always say you were married secretly, earlier. She sat, she sewed, she ate, and blowned to 220 lbs. "Don't look at me like that, I know I look like a whale!" She scolded Seneca one evening. "Your baby weighs a ton, I'm too tired to fix myself up."

"I was not looking at you like 'that'," said Seneca. "I was just thinking again that just sitting around is bad for you. You know what the doctor says. If he weighs a ton now he'll weigh two tons in the last month, and you'll have a hell of a time trying to deliver him. Let's just go on a picnic, me and you."

"What's this he, him...he, him-goddammit I'm having a girl- a G-I-R-L, Poppa Seneca, you got that!"

"Just drop it, baby girl-I don't want to fight about it." Seneca went into the kitchen and hummed cheerfully as he cut up a chicken, dipped it into salted flour batter and dropped them into spitting grease in the frying pan. He was draining the grease from the chicken and had finished stuffing eggs with mustard and mayonnaise, when Jenelle came into the kitchen. She wore a bright yellow scarf in her hair and a paisley dress.

"You look wonderful, baby girl," Seneca was shocked, but recovered. "Here, we're just ready to go. This is going to
be fun. I love the way you're wearing that scarf, you're still my beautiful baby girl. I apologize for getting the sex of our baby confused. Can I get an I forgive you kiss?"

Jenelle went around the counter and hugged her husband and kissed him deeply.

He drove carefully, and in silence, for some time. As the ground got higher, moving away from the river, the bearded Cypresses and Oaks diminished, giving way to the glossy green of gallberry bushes and huge stands of long Leafed Pine. The Gums, Pink Oaks, and Hickories made a brilliant splurge of gold, yellow, and darked red against the black-green on the Pines. "Oh, this is so pretty," Jenelle said. "It's beautiful, it really is. Are we far from where we're going?"

"Not very, couple more miles. Hungry?"

"Sort of. That fried chicken makes my mouth water. It's been a long time since I've had some of your fried chicken. And it has been nearly two years since you took me on a picnic."

They spent two hours in the camp site and Jenelle laughed and talked as if she was enjoying their private outing. Seneca looked at her out of the corner of his eye, he smiled. "I believe you are having a good time, baby girl."

"This is a small piece of Heaven, being here with the two people I love most." Said a smiling Jenelle. "I just thought of what I'm naming our little girl! Charity! Charity Lee, that's what I'm going to name her, what do you think?"
"But...what if it's a...well, it sounds okay, baby girl." Seneca didn't want to spoil the mood, so he left things alone. "Well, it's starting to get rather cool out here baby girl."

"Okay, honey, let's go home and make love, this little get together has made me feel like being held."

"Being held ain't all you want, you are going to put me to work!" Seneca laughed and started packing away their picnic gear and putting out the camp fire. Careful to make sure all of the embers were dead and buried.

"Honey, can I drive back?"

"Sure, baby girl."

* * * * * *

The baby was a year old and Seneca had been at the mill for just under a year. Jenelle felt that he spent more time at the mill and too little with her and Charity Lee. He'd only gotten a ten dollar raise, which brought his salary to thirty-five dollars a week. He had become quite an expert on grading the quality of incoming cotton, and Mr Gaston had gradually, without appearing to notice it, given over most of the final say on cotton to Seneca.

Seneca had suggested that the mill go so far as to advance certain seed supplies to some selected farmers, but Mr Gaston rejected the idea without even talking it over with him. He didn't seem to trust people and couldn't see the gains the company would make doing business on a handshake, too risky.

Seneca disagreed, and questioned Mr Gaston's conclusion, and went 245.
to see Judge Hargraves. Mr. Gaston was none too pleased. "That man don't own my mills, Seneca, and he had no business speaking on how I do my bid'ness, as long as you stay black and shit between two shoes don't you never go to no white man about my concerns!"

"Sir, I was just trying to get-" Seneca was not sure of what to say.

"Goddammitboy!" Interrupted the old man, "you tend to what I tell you and be thankful you got work in hard times. You just my daughter's whore anyhow!"

"Yes sir." Was all Seneca could think of to say. It was then that he thought of quitting and going to sea. He couldn't stomach being held captive for water under the bridge. And he sure as hell wasn't no Whore! After work, feeling like a brused child, he refused to go home and hear Jenelle's complaints too. So he drove over to 751 Enterprise to talk things over with Benni Jewel.

"What de I do, Benni Jewel? What do say? Where do I go?"

I can't put up with the turn my life has taken. I don't even know what I want anymore...I thought a wife and child, a good job. But I'm barely skimming by, and he's calling me a whore. Mr Gaston is still holding a grudge for me eloping with Jenelle."

"What you want to do like I told you in 1930, get out of town," Benni Jewel answered. "I'm not kidding, go off some place and look for something. Anything. Maybe after you've looked hard enough you can nail it down and find out what you want. The worst problem you got, Seneca, is that you really never been a boy. You're a grown up man with a kind of boy's mind, like I said once before. You been cheated out of childhood and you ain't got no
patience to be an adolescent. Go be a man. Stop being a prostitute that fucks everything that passes by. Men don't marry the wrong woman. Go be a man."

"I think that's why I'm in love with you, Benni Jewel." Seneca blurted out.

"See what I mean, you just want to get in my panties, that's the needy little boy talking." Benni Jewel said. "Go to sea, Seneca, if you still love me when you return, I'll be here for you." Benni Jewel got up and went into the house without looking back.

* * * * * * *

After spending an hour talking with Benni Jewel, Seneca left knowing he was going to leave everything and go grow up. He didn't say goodbye to his aged great-grandmother but left a quick note in his parent's mailbox: "I have decided to go to sea. I'll be in touch. I love you both. Seneca."

He also left a note for Jenelle and Charity: "Dear Jenelle I won't be seeing you and Charity for a while. I'll write when I get somewhere. Give my best to your dad. Take care of yourself and Charity, love Seneca."

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247.
Once in New Orleans, Seneca crused the ocean front, taking in the smells and flavor and sounds of Negro life, the shanties, the fried fish, jambalaya, Voodoo chants, and the beautiful prostitutes renting a few minutes of Heaven to anyone in need of escaping the confines of hell.

"Big boy," said a dark-eyed buxom woman with high-yellow skin and a red flower in her black curls. "What you lookin' fo' down here. One dallah I take you straight ta glory!"

Seneca shook his head, "no." He said, embarrassed by her direct approach. "I haven't got time, I'm headed to that ship over there."

"Ain't no woman on no boat, not like me." She said and flounced her bosom at him. "Just strawberry boys."

Seneca stepped around the whore and headed for the ship. He watched, fascinated at the necessary precision that warped her into her birth, the fluid communication between a swarming gang on the foc'sle head, the captain on the bridge, the other figures milling on the fantail. A big man with an officer's cap shouted orders to his winchmen and the other seamen on the foc'sle head seconding the shouted orders from a figure on the bridge. Another short, squat officer responded to the weird linked rhythm which centered on the flying bridge, where the captain stood sternly beside a helmsman. Light heaving lines, of thin cord with the old familiar Turk's head woven-weight bulking heavy on the end, snaked ashore to be caught by waiting dockers. The thin line
was fastened to the thick-yoked hawser, which then were looped securely to the incurved bollards. Then the winches rattled hoarsely and took a strain and steadily drew the ship taut to the dock. A midships crew swung the gang-plank from its deck-rail snuggery, out, down, and finally with a platform at right angles to the shipside. All was made fast, and the groaning agony of the winches ceased. The ship was home.

The officers on foc'sle head, flying bridge, and poop made negating signals with their arms, and the ship which had prowled the Atlantic was landbound and neatly parked.

Men disappeared into the mid-ships and afterdeckhousing and presently began to flow outward in a steady stream, some carrying sea bags over their shoulders, bags like long canvas sausages, bludging and lumpy with possessions. Others, not carrying bags, appeared in shore-going clothes, and left in a hurry. A few remained aboard. The big man with the blue officers cap, seemed to be everywhere.

Suddenly there was a commotion. A skinny Negro man dressed in filthy blue dungarees and ragged sweater ran stumbling from the midshipshousing down the ladder to the forward hatch, up the foc'sle head, and stood, panting, staring round him, like an animal at bay. Behind him lumbered the big man, leaping, nimbly for his size, swarming up the ladder to the foc'sle head like a big lion. The little Negro man dodged round the winch and stood with his back to the aprons of the V of the bow, trapped, as the big man charged reaching meaty hands toward the thin Negro man.
who attempted to shrink into the ship's iron skin.

The big man grabbed him by the scruff and by his rope belt, planted his feet, surged, and heaved the skinny Negro over the side. He fell and lay brokenly, then stirred, as the big man looked down at him. Then he pulled himself painfully off the dockside iron sheathing, rising with separate creaking movements like a folded sheet of paper emerging from an envelope. "You ever set foot aboard any ship of mine again!" The big man stood with fist folded. "You put so much as one black foot on a ship of mine and I'll kill you, you black son-of-a-bitch! I'll pull your head out of your neck and shit down your black throat, you goddamn black Nigger!"

The goddamn black Nigger didn't answer, He dragged himself as swiftly as his bruised body allowed away from the ship.

Seneca got to his feet and walked to where the big man still stood, watching the retreating Negro, breathing satisfaction. "Mr Mate," Seneca called out, not knowing what else he was going to say. "Mister Mate!" The big man looked at Seneca over the ship's side. The mate was as big as Seneca, with a whiskered face and wide flat nose. Little piggy blue eyes and a hard flat mouth.

"What do you want, Nigger!" He bellowed.

"I'll bet you can't do that to me," Seneca said.

"Do what?"

"Throw me off the ship like you just did that little African man."

250.
PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

The mate stretched his muscled neck and laughed. "Who was he, yo Mama, Come on up and see, punk. I'll eat you raw."

Seneca was all business now. "If you can't eat me raw...I mean, can I have his job"

The mate laughed again, hugely amused. "If I can't whip you and throw your sorry ass off my ship, shit, you can have my job. Come aboard and stop running your mouth."

They fought for a solid half hour. Well matched, both stood six feet ten and were soild muscle. The mate was older and a bit heavier, but was deceptively quick on his feet. He roared with laughter as he slung his punches, most of which missed. One didn't. It caught Seneca on the bridge of his nose and he could hear cartilage crunch. He fell backward onto the anchor winch, but as the mate came after him he kicked out and caught the mate in the testicles which dropped him. Seneca's broken nose gushed blood but he stood over the mate ready to drop him again if he attempted to rise. The mate's face was twisted with pain. Seneca held out his hand and yanked the man to his feet. "We going to do this some more or you had enough." He snuffled and swept blood from his face with the back of his hand. "When you catch your breath, Mr Mate, I'll beat your ass some more."

The mate laughed again, although the effect hurt him down below. "No, by God, we're finished!" He bellowed. "Of all the goddamn crazy kids, I get one can fight! You got yourself a job"

Then he suddenly swung his right and caught Seneca on the jaw sending him to sleep. When the boy came awake, the mate was 251.
standing over him, legs spraddled looking down with vast amusement. The mate reached out a hand and yanked him to his feet. "You got yourself a job," he said; "if you still want it. The last punch was just to let you know I'm still the big dick duck on this ship. You think I'm the boss? Could I throw you off?"

"You could have after you sucker punched me?"

"Okay. That settles it then." The mate looked around at the seamen, "you boys hear that? "Shake." He offered Seneca his hand. "You're the Number Two Ordinary, and there's nothing lower unless it's a cadet. What's your name?"

"Seneca Fofana."

"Say sir from now on. What was it again?"

"Seneca Fofana, sir."

"That's better. My name is Mr Hogg and I'm the chief Mate and I'm the stud duck on this tub and don't you forget it. Now go get yourself taped up, and go get some twat, cause ain't none on this ship. Be back here tomorrow, we're articling on a new crew. We sail day after tomorrow. Welcome aboard the SS INSTITUTION. It's what's known as a hungry ship. No pussy on board so like I said, go get your fill, we'll be months crossing." He clapped Seneca on the shoulder. "You got guts, boy. Now, get over the side and see me in the wheelhouse tomorrow at eleven bells." Mr Hogg turned and slid himself down the ladder to the foredeck, feet not touching the iron rungs, and never turned his head as he swaggered painfully, jauntily up the ladder to the midshiphousing where he disappeared.

Seneca swabbed at his nose, now puffed like one of Mama.
PREACHERS PROSTITUTES & FRIED CHICKEN

Nandie's biscuits, followed the mate, and went over the side down the accommodation ladder. He had nine dollars and twenty-seven cents, but by God, he had a job. He was going to see the wide world at last and go to Africa, no matter what anyone said.

His only regret, in fact he had two regrets, he did not know if little Vera was alright, and had no way of finding out. On the home front, he was concerned for his niece. But had faith in the sweetheart in his life, Benni Jewel. He knew that she was as soild as steel and would care for Ruby at all cost. Every one else had let him down in one way or another and he wasn't man enough to forgive and forget. However, he never even considered his child; innocent of doing him any wrong, he had lumped her into his disappointment with Jenelle, as most men had the weakness of doing when upset with the woman that had given them children. He considered having Jenelle send Zakia's diaries to Ms Blon's home so Phoebe could keep them for him. But decided not to bother her at this time. He'd give her time to cool off. Having did all he thought necessary, for his leaving, he headed for town.

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253.
FOURTY-TWO

Seneca got into his car and headed across the bridge to say goodbye to Ms Desire Blon and Phoebe Wade.

In life, a charmed life is possible with the right person at the right time, there is possible perfection and Seneca found it and touched magic those last two days in New Orleans. Maybe those were the markers for a positive upswing in his search. They were days that he found hard not to relive at every opportunity. Maybe there were other people around Ms Blon's mansion, but the quiet, beautiful Phoebe was all he saw or remembered.

They had gone for the afternoon, to Lake Pontchartrain. The sun warmed them, glowing through the leaves, and birds discreetly sang. They stretched dripping from a swim, on the crisp grass and quite suddenly fell to kissing. The peachy-sweet scent of wet, sun-warmed woman suddenly got tangled with a clean cloud of black hair and sugary, spiced lips causing Seneca to lose his breath. Her purple eyes rolled backward, and the feel of her skin was flower-petal soft, a small pocket of purest honey where the neck joined shoulder brought intimate delight. The plump bulge of her inner thigh burned his hand as he pushed her swim pantie to one side of her mound; his fingers explored all the wondrous nooks and crannies which spelt sugar and spice..."I'm sorry." Seneca said. "I didn't want...I mean I didn't mean to. I mean I don't know what I mean. Except I'll love you all my life. We can't get married right now, but..."

"Silly boy, why did you stop? I told you before that I'm a 254.
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who will give you exactly what you ask for." She pushed him down and kissed him, then turned swiftly and pulled him onto her and kissed him again. "Let's just play like we're married; I know how to ask for what I want, too." They made love and had mad sex all afternoon. Seneca had never experienced such a thorough lesson in the art of love, and was deeply in love when he left that evening.

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255.
The waves smote the bow of the ship, savagely streaming sheets of water over the foc'sle head. The INSTITUTION was running bow on into the gale. As she buried her nose in a sea her screws reared clear of the wrenching waves and thrashed painfully half out of the water.

The night was blacker than the water, and colder than the Artic ice that supplied the sea on this Northern passage to Liverpool. The night watchman was braced against the anchor chains as they stretched taut from the chain locker to crimp round the winch. A nightwatch was basically two people—the Number Two Ordinary seaman and the cadet. They each worked an eight hour shift from eight bells to eight bells, or, rather, from 8 PM to 8 AM—two hours on look out; two hours stand-by, two hours look out, two hours stand-by, seven bitter cold nights a week, each week.

Seneca wore smelly long-johns, two pairs of pants, two oil-skins, two sweaters, a sheepskin coat, a knitted cap pulled down over his ears under the sou'wester, two pairs of socks, and hip boots. The sheets of water smote him full in the face, streamed back over the iced foc'sle head, and went plunging iron-heavy as an avalanche over the deck cargo of lashed logs, poisoned tautly by turnbuckles.

A shadowy figure gingered its way over the logs, a feeble tongue of flashlight licking out ahead of him. The light stammered and disappeared once as the figure slipped or was
Knocked off an icy log. The light reappeared and then was snapped off as the figure climbed up the ladder to the foc'sle head. As his sou'westered head appeared in dark profile eight bells struck on the bridge, Seneca checked the starboard (green) and port (red) running lights, the masthead light, answered the eight bells by hand tapping the clapper of the brass foc'sle head bell, then cupped his palms to his mouth and screamed into the gale the required answer to the bridge: "Lights 'r' bright, sir." The other figure walked over to Seneca.

"You're relieved, how is it?"

"Another ten minutes and you'd have deep sixed a corpse."

Said Seneca, "You'd think that Scotch bastard up there would at least set his lookouts on the flying bridge in the doghouses, wouldn't you, instead of down here on this fucking foc'sle head?"

"They don't call him Ice Dick for nothing," the other nightwatchman said. "He's still got the Mate and the AB standing wheelwatch topside. He's bedded down with his strawberry in that nice warm chartroom. "Well, I'll see you in two hours, if I don't freeze."

"Right, cadet. Think about New Orleans, it helps."

"Not me, Ordinary. I'm going to think about hell. It's warmer."

Seneca, who was the Number Two Ordinary seaman, took the flashlight and slipped and slithered, swearing steadily, over the sea-slimy logs leading to the midships ladder. He picked his way along the port passageway, across the midships deck,
undogged an iron door, slid into a brightly lit passageway, and
dogged the door shut behind him. He stopped for a minute by the
iron grating of the deck platform, which stood atop the engine
room, peeling off his soaked outer clothing, kicking off the
sea boots, taking off his gloves, and spreading his raw chapped
hands over the blast of heat which blew up from the iron open-
work of the grate out of the engine room below.

When he quit shivering he walked down the alley way seeing
for the hundredth time the bullet holes alongside the scabbed
white doughnut life preserver, the ax-blade scars close where the
red fire ax and extinguisher hung in brackets against the paint
blistered bulkhead. The red stenciling on the life preserver
said SS INSTITUTION. He had nearly been killed in that one sea
battle. She was a trouble ship as well as a hungry ship, like
the mate said. She was bound out of New Orleans for Liverpool,
Antwerp, Hamburg and Bremen. Her cargo was timber, sulphur,
phosphate rock, fertilizer, nails, and scrap iron. Like Jimmy
Du said, it stunk.

Seneca Fofana, who was paid ten dollars a week, no overtime,
who stood eight-hour watches at sea, who shortly would begin to
rot his hands in a mixture of lye and water called ALKI with which
he cleaned the whitework, who helped shift the ship at night from
dock to dock on his own time, who painted over the side in port,
who swept the remains of sheep shit and phosphate rock and sulphur
from the holds, who cleaned the stinking bilges in the deep tanks,
who helped batten down open hatches in company time-saving
defiance to maritime law when the ship was already at sea, who was part of the poop deck gang when the ship tied up or cast off, who ate biscuits from which cockroaches were knocked, who lived with seven other black men in one room under the poop next to the tortured grinding of the steering engine, who shared one reeking toilet with the same seven men and washed out of a bucket into which a steampipe had been twisted to heat the water-this Ordinary seaman walked into the crew mess and bled off a cup of overboiled coffee out of the huge zinc urn in the corner, sat down on a bench by the mess table, observed that the 'night lunch' had already been eaten, and lit an Old Gold. He cursed again-cursing ships and men and the sea and the spirit of high adventure which had gotten him into this mess.

A shrill pick-up whistle from the bridge hauled him swiftly out of the mess and back to the hungry ship SS INSTITUTION, bound for North European ports out of New Orleans. He dashed up to the bridge. The Mate was poised over the ladder, looking down at him.

"We've changed course," he said. "Trim the ventilators!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" he said, and went off to trim the ventilators which led to the cargo holds so that no dirty ocean damp would damage the lovely cargo of sheep manure, sulphur, phosphate rock, nails, and scrap iron for Germans to make a new war with. The waves crashed over the decks as the ship changed course, and all the ventilators appeared to have been seized, rusted fast since they had been trimmed an hour ago.

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Once relieved, he crept to the officers' pantry. He opened the icebox and there it was, all the delicatessen his soul as well as stomach craved, he ate ravenously. He was drinking a cup of once boiled coffee when he heard determined steps. The skipper had roused, either from ancient intuition or hunger, and was heading for the pantry. Seneca beat him out the door by a whisker.

There were over thirty men on that ship, and it's hard to pick a night-lunch thief out of thirty men. The skipper ranted and roared, and swore that: he would hang, keelhaul, and flog through the fleet the guilty party when he caught him, and in the meantime there would be no pay when they docked in Bremen and no shore leave at all.

Seneca looked at Bremen's lights, faint in the foggy distance: He saw the west coast of Africa, Old Cathay-the Taj Mahal, and temples of Greece, and the pyramids of Egypt standing sternly safe above the shifting desert. Zanzibar lay straight ahead.

He had passed safely into Kenya and had his African earth stowed away for Grand b's grave.

Seneca of the lonely heart, was lonely at sea and looked forward to making landfall.

He turned to the bridge.

"Light's are bright, sir," he sang out, loud and clear. Then turned again toward the oncoming lights of New Orleans, Louisiana. He rested his chin on his hands and looked into the soft distance of New Orleans 1936. "Very bright, sir" he said for the last time at sea.

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SENeca had been to sea, he had been to Africa, he had been to himself and found absolutely nothing. He'd worked in Washington, San Francisco, Ohio and he had paid off in New York. There was nothing to call him home to Houston, really. Daudi and Sarah Jean were both dead and buried. Poppa of a weak heart and Sarah Jean of a broken heart along with a push from pneumonia or flu.

They had died within months of each other, and Seneca had been in Egypt at the time, with no way possible of getting home. In a way it was a relief. Yet he had to see Mama Nandie, now 96 years of age and living alone. Then too, there was his wife, Jenelle and daughter, Charity. Otherwise, the lack of communication he felt about his immediate family was severed. Ruby wasn't old enough to truly need him and he knew she was secure with Benni Jewel.

But still, something drew him back to Arces Home. Maybe it was Grand D's spirit, he thought as he drove into Houston City limits for the first time in six years. The only thing certain in Seneca's mind was that he was finished with the sea.

As he came up on his turn off at Enterprise, he looked on the bright side, there was Ruby standing in the yard, Benni Jewel coming down the steps, looked like an angel. She had kept in constant contact, and seeing her was a shock to his system.

First things first; he was still married to Jenelle Gaston Fofana, so he continued past 751 Enterprise without making known 261.
to his niece or Benni Jewel that he was back in town.

The time wasn't quite right to face Benni Jewel just now. He needed to free himself from Jenelle. She now owned her father's mills, thus, he owned those mills, his ready cash was sparse and dwindling fast.

Seneca reached the highway #17 turn off for Spring Branch, made his turn and looked at the home he'd left six years ago. Surprisingly, things looked the same, in fact there was improvement to the roadway and something else he couldn't name. He parked and sat there for a few minutes to get his thoughts in order. He was surprised that the house was the same, but it now had a wide brick front drive, that's what he failed to see at first.

He was hesitant as he knocked at the front door. But then he'd been away a long time and out of touch with Jenelle. The papers had said...but news was never true. Maybe if his folks hadn't died, they'd have kept him...why would they, who kept in touch with anything?

Jenelle answered his knock. She was still plump, and very pretty in her bright dirndl dress. The eyes were still the same China blue, but now hardened by experience, and something he couldn't put a name to. She was not a fat little lonely girl, she was a woman, no longer a carbon of her father; but someone in their own space and knew it. Seneca remembered that she was nearly a year older than he was.

"Won't you come in, Mr Fofana?" She almost simpered. "It was nice of you to call. It's been such a long, long time. I
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hardly recognize you with your mustache. It makes you look like a pimp." It was then that he knew that she wasn't simpering but being sarcastic.

"Thank you, Mrs Fofana," Seneca said in a parody of her affectation. "I used to call you 'baby girl' when I was teaching you to drive, didn't I? Can we get back on that level? Even if I do look like a pimp."

Jenelle pretended shy. She dipped her chin with uncertainty. "Where have you been for six years? I thought you were going to visit your cousin over on Enterprise in Arces Home?" She folded her arms. "Me and the baby just waited and waited and waited, then some woman called and she said you had run off and gone to sea. I was so hurt and mad, I could hate you! Did hate you until I'd look at Charity."

"To tell it straight", Seneca said. "I was upset with the way your father treated my every suggestion on running the mills." Seneca entered the house and stood in the hallway. "He never got over us eloping, you know."

"That was no reason to run off and hurt me for six goddamn years! Now, was it. Didn't you love me and the baby?" Jenelle walked into the living room and took a seat in an over stuffed chair. "You been all over, everywhere, all over Europe, Africa and like that. Daddy set a lot of store by you, even after you ran off; he told me not to give up on you. You know he left one third of everything to you when he died. The other two thirds go to me and Charity. So, together, the three of us hold all of the"
stock in Lafarcarde Mills. His entire Estate. Seneca, we're very, very rich."

The rich statement drove through Seneca's consciousness, he started seeing some of his desires materialize. "How much is everything worth? Are we staying married, or do you want a divorce to put me in my place?"

"Seneca, please sit down and try to understand me for a change." Jenelle looked so serious until her facial expression brought chills up Seneca's spine. He felt as if someone was standing on his grave.

She continued, "when you left, I hated you and looked for some way to hurt you, make you feel my pain." Jenelle stretched and stood. "Do you remember Zakia's diaries that you had in that fishing tackle box? You said you were saving them for Ruby?" She walked to the bar and fixed drinks for them. She gave Seneca a rum and coke. Hers she drank neat. "Well, I opened that box and read those diaries, because you never would let me read them."

She took a seat next to Seneca on the sofa. "In the last one, dated October 9, 1925; she was telling Ruby why you killed her father, who her father was, and asking her to forgive you and your dogs. She even named the dogs, Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and Prince Alfred. She said that on April 12, 1925, she had went down to the creek to pick some bluebonnets for Kandi, and that Jessie Lee Maddox grabbed her and drug her under a pine tree where he raped her before you and your dogs got there. She described every detail, even about how 'the old folks' got the axe, bone saw, and knives and chopped his body up and then took

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his patrol car up to Huntsville and dumped it into the Brazos river. Then your parents took you to live with your Uncle Leroy in New Orleans; for fear that Ernest Ferguson would pick you out and you'd go to prison or be killed. She even wrote in another one about how Maybelle and Bennis Jewel went to see Big Red Ennis and tell him about what Ernest Ferguson had done to both of them. How he had raped Benni Jewel and..." She got up and went toward the hallway. Looking over her shoulder, she said, "wait, I'm going to go bring Charity so you can at least see her."

Seneca got up and went to the window and looked out at the enormous yard. He wondered why she had said 'at least' see her, he was home to stay.

"Wake up sweetie, your daddy is here." Jenelle was saying to the little sleeping girl as she walked back into the room.

Charity was a true carbon copy of Seneca, just a female with long black curls, and the deepest black skin he'd ever seen besides his own. She smiled and had the same bright white smile he had once charmed his great grandmother with. At seven, she looked nothing like she had at 14 months.

Seneca reached out for her and she drew back and looked up at her mother. "Go to your daddy, sweetie, it's okay."
The child was tall for her age and reached his belt, he stooped to hug her.

"I gave those diaries to the Texas Rangers downtown, over a year ago. I just called and told them you were on your way here, They are on their way to arrest you, they got your great grand-

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mother and Big Red Ennis last year. They're both being held in the County lock-up." A loud knock at the front door brought silence to stamp her last words, and she turned and went to open the door.

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BLACK LIVES MATTER...TO WHOM?

"One of the most tragic beliefs widely shared by Blacks throughout the world is that white people need or want us or will treat us equally and share societal resources with us. Faith continues to prevail in spite of overwhelming evidence, which disputes this belief. Blacks continue to ignore the irrefutable truth that in a racist social system, all institutions will reflect, protect and sustain values that are consistent with racism/white supremacy. This should not be considered surprising or profound since all institutions serve to perpetuate the social theory of the group that created them." Dr. Bobby E. Wright, African Centered Psychologist.

Sometimes, different people can independently arrive at the same conclusion. I didn't and haven't been affiliated with the "BLACK LIVES MATTER" movement, but I respect their analysis of the problem and their desire to end it. Around the same time as "BLM" was starting, I, like other people, was thinking along the same lines about what the fundamental problem was behind seemingly rampant police murders of Black people. And for once, I didn't feel alone in centering the problem on what Black life means. If Black life doesn't 'mean' anything, the USA would be a genocidal slave State in which the killing and punishment of Black people is meted out and widely considered acceptable, regardless of guilt or innocence, gender, socioeconomic status, or other factors. And that's exactly what the USA is.

BLACK LIVES MATTER is a grassroots coalition-based social
movement started in the United States by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in the wake of several unpunished (or lightly punished) incidents of police murdering unarmed Black people, including the slaughter of Oscar Grant and Kenneth Harding in Oakland CA; as well as Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, and Michael Brown.

It consist of people with diverse viewpoints and tactics, the movement's central aim is to oppose the systematic normalization of Black peoples' deaths at the hands of police, which makes violence against Black people more likely and more acceptable. BLM began as a social media movement, but has quickly become an on-the-ground social movement with many different actors and organizations that aren't necessarily connected as one organization but have the same general aims.

Actions and policies of the State result in the disproportionate killing, injuring, and incarceration of Black people, but the struggle for Black life to 'matter' is not just about opposing policing practice against Black men, boys, and girls. It is also about how domestic abuse victim Marissa Alexander was not allowed to defend herself against her abusive husband under the same 'stand your ground' defense in Florida law that George Zimmerman used to get exonerated in the murder of Trayvon Martin. It is also about how Black trans woman CeCe McDonald was prosecuted and convicted for defending herself against hostile and racist young whites in Minneapolis. It is also about how broader political practices,
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like the mass disenfranchisement of Florida and Ohio Black voters, the shutting down of water services to Detroit residents, and the anemic Federal response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, show a remarkable disregard for Black lives.

Because the nature of racism is not just prejudice but also the power to enforce prejudice, punishing or educating those who commit violence against Black people without justification cannot address these problems individually. It's too big of a problem. The conservative Wall Street Journal reported that in 2011 NYPD had more stops of young Black men in Manhattan than there are young Black men in Manhattan. And at least one former NYPD officer has stepped forward to say that he was specifically ordered to stop young Black males at every opportunity. But he is just one officer, and NYPD is just one department. Police officers everywhere have broad latitude to stop anyone they suspect may be involved in a crime and use that latitude to systematically target Black and Latino men and boys. The problem is deeper than any one department and it's stop-and-frisk policies.

For one thing, it's everywhere, not just New York. One report described anti-Black racism as 'baked into' police practices. "The root of the problem," says BLM co-founder Alicia Garza, "is anti-Black racism." In other words, there is a unique, deeply ingrained, and pervasive kind of racism that American society at large feels toward all Black people that goes a long way toward explaining these disparities as well as many others. What does Blackness mean to America? There are not-so-subtle hints everywhere.
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* Black people make up approximately 12% of US population, but constitute more than 40% of the prison population.
* White Americans use illegal drugs at rates that are comparable to, or well in excess of rates at which Black Americans use illegal drugs, but Black Americans are incarcerated for drug offenses ten times more.
* In 2012, police and security forces killed a Black American at least once every 28 hours. According to another report, "Black teens were 21 times more likely to be shot dead [by police] than their white counterparts."

The problem is not just that a de facto police State is ready to descend on Black people at any time, but also, more broadly, that the entire population of African Americans is perceived by broader society(1) as unworthy of being listened to when we protest through legal, institutional, or other means. (2) as a potential threat. This problem must be viewed as a systemic one, not just an individual or institutional one, and it must be addressed on multiple levels, including not only institutionally or interpersonally but especially in our unconscious thought, the deeply ingrained thought processes that are reflected by our actions before we even have the opportunity to think. Before we can change our thinking to make Black lives matter, we must truly understand that the problem of Black lives not mattering is a problem of meaning that isn't just individual or institutional but structural. It is rooted in what America is.

America needs Black lives to matter. Due to centuries of
negative images and stereotypes about Africans and racial Blackness, in the collective psyches of the United States, throughout the Americas, and across the world Blackness means, as the late psychiatrist Dr. Frantz Fanon said, "the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul." A field of study within cognitive psychology known as implicit cognition (or implicit bias) finds quantifiable evidence of what Black people have been knowing for better of 1,000 years (had anyone with power ever bothered to listen): that deeply rooted negative attitudes towards people of African descent are held widely across the American population, even among those who claim to be nonracist, even when other possible causes for these attitudes (like socioeconomic class or education level) are taken into consideration—and these attitudes tend to increase people's willingness to use violence (interpersonal, institutional, or State) and punishment against Black people.

One recent quantitative study from Stanford, titled "NOT YET HUMAN", shows that people of African descent are commonly associated with apes at an unconscious level of mental processing. According to the study, "this Black-ape association alters visual perception and attention, and it increases endorsement of violence against Black suspects. In an archival study of actual criminal cases, the authors show that news articles written about Blacks who are convicted of capital crimes are more likely to contain ape-relevant language than news articles written about white convicts. Moreover, those who are implicitly
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portrayed as more ape-like in these articles are more likely to be executed by the State than those that are not." This finding agrees with the earlier work of Stanford literature professor Sylvia Wynter, who found that police in Los Angeles in the 1980's and early 1990's commonly used the incident code "NHI" - meaning "no humans involved" - for incidents involving African Americans. While many people acknowledge this police code have been racist, the Stanford quantitative study shows that even people who don't think themselves racist have the same thoughts.

Other studies show that children of African descent are believed to be older, more mature, and less innocent than their white counterparts are, something that might explain why teachers suspend African American preschoolers at triple the rate of white preschoolers and why police and prosecutors are more likely to charge African American youths with harsher crimes or in adult court than they are in cases involving non-Black youths. It might also explain why 12 year old youth Tamir Rice was shot dead by police at a playground in Cleveland, Ohio, while holding a toy gun, whereas white youths are free to regularly play with toy guns in their neighborhoods.

Another set of studies ("shooter bias" studies) shows that Black males holding cellphones are, on quick glance, believed to be holding guns, while white males are believed to be holding cellphones. These studies also found that people would be quicker to draw and shoot their weapons when faced with a Black male who might be holding a cell phone or a gun, compared with a white male in the same position. These studies might explain
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why plainclothes police shot unarmed immigrant Amadou Diallo after he reached for his wallet presumably thinking the officers wanted to see his identification or were trying to rob him.

Still other studies have shown that a stereotypically-named hypothetical Black defendant will receive a higher rate of conviction and harsher degree of punishment for the same crime than will a stereotypically-named white defendant, even when identical evidence is presented.

A hypothetical job applicant with an African American sounding name is less likely to receive further consideration when a hypothetical job applicant with a white sounding name is granted further consideration, even when both have the exact same resume except for the name at the top. An applicant for housing or mortgage will be similarly screened based on assumptions about whether they are Black or not, thereby shaping geographic segregation patterns.

African American employees are more likely to be evaluated poorly by employers than are white employees.

Black NFL players are required to return from injury sooner than their white counterparts with the same injury. Other studies that the medical profession is slower to give aggressive treatment to African Americans and less sensitive to the pain of African American patients.

Regardless of whether one stands on the side of those addressing the problem, like the founders of BLM, describing the problem, like researchers at Stanford, or even denying the problem or defending police murders of Black people, the central problem is not
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a swirling morass of practices to be altered. It is a structure. These problems of anti-Black racism are not simply problems of individual or institutional practice or prejudice because they are repeated across widely disparate individuals and institutions with the same independent results. The psyche of anti-Black racism is not individual or institutional. Both the psyche and the institution are networked together as part of one dynamic, fluid, and massive structure. The psyche, like the institution, is a structure. The problems of Black life mattering are hence fundamentally problems of structural power. In other words, structural racism encompasses the entire system of white supremacy, diffused and infused in all aspects of society, including our history, culture, politics, economics, and our entire social fabric. Structural racism is the most profound and pervasive form of racism—all other forms of racism (e.g. institutional, interpersonal, internalized, etc.) emerge from structural racism.

The key indicators of structural racism are inequalities in power, access, opportunities, treatment, and policy impacts and outcomes, whether they are intentional or not. Structural racism is more difficult to locate in a particular institution because it involves the reinforcing effects of multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present, continually producing new, and re-producing old forms of racism.

The problem of Black life mattering extends to unconscious levels of thinking and is not only deeply rooted, but also widely diffused and reinforced through multiple networks of power. It
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is therefore quite challenging to uproot without a massive change in the social structure that abolishes the ways that both personal and institutional practice, as well as individual and social frames of meaning, are tethered to the genocidal slave empire of the "modern" world, the United States. If we only think about the practice of prejudice without centering the ways that all racism derives from structural racism—what I call anti-Blackness—we will be at pains to explain why there is so deep a reserve of animosity toward Black people (and people of color in general) and why the mass loss of Black life does not constitute a national emergency or a cause for widespread grief. True dedication to the principle that Black Lives Matter will require a revolution using all means necessary to end the structure of anti-Blackness.

Racism/white supremacy in America is deeply rooted in a global system of settler-colonial capitalism, land theft, mass murder (or if you prefer the sanitized euphemism of the term "genocide") racial chattel slavery and its consequences. White privilege is the manifestation, consequence, and flip-side of Black oppression and exploitation, attacks on indigenous sovereignty, and the Eurocentric imposition of private property relations on both land and people is to extract profit through domination. This is a global Empire, and it is an empire here within the US itself as well. White supremacy, white privilege, and racism can only be uprooted by overturning that system of settler colonialism and imperialism, here in the US and throughout the world. Nothing short of decolonization, self-determination of oppressed
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and colonized people, and revolutionary social, political, economic
and ecological transformation of entire society will do.

"Powerful people never educate the victims of their power
in how to take their power away from them...the ideology of our
"former" slave masters cannot save us. We will not be truly liber-
erated until we are the main instruments of our liberation." Dr.
John Henrik Clarke

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