

## Mass

The white men gathered outside in the main yard, around a crackling fire, drinking, swearing and sharing stories of the brewing war between the states. The black men moved purposely about, tending to the needs of the white men, despite their own tiredness from working the fields all day. This baby did not seem to want to greet the world tonight. The missus had carried it for a few days more than she liked and, now it was time, she did not appreciate the long labor. Her black nurse kept hot rags and cool towels to soothe her pains, but all she got in return were curses and accusations for personally prolonging the birth with her Haitian voodoo. She was alternately pushed away then pulled closer to help bear down.

After many hours of abuse, the black nurse saw the head start to crown and took quick action to call the little black girl by the door over with more towels and cloths. The baby was coming hot and fast now, but there was too much blood, she said. The baby plopped out, small and angry red. It was quickly wrapped and sent out of the room. The white woman nearly passed out from the pain, after glimpsing the dark bundle of baby flesh and blood. She already knew before the nurse told her. The baby was dead. Thank God.

Mass held the bundle tight to her flat chest and ran as fast as her skinny legs could carry her toward the slave quarters. She passed up the shacks, avoiding the little fires of light, and kept on toward the river. She was very dark and very light footed, so she was not seen or heard in the night. She took deep breathes as she pumped her legs forward. She ran for all her life, headed north. She did not stop until daylight when she hid in a beaver dam. She hummed a familiar song in her head. She followed instructions well. The nurse had whispered one word, “run”.

In the darkness of the beaver dam, she allowed the wiggling figure to peep out of the cloth and catch some cooler air. The new eyes barely opened and the baby turned its head toward her close face. She had heard the softest cry while running but could not allow the baby to move freely for fear of detection. Such would be an immediate death sentence by bullet or rope if she was lucky. If she wasn't, which was most likely, it would mean bloody stripes on her back, the humiliation of the slave auction block, and brutal daily raping of the soul, if not the body.

Mass gently rocked the baby as she began to put words to the song she hummed. She smiled and let her eyes comfort the baby's dark eyes. She was familiar because she had been the missus's little handmaid, so the baby had heard her voice many times. This familiar was enough to keep the baby calm and happy. She liked to laugh so she giggled a little now and the baby smiled back. She settled down in a less damp section of the abandoned beaver cave and tried to get a little rest, though always listening and alert to trackers. As the day became hotter, she took a piece of bark and fanned the baby's face; she dared not move too much. The ripples in the red river water would give them away. Here they would be safe until dusk, when she could start running again.

The baying of hounds could be heard in the distance, mixed with the gruff shouting of men searching for the runaway slave. They noticed her absence in the big house and suspected she had run off. The men followed the dogs as they sniffed the ground and picked up the trail. The girl's scent led them to the water's edge and they picked up their trotting pace, following the serpentine course of the river, headed south. As they stumbled over cypress knees and tree roots, they sniffed and inspected the muddy holes along the bank. Their noisy clamor faded away as they followed the fake trail she made before back tracking in the river to hide.

The heat of the day brought on fitful napping, peppered with dark dreams of being beaten, mauled by dogs, and slowly drowning from snake bites. Mass was glad when dusk arrived. She gave the

baby some of the reddish brown river water to drink before wrapping it up again for the next leg of their journey. They had to make it to the big river and find the railroad people whispered about. No one knew for sure it existed but they had to try to find it. Their life depended on the help of strangers to get them to freedom. Mass tied the baby to her chest, so both arms could swing freely. She could run faster and for a longer time before resting. She felt she could run until dawn.

A faint light shone in the window of the house's dark silhouette. She knew this meant it was a safe place to get food or rest. She had run past a few but dawn was coming and they needed to hide. The baby was getting restless and they both needed to eat. Mass watched for a few minutes taking in details like back doors, covered windows, then she carefully snuck up to the door and knocked out a soft rhythm. It sounded as loud as her thudding heart. She nearly jumped when the door slid open. A pale face stared out at her briefly, then the door opened wider to let her in.

Inside the modest home, there sat a youth holding a pistol pointed right at Mass. The woman, standing against the closed door, nodded to him and he put it away. She motioned for Mass to sit down at the table, something she never did in the presence of a white person. She hesitated a moment until she saw the woman fill a big bowl with soup from the hearth. She quickly sat down and began to unwrap the bundle at her chest to reveal the small infant. She dipped a finger in the soup and put it in the infant's mouth. The infant refused it. She tried again and was refused. Once again she dipped her pinky finger and this time she caressed the infant's tongue until it began to suck. She continued to do this until the baby was satisfied and refused her finger again, then she ate what was left.