Kwaku Ananse and The House of Ashe.

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Kwaku Ananse and the House of Ashe

by

Craig Schisler

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through the Department of English
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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Author's Note:

In certain displaced cultures, such as in the boundaries of this story, the traditions that hold a distinct identity are, out of necessity, remembered and communicated through oral means such as story and dance.

The general nature of the stories of oral traditions are meant to provide not only a cultural continuity from elders to young, but to challenge an audience to find a recognition that it can apply to itself as individuals.

Not all people are affected the same way by any particular myth. The themes presented in each myth affect a group of people on levels that can be felt painfully, as a slap in the face, or softly like the sight of dry petals floating away from their floral stem.

The characters of the Kwaku Ananse myth are not representative of any specific characters, but embody the tendencies and behaviors of many.
The land was suffering a great drought. Trees and bushes grew so thin that their own shadows could find no purchase. Rivers, once mighty had retreated under the soil to escape the bale faced sun. Animals roamed the land desperate even for a scent of food. Kwaku Ananse, the spider, found himself so raw and sore from his hunger that he began to blame everything around him for his pain. He regarded the sky and tried to stick his nose as far against it as possible. He strained for even a whiff of rain. The emptiness of the sky only reminded him how famished he was. Blue became an ugly colour to him.

His belly was distended horribly so that it dragged across the ground when he walked. Just to stop the drumming inside it, he swallowed sand and soil and rocks. But this did nothing to appease his hunger. He was in a foul mood.

Near death and cursing the ground that held him, Ananse heard a drumbeat that was full of joy and victory. It reminded him of living.

Boum-Ka Ba-Ba-Boom-Ka
Boum-Ka Ba-Ba-Boom Ka

At first he thought that it was his stomach making the noise. He prodded it.

"Be quiet. You are delirious," he told it. "You must be silent so that death will be easier for me."

But the drumming continued. Ananse discovered that the noise was coming from somewhere else. He decided he would tell whomever was doing that drumming to stop so he could die in peace.

He walked a great distance and went behind a mountain and through a grove of trees. What he saw made him salivate.

There was Mandril in the middle of a field full of sweet and delicious yams. Mandril was doing the drumming, stuffing his mouth full of yams.

Ananse instantly forgot all about dying. He had to have those yams.

Now Mandril was a very clever character, and very selfish. He
was also very strong. Ananse had to be careful in getting the yams. He crept a safe distance from Mandril and looked in his basket of tricks that he always kept near him. He sorted through it and saw how tired and worn they were.

Said Ananse to his tricks, "Wake up, I have a job for you to do. I need one of you to help me steal Mandril's yams." There was no answer from the basket. So he shook his basket until he got a reply.

"Kwaku Ananse," said his tricks, "you have used us too many times and we have grown feeble. You will never fool Mandril with any of us," said Pretending-To-Be-Dead.

This made Ananse angry. He shook the basket even harder.

"Even the simple pig won't listen to your tales, now," said Changing-Your-Name. Again Ananse shook the basket.

"All our ability you have squandered," said Getting-Others-To-Work-For-You. "Ha-Ha-Ha Ha Ha." All his tricks began to laugh at him.

"I do not like this way which you are joking," said Ananse. But his tricks continued to laugh at him. Ananse slammed the lid on his basket and walked away quickly so he could not hear the laughter. He was very angry. He feared his tricks might be right.

"I must look for more tricks," he said. "Good tricks, tricks that no one has seen before."

Cora watched the dancers circle the fire. She felt the rhythm of the drums go through her, each beat changing the pattern of her heart, her soul lifting with each crescendo. The dancers followed the drumming. They bent and twisted, twirled and shook. Each told their story of hunts and battles, of vision and spirit. She watched her aunt dancing, absorbed in her telling and heard her voice as she remembered Ananse and his tricks. She knew all the stories.

She could barely wait till it was her turn to enter the circle and dance. It didn't matter how small your story was, as long as you told it.
"Every story holds something", Mama Rose had told her. "When you tell it. That's part of the magic. You live each event, and then, when it's time, you bring them back by breathing them out." Mama Rose knew how to tell a story. Cora liked to be around her when she was speaking. When she was holding an audience, everyone felt the power of her voodoo. Cora saw how still they were, trying to catch the beat of every word that came off her tongue. Cora studied how they sat, struck by how beautiful she was, how tall and regal, like a queen. Yes, Cora made sure everyone knew that Mama Rose was her aunt. She was very powerful.

One day, she thought, I will be like her. She imagined herself walking into the dancing circle and everybody stopping. Then the drums would begin and she would dance and tell something very important, something that would help everyone. And they would look at her differently after that; the way they looked at her aunt. They would come to her with their problems and worries and sicknesses, and she would cure them using her magic.

The dance was ending. She waited for the abrupt stop of the drums and then ran into the circle. Now, everybody could dance. Those who wanted to gathered around the fire and the drumming began again. Cora felt each drum beat inside her. They resounded with each of her steps and every movement. She let herself go completely with the dance. It was a kind of trance that pulled at her existence and spread her soul beyond her body, beyond the dancers and upwards with the smoke of the fire and the voices of the drums. A feeling of freedom overtook her; it flowed through her and filled her with such a feeling of goodness that she couldn't believe that she could feel any differently.

After the dancing, her spirit still shone and everyone around seemed illuminated by it. This was life. "That is why," her aunt had told her, "we will always survive. No slave master can destroy that."

The drumming stopped awkwardly. Cora looked up and saw a girl about her own age run into the circle, a look of panic on her face. She looked frantically about and then moved towards her. She held
Cora's arms and between breaths managed to get her message out.

"Soldiers are coming."

"Yankee?" said Cora.

"It don't matter," said a voice behind her. Mama Rose put her hand on the girl's arm.

The girl turned toward Mama Rose. "Maybe 'Hawkers," she added. The girl referred to Jayhawkers—bands of men, deserters, criminals, who raided farms and plantations looking for loot, food, and women.

Cora saw fear in Mama Rose's eyes. "How far away?" she asked.

"They'll be here soon."

Everything seemed to dissolve around her. Cora watched people just start running, away from the fire, away from the plantation. There were cries of "What do we do?". Mama Rose tried to make everyone come back to the house with them. She would keep them hidden. No one came. They were too scared. Hysteria had set in. Cora tried to tell them not to go but they wouldn't listen.

"Mama Rose may have voodoo enough to scare away a cold with roots and herbs, but no voodoo is proof against what soldiers can do." People headed inland. They'd rather take their chances there.

Mama Rose led Cora back through the plantation and straight into Ashe Hall. That house had sheltered them for the past few months after the plantation owners had abandoned the place. The people had decided that Mama Rose should live there; she deserved to more than anybody else. She brought Cora with her. Ashe Hall became their home.

They ran into the house and bolted the door. Cora could see that her aunt was upset that nobody had followed them. Why were they treating Mama Rose like this? They were so adamant, and so afraid. Cora couldn't get the panic of the people out of her head. She and her aunt retreated to an upstairs room. They could see the entire plantation through the window. There was an immense quiet that filled the plantation as they waited for signs of the soldiers. Cora watched her aunt. She was deep in concentration:
all signs of disappointment gone from her face.

Torch lights appeared in the distance. They floated silently and deliberately towards them. Maybe those people were right in running, Cora thought. What if Mama Rose can't protect us? An overwhelming urge to flee gripped her. She stood and ran to the door. Her aunt was quicker. She pulled Cora down to the floor and then led her over to the window. Her grip was iron.

Cora squirmed, but there was no way she could get away from her aunt. Those torches were coming nearer. Normally, she would be comforted by her aunt's hugs. She would be calmed by the softness of her touch and the regular beat of her heart. This time it was as if a stranger was holding her. She shut her eyes tightly. She wasn't here; this wasn't happening. She wanted it to end, to be back at the dance. It made no difference if she closed her eyes or not. When she opened her eyes, she saw the small flame of torches put to the cane fields. The advance of the 'hawkers was methodical. She watched them set fire to some of the slave shacks where those families had lived. She heard them breaking things in the barn and the stable. They ripped the doors off the sugar-house and dragged out the equipment. When they descended on the stable she knew that some of them were Southern deserters; they still wore partial uniforms. They didn't care about saving the South or who they fought. The message they brought was simpler, more direct and horrible. The stable roared with flames, and above it all, she could hear the screams of somebody's forgotten mule as it burned. Animals scream just as loudly as people.

What a joke to those 'hawkers: all that yelling and laughing and burning. It seemed everything got lit.

Mama Rose made her watch. She didn't say hide your eyes, girl. She held her head and pointed it toward what was happening. "Watch," she said. "You watch." Cora could feel herself crying, and Mama Rose never let her turn away. Why was Mama Rose mad at her? It wasn't her fault this was happening.

That mule was still screaming, and the smoke came through the house and made her gag and want to vomit. When the 'hawkers
started to move towards the house, she struggled and fought to get away.

"Let go," she cried. "Let go. They're coming; they're coming." But Mama Rose held her like a vice. Somehow the soldiers never heard Cora's hysteria, and when they made a move towards the house, they kept getting distracted. They never saw the house. Maybe there was too much smoke; maybe they simply had enough of destruction: Cora didn't know.

Mama Rose held her tightly until the 'lawkers left, and the fires died down. Cora fell asleep in her arms, and she awoke in the same position. She saw Mama Rose's face, saw it in the flickering light of the fires, and wondered aloud, "Are we all right?". Mama Rose just stared at her and slowly lifted her eyes back out towards the plantation.

Maybe Mama Rose didn't have an answer cause she never said a word. Instead, she just held Cora and rocked her until she fell back asleep.

A short time afterward, a few of the families came back. Cora figured that they would be overjoyed that Mama Rose had kept them hidden. Instead, what she found was open resentment. Everything these people had, their homes, had been destroyed. Some of the other families never made it back. Cora never asked about them: you never did things like that; you might find out what really happened.

With nothing left except the memory of the 'lawkers, these people decided they had enough. They were abandoning the plantation. Cora tried to make them stay, but they said they'd rather take their chances in Baton Rouge or New Orleans. The angry way they looked at her, the way those eyes spoke an unmentionable blame made Cora step away from them. Others headed north to Arkansas, and Texas.

There was no way she could stop any of them from going. Perhaps her aunt could have done something to help them, save their homes. Maybe if she, herself, had just hung a few wreaths like she had been taught... They made her feel like she was as bad as the
soldiers, as if she had carried the torches and set fire to the world.

Cora went back to Mama Rose and told her. She told Mama Rose that if she had done something then things would be different and if, and if, and if.

Mama Rose just sat there and took it. She didn't tell Cora to stop, didn't tell her she was wrong, didn't tell her that if people really want your help they ask for it. Later, when Cora had finished crying, Mama Rose came up to her room and sat beside her on the bed. She handed Cora a wreath woven of wisteria adorned simply with a white satin bow. Mama Rose gently began to stroke her hair and sang her a childhood song. When she was done she kissed Cora on the forehead and gave her a big smile. "Come and eat," she said. "I made some of those fresh biscuits you like.

Jayhawkers came through the plantation two more times. Cora hung her wreath on the front door. Mama Rose said that it would help keep them hidden. No 'hawker ever found them. That was because Mama Rose knew how to hide. She and Cora planted wisteria alongside the house, and it climbed up and worked itself into the brick so it became part of the outside wall. They planted little flowers, each bloom part of a special pattern, each pattern forming a hex.

"This one is a warding sign. And this too, only different." There were mats woven with similar patterns. She taught Cora to recognize each pattern, ones she'd never see unless she specifically looked for them. Every time Cora opened a window or stepped through a door, she had to draw another sign in the air. There was something crazy about it all, she thought at first, but Mama Rose seemed to know when she didn't draw her signs, and that, Cora couldn't explain. She got a whipping, but she was more scared of how Mama Rose knew. So she made it a habit to draw the signs, and not one 'hawker or soldier, Yankee or Southern, ever set foot in that house. Even though Ashe Hall stood right in front of them, they couldn't see it.

That was how Mama Rose kept them hidden and safe. Cora never
doubted her aunt's abilities again.

Some families eventually did come back. That was how Cora and Mama Rose knew the war was over. These families asked how they had survived. Cora told them the truth: plainly and simply. Mama Rose had done it. These people asked if maybe they could see her aunt. Mama Rose let them into Ashe Hall, and they'd say a few things to her, but mostly they just stared. Cora watched her aunt smile and graciously, like a queen, welcome these people back. They all seemed satisfied when they left. Mama Rose spent the rest of the day humming and singing and smiling, just like she was before the war.

When Cora was told that they had to leave Ashe Hall, she complained bitterly. Her aunt's manner made it clear that they didn't have a choice. Mama Rose started going through each room with a volatile efficiency.

"Pack up only what you need and can carry," she told Cora. Not only were they to move out of their home, she wasn't allowed to take any of her precious things with her. This seemed more of an affront than she could stand. Cora could feel her voice getting weepy with anger.

"Why don't I just take off all my clothes and leave them here too. I don't need them. I don't want anything. Nothing."

Mama Rose barely paused to acknowledge her. Her answer was a raised eyebrow. Cora began her whole routine again, asking why they couldn't just stay. Mama Rose was as resistant to her pleading as before and just kept repeating the same thing over and over. "Because that's the way things are." After about five times, Cora got the message. She decided that she wasn't going to speak to her aunt ever again.

It was difficult deciding what to take with her. At least she was allowed to choose. There were lots of things she wanted, but mostly things she didn't absolutely need. There was a little girl's doll that looked nice propped up in her room. The doll had a pretty porcelain face and was dressed in red satin. She'd often pretend she was wearing a satin dress just like that. But she was
far too old to be playing with dolls, so she lay it gently on the bed. She put a candelabra she had found in the dining room beside the doll. That candelabra had places for six candles. Sometimes she'd light six all at once but not for long because she didn't have any more candles. She liked the way they smelled when she blew them out. But candles wouldn't last forever, and Mama Rose used oil lamps. She wouldn't be taking those. There was a ripped painting of a beautiful blond girl dressed in pink, carrying a parasol that she added to the pile. She wondered if that girl had lived in Ashe Hall before her. It gave Cora a thrill that she was living there too.

Slowly the pile on her bed grew. She held everything for a while, trying to think of some excuse to keep it, and then tossed it on the bed. She couldn't find anything she really desperately needed. There was a broken knife; a rusty straight razor; a glass bauble from a chandelier; a pewter comb; an empty perfume atomizer; an old catalog for sportswear; a stuffed peregrine with a broken wing; a dog leash; a man's felt hat riddled with moth holes; half a deck of playing cards; a bar of perfumed soap; and a silver spoon. It was quite a pile. She studied it for a while knowing that this wasn't what Mama Rose was talking about when she said to take what she needed. What if she needed any of it? There might come a time. Cora sucked her bottom lip and listened for her aunt. She stepped quietly into the hallway and held her breath. Mama Rose had gone. Good. Cora ran back into the room and lifted the edges of the quilt around the pile. She tied the corners together and heaved it over her shoulder like a sack. Then she was out the front door and running through the early morning mist toward the sugar-house. She could hide her pile there for a while until she had time to sneak it out.

There were some loose floorboards behind one of the vats in the sugar-house. She pried the boards apart and hid her treasure beneath them. Then she did like her aunt had taught her. She went outside and found some dried grass. She began to weave a simple pattern by braiding and tying the grass together. It was a hurried
job and not the best hex, but it would do for a while. She threw it on top of the sack and said a little prayer for extra luck. She put the floorboards back as best she could and hoped that the grass hex would stay together.

She ran back to Ashe hall knowing that this one time she had gotten past her aunt and that was the best part of all.

Mama Rose looked up at the front of the house and stared for a spell not saying a word. It was such a place. Columns held the front and big windows were set above and below to trap the breezes that rode down the river. Somehow the house stayed white.

That's pride, she thought. She wanted to speak out loud to it, to apologize for leaving, for letting the new owners take it. She wanted to give the house her promise that nothing terrible would happen to it, but those words wouldn't form. She didn't let them. There was so much she couldn't do. A sudden thought gripped her, and she shook, it was so terrible. The house would burn nicely. It would burn right down to the earth like it never existed. Then these people couldn't touch it. Then they'd go away.

No, she thought, they'll come again and again. She remembered the hard thing she told Cora. "That's the way it is." And that's the truth. Sometimes it was very hard for her to listen to her own advice. But it was a form of wisdom. She gave no apology to the house. Besides, she knew it understood her silence more. She made a small but definite sign in the air and told herself that all the flowers would have to be dug up, all the woven mats taken out, the house stripped of every hex and ward she and Cora had laid. "That's gonna be some hard work."

Behind her she could hear the river flowing. Its music was quiet and strong. Above her in one of the cypress trees she saw a crow take flight. She frowned, hoping that it wasn't some kind of sign. A cool breeze and a smell of wet grass and mud floated up from the river. A cloud moved in front of the sun. She shut her eyes and took a deep breath. Winter was almost there.
She opened her eyes. Ashe Hall stood proudly in front of her bathed in sunlight. Maybe it won't disappear, she thought, and managed a smile. Not everything is a sign.

She forced herself to think of the work she had to do. Yes, the work was the important thing. Her resolve began to slip from beneath her. That same resolve had been carefully maintained, constantly built up during her stay. It was the one thing that kept her from bursting out in tears every time Cora wanted to go outside, every time she heard some strange noise and the fear of what the 'hawkers or soldiers would do if they found them: a nigger woman and her young niece.

Her strength almost broke so many times, and it was always Cora who could see how things were affecting her. It was always that little girl, that young woman who still didn't know the power she had over her aunt, that nearly broke her. Every time Cora spoke, frustrated and scared, demanding to know why, why, why, Mama Rose wanted to take her hand and run: flee like the others on the plantation and take her chances out there. So many times she wiped away the tears on Cora's face and held her as she shook. It was as much for herself as for Cora. There were so many times when she wanted to tell Cora, "everything's going to be alright," and "don't worry, we got magic enough," but she couldn't. She knew that if she opened her mouth, all that would come out would be, "I don't know." And that wasn't good. She could never let Cora see her doubt, never allowed herself any tears, any mourning, any of the things that gripped her during the loud, profound silences of the night. No. Nothing showed. Nothing.

Cora was back before her aunt even noticed she was gone. She worked diligently during the day doing whatever her aunt asked of her. Every once in a while she would pester her aunt with the same question she had asked before.

"Why can't we stay? We could hide. You could do it, Mama Rose, just like before."

"We hid here for two whole years. I don't see the difference
now."

"We should really stay. I promise to do everything you ask. I know you love being here as much as me."

As usual Cora's pleas got her nowhere with her aunt. Sometimes she thought that her aunt could go deaf at will. This time she was actually glad that her aunt said nothing. She already knew the reasons they had to leave, already knew what her aunt would say if she had answered her. Cora just didn't want to put words to it, didn't want to listen to herself. For just a little while she could enjoy the slim chances that her complaints created. The more she complained though, the more their reality made itself known. She began to foster the feeling of anger that was beginning to burn inside her. If they could live in that house forever, then she and her aunt could take over the plantation, and she could dress in long, elegant dresses and enjoy the attentions of many rich suitors like a princess in a fairy tale. Life would be perfect. The thought that someone else would be living in her house made a sick feeling in her stomach. Why was it that there was nothing they could do? She didn't want to move back to the slave shack where they couldn't see the river, where the roof leaked and they would have to live cramped and uncomfortable. They should stay in Ashe Hall because they deserved to. That was that.

Her aunt never paused from her work. She never took a rest. Slowly and methodically she was dismantling all the structures of magic that they had set on the house. Her aunt had resigned herself fully to what was clearly an unacceptable situation, and she wasn't going to do anything about it.

"Isn't there any way we can stay?" It was Cora's final plea. Mama Rose shook her head and sighed.

"No." Cora thought she saw her aunt's lip tremble. When she looked harder, all she saw was that eternally set expression. Mama Rose wasn't even going to try. Well, she would do something even if her aunt wasn't going to.

After they moved out of Ashe Hall, Mama Rose made Cora unpack
everything they had brought and set it in a proper place within their shack. It took less than an hour, but by that time, Cora was exhausted. Mama Rose felt the burn of exhaustion herself, but she was restless as she lay down to sleep. She had gotten used to sleeping in that big house.

There was no use for it, but she couldn't help feeling angry that they had to move back into the small two room shack. Each one of Cora's complaints dug into her like a barbed thorn. She thought of giving Cora something to dull her pain, but she knew that it would only be harder for her niece later on.

She decided that sleep wouldn't be easy, so she got out of bed. She entered the other room where Cora was sleeping and looked at her. She smiled, remembering a conversation earlier in the day. Cora had insisted that she sleep in the other room. Maybe it was better to let a girl her age have a room of her own. Lord knows, she's had so much taken away.

Cora's mother had died in childbirth, and her father...Well, Mama Rose thought it fitting when they moved into Ashe Hall that Cora should finally get to live there. Cora's father was the son of the former plantation owner. After his brief affair with Mama Rose's younger sister had been made popular, he had been sent away. It didn't make Mama Rose sad; there was no love to be found there, just simple lust. When Cora was born Mama Rose looked to her upbringing. There was no contact with the father or his family. They didn't even pretend concern. That suited her just fine. It was easier to keep things silent. She hadn't yet decided whether to tell Cora the truth or not.

Mama Rose placed a log in the stove and kissed her niece on the forehead. Then she went back to her room. Before she fell asleep, she pretended she was back in Ashe Hall.

That night, the night before Walker Bowe arrived to take over the plantation, Mama Rose lit a candle and placed it in the front window. She closed her eyes and said a wordless prayer and stared hard at Ashe Hall. She left the candle on the sill and went solemnly to bed.
That night Mama Rose dreamed of moonlight shining off the waters of the Mississippi.

There's something coming down with the current. It's coming from way up. She stands at the bank and tries to see what it is. Her view is obscured by the hair of a willow and a cloud boldly crosses the moon. She lifts her skirts and wades into the river. But, the current is too strong, and she slips in further than she wants. Her feet still touch bottom, and she holds herself against the amount of water gathering around her. It pushes against her, trying to push her over, trying to sweep her away. She stays still, very still, afraid to move. All of her strength is concentrated, but it isn't enough. Slowly the river begins to push her backwards and forces her head under. Her clothes are heavy and pull at her like she's caught in a net. Water pours into her mouth.

Then she is lifted out by strong hands. A man smiles at her and makes a cross on her forehead. She is now in a pool of water. Around the bank of the pool stand many people. They cheer and clap. The man helps her out onto the bank of the pool. Cora stands on the bank in front of her, a look of hatred on her face. Mama Rose reaches out for her, but she refuses her hand and runs into the crowd. Mama Rose has betrayed her. She looks back at the man, the priest who has baptized her.

"You are saved," he says and smiles.

Early the next morning, Cora noticed two men walking through the plantation. She ran into her aunt's room and told her. Mama Rose started acting strangely. Cora stepped away from the look on her aunt's face. It was as if soldiers were coming through the plantation again.

"What's wrong?" Cora held onto the door frame for support.
"You stay quiet, like before, like I taught you."
"Why?"
"Just do as I say." Mama Rose was curt. Cora wanted to tell her that she thought it was the new owners, but as she opened her
mouth to speak, Mama Rose shot her a look. She decided to stay still. There was no reason for her aunt to be acting this way, at least none that she could see.

They stayed hidden all day. Cora's aunt gave her a look every time she tried to ask her what she was afraid of. Every time Cora began to move around, Mama Rose told her to sit still. She told her to come and sit on the bed with her. Cora refused. She wasn't going to sit in bed all day. As far as she was concerned, this act was a waste of time. They were going to have to meet the new owners sooner or later.

The two men passed very close to the shack, and at one point, Cora could overhear them. It seemed that they were the new owners. One told the other that he might hire one of the negro girls as a maid. She looked at her aunt. Surely she must have heard.

"They're the owners," Cora whispered. Mama Rose didn't answer. She had her eyes closed as if she was doing some hard listening. Cora waited until the men had passed a safe distance away. This hiding was too much.

"I'm not going to stay here any more," she hissed. If you want to stay hidden for the rest of your life you go ahead. The war is over, finished. I don't understand you. Why are you suddenly so scared of everything?" Cora left the room, left her aunt sitting there with her eyes closed and left the shack. She headed in the opposite direction that she heard the men go. The sun was descending, and soon it would be dark. Nobody could find her at night. She sprinted toward the cornfield and ran through rows of unharvested corn. She ran until she couldn't see the shack, where she was sure she was alone.

She hated getting angry at Mama Rose. She hated yelling at her, the way her aunt would close up, like she had moved miles away. She played the scenario again in her head. Nothing ever got resolved; that woman just sits there with that set expression and doesn't listen. She doesn't ever listen, and this time she's wrong.

Cora knew. She could feel it. She stood in the field shaking
like a stalk of corn and held herself. She stood and waited until she could still herself. She hated that feeling when she got all upset, screaming and crying. It made her feel like she would burst apart, like she was full of hot steam under pressure. During times like this, she needed to run, to escape and put as much distance between herself and her aunt as she could, because if she didn't, then she didn't even know what would happen. That scared her something awful.

Cora kept walking. After she stopped crying and felt a calm return to her she decided that she needed to walk. What if Mama Rose never came out of the shack ever again? She was usually so strong, but what went on today really worried Cora. She hoped it was only a passing thing. Mama Rose would get better; she would see that things would be all right.

It was because of the new owners that her aunt was like this. She knew her aunt was upset about leaving Ashe Hall, but there was more to it. The way she had acted that morning told her that things would be much better if the men left. Then they could return and nobody would bother them. They could have dances again and...

Cora grew angry at herself. Things would never be like that again. With that realization she made a decision. She knew what made people flee their homes. She would do the same thing to them. And the new owners couldn't prevent it; they didn't have the magic.

All Cora needed was an oil lamp and some fire. The oil lamp wasn't a problem. Mama Rose had taken a couple from Ashe hall. The fire was difficult though. If she approached the house, a torch would undoubtedly be seen. She needed some way to light the lamp at the last instant before she threw it. Even if she approached with the lamp lit, she would be seen. Besides, she wanted it to appear like an accident. Mama Rose might never forgive her if she knew it was she who burned down the house.

She needed to get inside. That way, nobody would see her throwing the lamp, and if the fire started inside, everyone would
assume it was an accident. She ran back to the shack and took a lamp. She could hear her aunt sleeping and was careful not to disturb her. Then she headed back into the cornfield and ran alongside it. That way she could duck into it and disappear quickly. She travelled quickly; the partial moon was enough for her to see. Nearing the house, she could smell the smoke from one of the fireplaces inside the house. That's one good thing about this cool weather, she thought. I'll throw the lamp into the fire.

Excited by the finality of her plan, she approached with confidence. There were lamps on in the house, and she could see the shapes of people moving around inside. She crept closer to the house and noticed a curtain full of wind. She smiled. They've made the fire too hot, she thought. How kind of them to leave a window open for me. She waited a safe distance away, behind the moss-hung shape of a cypress, and watched people pass behind the frame of the window. She held the lamp in her hands and prayed that the people would leave the room so she could enter. The lamp seemed light; she hoped it was enough to send the place up.

The light in the window went dark. Cora waited a few minutes and heard nothing. She crept up to the house and crouched underneath the window. She peered up into the house. Inside, the fire was still burning. Boxes lay on the floor ready to be unpacked. In front of the fire sat a high-backed chair. There was a man sitting in it facing the fire. She couldn't tell if he was asleep or not. She set the lamp on the ground behind her and picked up a stone. She tossed it into the room. She heard it hit and roll across the hardwood floor. There was no movement inside; the man must be asleep.

Cora set the lamp on the sill of the window and boosted herself up. She crouched in the window for a moment, waited, and then she was inside. She had to move carefully across the floor because it creaked. She tested each board before she stepped. At each creak, she froze, ready to throw the lamp and rush toward the window.

It seemed to take forever to cross that floor, but when she
did, she could feel the heat of the fire. It was nice and warm. Her aunt used to make a fire in this hearth and she'd fall asleep in front of it. She looked at the man in the chair. It surprised her that he was so young-looking and so handsome. His clothes seemed rich, but his hands were rough. She wondered briefly who he was and where he had come from. He was so peaceful looking; he seemed so innocent and defenseless in that chair. She had a sudden urge to lead him outside away from the house and lay him on the grass.

She tore her eyes off of him. He was probably the new owner, the one who had wrecked her life. She clenched her teeth. It didn't matter what he looked like; she had to do this thing. It was what he deserved. There was no other way to deal with things. Was there? She felt the weight of the lamp in her hand.

The man in the chair stirred. His eyes opened and slowly focused. He let out a yell and was on his feet.

Cora felt the lamp fall out of her hands and heard it crash to the floor. By then, she was at the window, away from the man. Before she leapt out, she turned back. Instead of anger on his face, there was a terrible look of disbelief.

She felt the ground beneath her feet and ran and ran and ran and ran.

Walker Bowe watched the girl leap out the window and into the night. He stood in stunned silence. He wasn't mistaken; it was a young girl, maybe about thirteen. She had dropped something on the floor. He bent down and picked it up. It was a simple lamp. Surprisingly, none of the fuel had spilled. It didn't look familiar to him, but it was possible that it belonged to Angelique.

The door to the room opened and light flooded in. Dane Thewes held a lamp.

"Mister Bowe, you all right?"

Walker was about to tell him about the girl but thought better of it. Dane would take things wrong, blow them out of proportion. The man worried Walker. He had hired Dane because of his reputation for running plantation operations; yet, the man
displayed views that Walker couldn't bring himself to agree with.
He was stubborn, especially where the negroes were concerned.
"Yes, Dane. Sorry, I must have yelled out in my sleep.
Worried about things, you know?"
Dane smiled and nodded. He looked around the room anyway.
"Maybe you better close that window, Mister Bowe. You never
seen what a nigger with a knife can do."
"Negro, Dane. Call them Negroes."
Dane gave a curt nod and left, a strange smile on his lips.
He closed the door behind him.
Walker got the distinct impression that the man was trying to
scare him. He didn't appreciate it. A division between himself
and his workers was not what he wanted. He needed to get things up
and working as soon as possible. Dane seemed determined to take
the plantation in a different direction even before it was
operational. He'd have to talk with him. It wouldn't be such a
pleasant conversation; Dane still viewed the negroes as slaves. He
didn't share Walker's northern views on that subject. Sometimes he
felt like he was the first man to bring these ideas to the South.
Change is slow, he knew, but, damn it, they had won the war.

He walked over to the window and looked outside. He couldn't
see much, just the dark shapes of trees. He leaned against the
sill and listened. It was a quiet night: even the crickets were
still.

He had maybe a month to get the sugarcane planted. The
cornfields had to be cut and plowed. Angelique, his bride would
arrive within the week, so he had to get the house ready. The
buildings on the plantation had been mostly destroyed during the
war. Equipment in the sugar-house needed to be repaired or
replaced, and workers had to be introduced to the comissary, the
plantation store where workers could get supplies at an inflated
rate, on credit.

It seemed an impossibility. If he didn't get all this
accomplished within the month, chances were good that he would lose
the plantation, and, with it, his investment. More than likely,
his new wife would go too.

He told himself he was being ridiculous. The future would come despite any predictions of how he expected it to. He forced himself to think positively. Dane said that workers would be no problem to hire. There were a lot of people looking to find work now that the war was over. That was a fact; people need to work. There were some negro families living in shacks near the cane fields. He made plans to speak with them the next day and see if they wanted to work. He frowned, thinking of the attitude Dane displayed when they first arrived. He wanted to chase the negroes off. "They could be a threat," he said. "They might feel that this plantation is theirs and we are coming to steal it."

Walker made him promise to wait. Dane muttered something about heathens and voodoo, and Walker did his best to ignore him. There were more important things to consider. There was a shortage of skilled labour. He needed all the workers he could get.

It had been a long day. It was no wonder he had fallen asleep in the chair. At least this house was still intact, he thought. That was a wonder; everything else seemed to be damaged in some way except for Ashe Hall. As far as he could tell, there was nothing wrong with it. He'd have to wait for it to rain to see if the roof leaked, but there were no water marks on any of the ceilings or signs of rot in the attic. Thank the Lord for such a blessing.

Walker peered out into the night again. There was no sign of the girl. He wondered what she wanted. If she had murder on her mind, as Dane was prejudiced to think, then he would probably be dead. She had plenty of chances. More than likely, she was just plenty curious.

Walker smiled and placed the lamp on the outside sill. For some reason, he felt sorry for the girl. He shut the window and secured it. Tomorrow was going to be the first of many a long day.

When Cora ran out of the shack, Mama Rose wanted to run after her. She wanted to explain why she was acting the way she was.
She wanted to bring Cora back and tell her that she didn't stand a chance against all the things that could happen. She was still a young girl, no matter what she thought. Her magic was nothing against what the new owners were capable of. She needed Mama Rose to protect her, at least for a little while. She could get hurt, or die, or worse.

Cora didn't want to hear any of it, that she knew. Forcing her to stay would only be sowing the need for Cora to run. Cora just didn't understand. She didn't have the experience. Maybe hiding wasn't the best way to deal with things, but right now, it was all Mama Rose had. She needed to find out more about these new owners before she acted. Even then, she didn't know what she was going to do.

Cora was wrong; Mama Rose wasn't scared of everything. She stayed hidden because she could still feel that dream, and it was a potent one. It stuck in her mind like a memory. The water kept coming over her head, and when that man pulled her out, she didn't resist. She didn't stop him even though she knew that she would become something different because of it. It was a survival instinct, and she couldn't stop it; but she wished she had. The look on Cora's face, that was something that killed her even worse than choking on water.

Mama Rose needed to get up. She had to busy herself. This lying in bed was not doing her any good. The realization that Cora was all she had would have bent her at the knees if she had been standing. Maybe that's why she was scared. When was the last time she had helped someone? Only a few families had come back after the war. For some reason, she had stayed distant. She had Cora to look after. No, that wasn't it. Cora was right; she was afraid.

Cora ran straight and far into the cornfield. Her heart was pounding like it was going to burst. She eventually stopped running after she knew that nobody was chasing after her. It was a miracle that she escaped. She had been stupid, so stupid. She got caught up looking at that man's handsome features and stayed
too long. That house could be aflame right now! She wondered how much the man had seen. Could he recognize her face? It was pretty dark in there. She began to worry. She didn't know what would happen to her if she was caught. She didn't want to die.

Mama Rose would protect her. She could say that she just wandered into the house and that she didn't know anyone was there. But what about the lamp? What if Mama Rose knew about the lamp. There was no reason for her to be carrying a lamp. Mama Rose would see through any lie she told. She'd better just deny the whole thing. Yes, that was best.

She needed to get the lamp back. She had to get back into that room again. Oh, God, this was a bad dream that kept getting worse.

The lamp was sitting right there on the sill as if it was waiting for her. This was too easy. Maybe the man was waiting just inside the window, and when she went for it, he would grab her. She had to try. It took her a while before she gathered enough courage to move. There was no one around; she was sure. Then why was she so afraid?

She held her breath and crept up to the window. It was closed. If someone were to grab her, it wouldn't be through the window. She grabbed the lamp and retreated a safe distance away behind a tree.

No one had even seen her. Didn't they expect her to come back? Surely they did; they left the lamp. Was the handsome man so stupid he didn't see her as a threat? She smiled suddenly; maybe he liked her.

Cora went home along the cornfield. She kept expecting someone to jump her. That made her move quickly. She was scared, but she felt good. The lamp on the sill might be a sign. She wasn't going to be in trouble after all.

From a fair distance away, Cora could see the small flame from the candle that her aunt left in the window. She knew that her
aunt was still waiting for her. In an instant, three stupid excuses went through her mind as to where she was and why. She would have to act like she was sorry for yelling at her aunt. That would be difficult; she was still partly mad at her. Maybe it would be better if she didn’t return home. She could find a pile of hay somewhere; she heard people could make it through even the coldest winter night curled up inside one. She chewed on the skin of her bottom lip. Staying out all night would only make her aunt madder. She bowed her head slightly and prepared to take her punishment. At least she should look like she was sorry.

It was Mama Rose who did the apologizing. She came at Cora with a strange look on her face, one she never had seen before. Before she could understand what was happening, her aunt was asking Cora to forgive her. She was saying that she was wrong to stay hidden, and that she was scared. Her aunt was scared.

Cora didn’t know what to do. This was more uncomfortable than she thought it was going to be. When she was getting yelled at she knew what she was supposed to do, how she was supposed to act, but this was foreign. She often pictured situations like this, when her aunt would come to her on her knees and tell her that she was right and how could Cora ever forgive her for being so foolish. These were fantasies. Now she wished she had never dreamed them up. What was happening here was wrong. Her aunt was supposed to yell at her, to be the one who was right.

When her aunt came toward her and asked her for a hug she found herself crying.

"How," said her aunt, "how can I make things right?"
Cora pulled away and smiled at her.
"Let’s have a dance," she said.

Kwaku Ananse thought long and hard about how he would get those yams. He studied all his old tricks and decided that nothing like them would do.

Then he had an idea. It was a complex one and a messy one, but it was clever enough to fool Mandril. Ananse was happy again:
No more would he have to swallow rocks to fill his stomach. Above all, he had devised a diabolical trick, and he had someone to play it on.

He thought the trick over. He would disguise himself as a creature that no one had seen before. It would be a creature that he'd say was Lord over all the animals. And Monkey, the close and trusted cousin of Mandril, would help him without even knowing. Ananse quickly went to work.

All around the land were strewn the bodies of animals who had been left as starvation's playthings. Ananse searched and searched for monkey's body, but he did not find it. He went to the tree where monkey lived, but monkey was not there. He walked along the river bed and found Snake's withered body, and Turtle's frail shell. Along the plain was Gazelle's crippled form and the faded spots of Leopard's coat. In the hills were the rot of Goat's and Boar's bodies. Monkey was nowhere to be found.

Ananse's search eventually led him to a cave located high up in the mountains. Inside he heard someone breathing. It was a breath full of sickness and strain. It sounded like someone was breathing through a hollow branch while someone else stood on their chest. He followed it into the cave, and way at the back, in the dark, found Monkey lying on the ground waiting for death.

"Who's there?" said Monkey, afraid.

Ananse disguised his voice and tried out the voice he would use as the new creature.

"No one you know," he said.
"You must have a name," said Monkey.
Ananse thought fast.
"My name is Man," he said hoping that Monkey would recognize the first sounds of his cousin's name.
"I am Lord over all the beasts," he added.
This made monkey more afraid. He did not expect this; he was only waiting for death.

"I have nothing for you to take," he said. "I am dying and all I have are my bones. Surely, that is not fitting for the Lord
of all the beasts?"

   Ananse crept close to Monkey's ear.
   "I can save you with the power of my magic," he said.
   "I would owe you my life," said Monkey. "I'm not sure I want
to do that."
   "All I need is your body," said Ananse. "And not for very
long."
   "Do you promise to return it?" said Monkey. It sounded like
a good deal to him.
   "I am Lord of all the beasts; I did not get this way by
lying."
   Monkey agreed.
   Ananse lifted a rock and hit him hard on the head.

   By the time the sun had burned through the mist on the river
Walker Bowe knew that the events of the day were going to knock him
off his feet. Just before dawn he was awakened by the sounds of
men yelling angrily at each other. Sounds of a full blown fight
echoed across the plantation. He lay feeling the exhaustion in all
his muscles and silently cursed whomever it was that was making all
the noise. Christ, it's the middle of the night, he thought. He
felt the slow burn in his stomach begin again, the one that kept
him going, the one that reminded him he hadn't yet had a full
night's sleep since he'd arrived. Who's fighting, damn it? He
threw off his bedclothes, and sprang across the cold wooden floor
to the window. The fight seemed to be around the workers'
quartes. His breath started to fog up the window, so he brushed
it away with his sleeve. It was impossible to see what was going
on; the workers' quarters were obscured by the men's and servants'
quartes.

   Walker swore under his breath and grabbed his pants that hung
over the footboard of his bed. He tucked his night-shirt into his
pants and hooked his arms through brown suspenders. He hurried
down the staircase and noticed Dane Thewes waiting in the foyer.

   "We've got a problem," he told Walker. "The new workers don't
seem to be happy." He smirked. Walker let it pass. He didn't need Dane to tell him that this situation was probably his own fault. He took his hat and coat from the clothes tree and headed out the door.

"Tell me on the way," he said. The sound of the fight grew louder. Walker shook his head and remembered Thewes's vehemence of a few days before.

"You can't put all the workers together, not in the same quarters. Do you want a riot? Listen, you can love the niggers all you want, just don't expect everyone else to. If you put them in with the rest, they will kill each other."

Walker waited until he was finished. "Where do you want the negroes to live?"

"They don't even want to be together with the rest. Have you asked the niggers where they want to live?"

Walker shook his head, no. It just seemed to him that anyone would want to live in a new building. He tried to place himself in his workers' place as much as he was able. He wondered if Dane was trying to do that as well.

"What's wrong with where they live now?" Dane asked.

Walker had seen the conditions of the shacks. There were gaps in the walls, holes in the roofs. They were shacks. "They deserve better, Dane."

"That's fine, that's fine. We'll build them their own quarters..."

"Until then they'll stay with the other workers in the new quarters."

Dane shook his head and sighed.

"We'll tell everyone that it's temporary. Maybe a week. Things will be fine."

"No, they won't. What about all the families who live there now? Where will they live? I'll tell you right now if you put a woman in a man's quarters..."

"All right." Dane did make some sense. "Then the families can stay in their shacks, but the new workers and those without
families will move into the workers' quarters."

"I still don't think..."

"That's my decision, Dane. I don't want to hear it."

"You will."

Walker shook himself partly against the morning's chill. He didn't need this, to be wrong about things. He lengthened his stride.

"Christ, they've only been together a week."

Dane grunted, easily keeping pace with him. "A week's long enough for a lot of things."

The sky began to lighten and fill with colour. It was going to be a nice day. Neither Walker nor Dane noticed. They walked between the men's and servants' quarters and the commissary. When they reached the road, they could see enough of the workers' quarters to gauge the situation. It seemed that every one of the workers stood outside their quarters. What had sounded like a huge brawl had now turned into smaller conflicts, with groups of men surrounding each. They were too far to see which workers were directly involved.

"It's better to stay above something like this," Dane said. "No sense getting ourselves hurt. We'll get the horses."

They approached the mob on horseback. The mob was spread across the road and in front of the barn. Walker and Dane rode through the middle. Many men fell back, ashamed, seeing the owner and foreman had personally come out. Dane rode around to break up a few of the fights that still continued. Walker noticed that none of the negro men seemed to be involved. They stood together at the far end of the quarters watching. At the same time, he was glad; Walker felt confused and angry because he had no idea about the reason for the rioting. He rode up to a red-headed man who was cradling his arm against his body.

"What's your name?" Walker asked.

The man turned sharply. His face flushed. "All I want is to work here. That's it. Honest work. I got nothing to do with all this. Honest."
"What's your name?"

"Thomas, sir. Reilly." He pointed to the quarters. "I'm in there trying to sleep. I'm a hard worker, needs my rest, when I'm pulled out of my bunk and given a shiner." He touched a bruise that was already forming around his eye. So, in self defense, I hit back. That's what happened here." He lifted his arm and winced. "But I got nothing to do with this."

Walker could see from the man's excitement that he wouldn't be getting much information from him. He decided to help Dane break up the rest of the fighting.

He rode up to a small circle and forced his way inside. Two men were locked in combat, faces and fists bloodied. He grabbed the back collar of one man and kicked his horse into a trot. He dragged the man clear of the circle and let him fall on his back hard to the ground. He turned his horse and glared at the crowd. Not one of them met his gaze.

Walker felt the sharp pain of a rock hitting him on the back. He turned his horse sharply and managed to avoid another rock. The man he had just thrown to the ground held another rock in his fist and started to yell something at him. Walker didn't wait for him to finish. He turned his horse away from the man a good distance, turned him back to face the man, then dug his heels into the horse's sides. The man wildly tossed his rock and began to run. Walker clenched his teeth and felt the power of the horse underneath him as he bore down on the man. The man screamed before slamming into the ground as Walker's boot slammed into him.

Walker wheeled the horse around, his heart beating loudly, his mind still reeling from the anger he felt. He forced himself to sit still in the saddle for a few seconds and take a deep breath. He patted the neck of the horse and sat back in the saddle. All the workers stood in stunned silence regarding him. He motioned to the man he had just ridden over.

"When he wakes up, somebody take him and his things and throw him off my plantation."
The crowd began to disassemble, and Dane told the workers to get ready for work. "Anyone not at their jobs in ten minutes will join our friend there." Everyone looked at the man the owner had ridden down. They hurried away. Dane dismounted and bent over the man. He didn't recognize him. Slowly he was beginning to place each worker; everyone had some task set out for them. He couldn't wait until his own men arrived: Those he trusted; he had worked with them before. If they had been here, he thought, none of this would have happened. He thought of what his burly friend Hebert Dupree would have done had he been wakened by such a rucus.

He focused on the man laying in front of him. The man was still unconscious, but breathing. He had a nasty bruise beginning on his forehead. Dane wondered if it had happened when Walker ran him over.

He smiled to himself. I didn't think Walker was capable. That man has a temper; I'll have to remember that.

When Dane had taken the job, he had been very wary of the position. This Walker Bowe was greener than the first sprig of spring grass; however, he had money. Dane knew that without his help, Walker would undoubtedly fail. Yet, the man did possess a great knowledge of the business end of things. Dane had been hinting that maybe he should stick to the books instead of the actual running of the plantation. Walker seemed determined to lay his hands on everything. It made things a lot more difficult. I don't need to take on a school boy as well, Dane thought. He mentally began making a list of the things he had to do. They seemed endless, especially with Walker in tow. Things will be easier when Hebert and Samuel get here. Maybe I'll let one of them lead Walker around.

He finished looking at the man and stood. One or two of the workers should see to him, he thought. He went inside the quarters. Most of the men were nearly ready for work. He talked to one of them, a young kid with blonde hair, and handed him some smelling salts. In the far end of the room he saw the niggers quietly getting ready. A few of them looked at him.
What do they want? Dane shot them an angry look. They bowed their heads. There was something that wasn't right with the situation. He was incredibly surprised that not one nigger had been involved. A few of them were still watching him, though they pretended not to. They don't belong here, he thought, and they know it.

Dane cast one more look around the room. There was no longer a feeling of hostility, at least not the same type as during the morning. He thought of pressing the issue, asking a few of the workers who had been responsible for the brawl. He decided to let it pass. Running a man down with a horse was enough to occupy their minds. Besides, they wouldn't tell him anything.

There was a definite distinction between worker and management. Any worker who snitched would find himself in worse trouble than any the boss man could dish out. A severe beating or death wasn't worth it.

Dane led his horse back to the stable. He was bothered by the fact that the morning's activities had happened. He wished his men were with him. There would have been no riot with them here, he thought. He expected them that afternoon. Thank God. I don't think I could honestly handle some of the shit that's been going on. He cursed himself softly, wishing that he didn't feel so tired, wishing that he was just a few years younger, but not so young as Walker. That man did have energy and spirit if nothing else. When my men arrive, then maybe I can attack what really needs to be done. Now though, he concentrated on what could have been the reasons for the riot. Nothing came easily to mind. Racial problems he could handle, but he didn't have enough time to play sheriff for other unexplainable events.

The attitude of the workers toward the niggers told him that he wasn't completely wrong. The niggers already knew their place. All their bunks were in the far side of the quarters. It was a natural thing. Still, some of them were testing things.

That nigger shouldn't have stared at me like that. He knew it too, else he wouldn't have looked away. Hell, if he's doing things
like that to me, who knows what he's stupid enough to do. If they
didn't get them moved out of there soon something worse than a
brawl would erupt. Walker was an idiot if he couldn't see it.
Tearing down the shacks to make a quarters was plainly stupid. At
least he had convinced him to leave a few. He couldn't imagine
what things would have been like if Walker had ordered whole
families to be moved. Walker's attitude, making things better for
them was doing more harm than good. How could he do his job with
fights breaking out all over? I don't care what kind of a perfect
world Walker wants, Dane told himself, he has to see things as they
are!

Walker left his horse at the stable. He took off the saddle
but left the bit in its mouth. He let it into the paddock and
closed the gate. He did each thing only half aware of his actions.
He had to steady his hands at first; his insides seemed to be wound
around each other. He went over everything in his mind again and
again. He could still feel the horse underneath him and hear the
man screaming, and then the thud. It had taken everything he had
not to leap off his horse and kick the man or jump on him and dash
his brains all over the ground. That was bad, he thought.
Terrible to lose control like that. I could have killed that man,
and would have, if nobody had been around. Where does this temper
come from?

He forced himself to walk slowly back to Ashe Hall. The cold
morning air felt good against his face. He let his jacket fall
open so he could breath easier. Something inside just snaps, he
reasoned. Something grips ahold of me like I'm somebody else. He
felt ashamed. It was too late to go back and see if the man was
all right. There was nothing he could do about it now. Every once
in a while he felt the heat come over him, like an explosion inside
his gut, his mind, and it wasn't like he lost consciousness or fell
into a dream. He knew what was happening; he was there, a witness
to everything, every movement, every blow, every flex of muscle,
every pain felt and caused. It was all him, and while he was
there, that feeling of survival was absolute. He wanted to do these things. It wasn't good. There was nothing good that came out of it: nothing except the irrefutable fact that he liked it; no, it overwhelmed him, and he had to have it, had to be within that intensity.

Things are too much, he thought. He took a deep breath, suddenly feeling incredibly weary. He wanted to go into his bedroom and collapse on the bed. He imagined himself lying in bed, the weariness leaving him as he fell into a deep, unbroken sleep...

No! He set his jaw. If I start thinking like that, I'm done! I'm not going to be defeated by anything.

As he entered Ashe Hall, he was struck once again by the size of the place. He had an overwhelming desire to run through each room, to place his mark everywhere. Even though this was his home now, he still felt that something was denied him. At times he still felt like he was a visitor. There wasn't one place that he could sit and feel completely at ease. An unwelcome visitor in my own house, he thought. He walked into the room he had set aside to be the study. The day's light shone through the windows harshly; he hadn't had time to put up the curtains. He sat down at the heavy Louis XIV desk that Angelique had given him as a wedding present. It fit so well in the room. He ran his hands over the polished red wood surface. For some reason, he wasn't comfortable there. He picked up his accounts books, a pen and ink and left the room. On his way through the back door he felt that maybe if Angelique were with him, he would be able to be more comfortable. Yes, he thought, I need her with me. By the time he reached the cook-house, he had decided that he would take the barge back to New Orleans and fetch Angelique.

Ten minutes later, Dane met Walker at Ashe Hall. Each day, Walker wanted a meeting with him to discuss the day's work. They met in the cook-house, situated at the back of Ashe Hall. It was made mostly of brick and stone to protect the main house from fire. Dane could smell Walker's thick black coffee being brewed. The
smell reminded his stomach that he hadn't eaten any breakfast. None of the workers had either. "That's a good punishment," he thought. "I'll call an early mid-day."

Dane stood for a few moments outside the cook-house before going inside. He looked through the window and tried to think of what he wanted to say. Sometimes, words didn't come so easily to him. With Walker he had to make sure he spoke plainly. It wasn't that he thought Walker simple; he wondered if there were certain people who were too smart for certain types of work. Walker's plans seemed to interfere with the way things ran. He couldn't tell Walker that, and never would. That's as bad as calling him stupid, he thought. The man was peculiar at times. He seemed to think about things too much. He even had trouble with the simplest tasks. Even in helping unload supplies from the river, Dane eventually had to tell him to do something else. The man kept suggesting the most obvious things.

Of course he got upset, Dane told himself. You would too. That's why you can't tell him what you want. It would be so much easier to tell Walker to let the plantation fall to him.

Inside, Walker sat at a large oak table, papers spread before him. He greeted Dane when he entered and finished tabulating a row of figures. He wrote them neatly on a column-lined page in a leather bound book. He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. He looked at the figures again and then lay his pen down on a piece of paper marked with random ink drops.

"We'll have a good crop," said Dane. "Work is going as well as can be expected."

"It'll just take a lot to get us there." He looked up at Dane. Something was clearly bothering him. "Is everything settled out there?"

Dane nodded. "For the time being."
"You expect more trouble?"
Dane shrugged. "Probably, not right away but..."
"But you think there will be. Say what you want Dane. I need your opinion." Walker prepared himself for the worst. Perhaps this
morning had been more difficult than he had imagined. Were the problems racial? Had he pushed things too far by knocking that worker to the ground. Hold your temper, damn it. He felt a cold sweat beginning under his arms and on his back.

"Your actions this morning should take care of things for a few days." Walker had given him the permission to speak freely. However, he knew the extent of what that meant: not too much, just enough.

"And after that? How's that man?"

"You hit him hard. He was out for a good ten minutes, took smelling salts to bring him around." A look of anxiety came over Walker's face.

"I don't think that was the best idea, but it was effective." He smiled. Walker was acting like a child being scolded. Dane was not comfortable with that position. Children usually come to hate their parents. Go easily, he thought.

"The problems weren't racial, though? I didn't see any negroes involved thii..."

"No. You're right. But don't think that there aren't tensions there. What we need to do is to build another quarters away from the existing ones and put the niggers there."

"And this will solve things?"

"Probably. It will." Damn. Dane cursed himself silently. I can't leave room for him to think. We'll never get anything done.

"The coffee is ready." Walker got up from the table and poured the coffee from a steel pot into two china cups. He handed Dane one cup and took a sip from his own.

"How long will it take to build the new quarters?"

"With everything else going on, a week."

"Start today then. I also want to know what happened this morning. Talk to Thomas Reilly. He's one of the workers. When the rest of the men arrive today with the sugar cuttings and the refining equipment, tell me. I'm going down the river to accompany my wife back here. I'll be gone for three days."
Dane nodded. Good, he thought, now he'll have something to keep him occupied.

When Walker boarded the steamer and looked back at the shape his plantation was taking, he smiled. There had been a lot of progress in just a week and a half. Buildings had been repaired and erected. Both the corn and cane fields had been cleared and readied for planting. Ideally, he should have had the cuttings two weeks earlier, but that was just the way things went. With luck, he thought, I may get two harvests. Three was possible but unlikely.

He breathed in the smell of the river, a rich and dully fragrant mixture of moss and weeds and mud. That was the smell of travel, wholly belonging to whomever was on the river. He was excited to be leaving for a night. The steamer picked up speed and he could feel the vibrations as the boat chugged along with the current. He hadn't seen his new wife since the night before he left New Orleans. That was too long, as far as he was concerned.

Since he had come to the south, everything had seemed to fall into place. He had left Boston and his life there at the age of twenty-two. His father, Alexander Bowe, had granted him permission to leave "in search of an elusive fortune," after the war had ended. That had been a sore between them. Walker had felt it his duty to join the effort, but his father forbade it. His political connections allowed Walker to avoid the draft. His whole life, Walker Bowe had been controlled by his father's money. When Walker threatened to enlist, Alexander had threatened to cut him off financially. Walker had no illusions that his father wouldn't do it. He had been witness to enough of his father's business arrangements to reinforce this. All through the war, Walker paid scrupulous attention to the happenings on the great battlefields through the newspapers. Working at one of his father's banks was robbing him, he figured, of the chance for growth and the chance to prove himself a man independent of his father's will. It was his birthright, and he was denied. There was no changing his father's
opinion. Walker was ensured a future resplendent with financial success. It was a legacy that could have continued for generations. And Walker didn't want it. That was clear. A deal was struck between them. Walker would continue to work through the war until its definite end, and if he still wanted to leave, he could.

Walker went west for a while travelling through New York and Chicago. He eventually ran into the Mississippi. He marvelled at its size and all the activity that it inspired. It was truly magnetic. He rode it all the way down to New Orleans. He wasn't exactly sure why it was that he got off there. Perhaps it was the distance, far enough from everything he had known. His first job came to him within a week of roaming the humid streets. It was a manager's job at a cotton plantation.

The Turbeville cotton plantation was something so foreign, so southern to Walker that he committed himself to it like a starving man to a plate of beans. Here was a chance to prove himself worthy of something, to be defined by his own actions and not be judged by who his father was. Within two months, he had been given a position to handle some of the financial management of the plantation. Clearly, he had an aptitude for it and Orville Turbeville was quick to recognize this. He was also quick to recognize an attraction between his daughter, Angelique, and Walker Bowe. When he closed his eyes, he could still see Angelique on horseback her legs skirted and riding like a man. Every Sunday she'd teach him to ride. They'd be off all day, usually with a basket full of food and a bottle of wine. As they'd ride, he'd watch her long blond hair falling behind her, her skirts coming untucked from her legs showing the soft white flesh of her thighs.

For a full season, Walker worked on the Turbeville Plantation, handling supplies and the commissary and wages and loans. Business was still business, but because it was on a plantation, and he was in control, Walker took to it with relish. In recognition of Walker's talents with money, and in an effort to keep Angelique from pregnancy and public shame, Orville increased Walker's
responsibilities until Walker eventually controlled the financial aspects of the plantation. Angelique was allowed to start a small school on the plantation and teach some of the workers' children. Orville was glad to supply her with something to occupy her mind besides horses and Bowe.

During that year, Alexander Bowe died and opportunity rose once again for Walker. A sugar plantation, north of Thibidaux, went on the market. It was a difficult proposition. Sugar plantations were extremely expensive to run, and few could afford to operate them. Alexander Bowe's death would give him enough money to establish the plantation but not enough for more than one year's worth of crops. Everything depended on the harvest.

Independence thrown his way, Walker decided to roll his dice. Over three months of planning and negotiations went into the preparation. Walker hired Dane Thewes, a reputable plantation manager, to operate things. Equipment was bought, and supplies were ordered. Walker had invested the entirety of his inheritance into the plantation, but it was his own. A month before moving out to Ashe Hall, Walker asked for Angelique's hand. Two weeks later, they were married.

Night fell with a suddenness over Ashe Hall plantation. Dane sat on the porch of the men's quarters enjoying the simple, elegant pleasures of French cognac and a cigar. He dipped the end of the cigar into his glass and enjoyed the sweet flavour as he drew the smoke into his mouth. The moon was a shard of translucent glass, but, together with the collected light of the stars, gave off enough light to see the shape of the river. Bowe would be in New Orleans now, probably wrapped in the arms of his bride. That's what that man needs, he thought. Needs to calm his mind. He was glad that Walker was gone for three days. That'll give me time to get a lot done. He would start the planting in the morning, hopefully getting a large bulk of it done before Walker returned. They could use a few more workers, but that was the way things went. At least numbers were high enough to form the requisite work
gangs. Now that Dupree and Samuel had arrived they could get things done right. Dupree: he would place in charge of the work gangs; Samuel could see to the equipment installation and could get the nigger quarters built. Dane sat back and pulled his coat closer around himself. He took a mouthful of cognac and let it sit on his tongue, warming, and slowly swallowed.

Ever since Walker had left that evening Dane had felt a sense of relief come over him. It wasn't that there was less work to do; in fact, he had accomplished more personally in the few hours than he had in a long time. The unloading of the sugar cuttings and refining equipment had gone splendidly. He could feel a different attitude take hold as soon as his men arrived. Order, that's what it was: everything running smooth like such a great plantation machine. Yes, that's what it was, and he was the one who ran it.

It was too bad that my men couldn't sit and have a cigar with me, he thought. Already Samuel was asleep and Dupree was out walking by himself, learning the lay of the land. He was a strange man, always off in the bush. He seemed to be more at ease in his own company, though he still liked to have a drink with him. Well, there'd be plenty to come. Dane smiled, no longer as worried as he had been.

Across from him, Ashe Hall stood. It's shape looked huge, almost ominous. There were no lights on inside; what small staff Walker had hired had gone back to their families in the shacks. Dane shook his head. There'd be no way he'd be caught like that, without a full complement of servants. He'd already be firmly set into that house, and the plantation would be further along as well.

Well, that's okay. It wasn't his plantation anyway. Still, Walker had to get organized. Maybe that woman of his would set him straight. He needed something.

Dane felt a hand touch his shoulder firmly. He leapt out of his chair, fists raised in a boxer's stance, turning to face his adversary. "Jesus, Hebert. Make some noise when you come upon someone, heh?"

Hebert Dupree stood with his arms hanging by his sides. He
noded but was unconcerned about alarming Dane. Something else was on his mind.

Dane wondered how such a big man could move so silently. It was one of the qualities he admired the Cajun for. It was great to witness, but not against himself. Clearly, Dupree hadn't come to play any practical joke on him. The look on his face was troubling. "What's wrong?"

"Listen," Dupree said. He pointed in the direction of the corn fields, past the slave shacks.

Dane cocked his head. Faintly, he could hear a drumming. It was coming from the direction Dupree had indicated. The drumming was complex. It was a definite rhythm with an African flavour. Dane felt some of the colour leave his face.

"Do I get the horses?" Dupree asked.

Dane shook his head. "Wake Samuel. I want this handled quietly. There's been some problems lately."

"I'll go inside and get us some rifles."

Dupree nodded once and was gone.

Voodoo, thought Dane. The drumming was getting louder. If there was anything he was uncertain about, it was the ceremonies the niggers kept. I almost didn't hear it. For an instant, he cursed Dupree's sense of hearing. No, he thought, it's better to stop something like this right away. Right away.

Mama Rose watched Cora dance. Cora's thin, shapely arms moving in tandem with the beat of the drums and the spirits of the bonfire. Out of breath and sweating, despite the cold in the air, Mama Rose sat on a thick woven blanket and marvelled at the exuberance and the energy of her niece. This was a night for all of them to rejoice, to laugh and embrace life. That's what it was for, this dance, this ceremony: a way to tell themselves that they were surviving and that they would forever. One only needed to watch Cora to see that. Cora danced feeling every drum beat, every cadence, and the shine of the fire heated her dark skin carving shadows into the gravel of the night's darkness. The young mer
were there too, vying for her attentions. They danced close and tried to rub themselves against her to capture what she was, her movements, her smiles. And she'd slip away, those thin muscled arms gently pushing some distance between them leaving them with the uncomfortable empty promise of their own desires. Some would get close enough to kiss her, a momentary distraction, but then she'd dance away like some forest sylph, a water spirit, hot like steam and lost innocence. This was her night. That was her promise made a week ago, a lifetime ago. It was a fulfillment of a promise that Mama Rose had made years ago to care for her and see that she became a woman. It's been long overdue, thought Mama Rose. My Cora hasn't been a girl for a long while. Not completely. Mama Rose shut her eyes and breathed deeply the smell of the fire, the clean night air, the sweat of the dancers and her own thick heat. Cora was crossing that line to womanhood. Mama Rose had been scared to let that happen, afraid that it would be so sudden and so damaging. She had to keep reminding herself that Cora was not Ornetha, not her young sister who raced so hard to become something that she wasn't ready for. Mama Rose gripped the blanket and prayed to no god in particular. "Not like that. Let things be easy for her, please."

Yet, Cora had come into her independence with an air of maturity. There was a lot still happening inside her, Mama Rose knew. She could see it in her face, hear it in her voice. It was threatening, and it was scary, but Cora was controlling it.

The other night, Mama Rose had focused all her will to remain still while Cora was out testing the extent of her powers. Mostly she was a danger to herself; there was destruction inside of her, a great desire to unmake things. Mama Rose could have restrained Cora for a while longer, but inevitably, Cora would have to face her demons alone. Waiting could have been worse; Mama Rose didn't know. It was something Cora had to deal with herself. Cora had left with an undeclared promise to return changed forever, but Cora did come back and nothing did happen. That's when Mama Rose knew that Cora would be all right. Power like that, to have such an
ability to destroy and not to use it: that was surely a mark of womanhood.

As Cora danced, she showed none of the turmoil that had gone on inside of her. It was as if she'd reached a peace with herself. The dance is good for her, Mama Rose thought. It let her sweat out all her troubles. In fact, all week the preparations had been good for her. Cora was very busy. Things at the plantation were far from settled. Everyone had to be very careful that the dance was kept secret. That was essential. She had let Cora spread the word: the location, the day, the way of slipping away unnoticed. Cora had made tiny hexes for everyone to carry. She sat by the hour weaving tiny vines so patient, her fingers so nimble. Mama Rose would have said that one week before that same girl could never manage to sit still long enough for such a task; yet, here she was weaving so that everyone could blend with the night, so they could get away without trouble. They were to move far past the cornfields, deeper inland where the corn and the cane would stand in a few months. It was a long walk, out of sight, and hopefully in a place far enough away that they wouldn't be disturbed.

Cora also made them understand that they couldn't tell anybody about it. Behaviour had to be good, despite all problems, if they wanted the dance. Otherwise, they would never get away from the workers' quarters or from the slave shacks. They all listened, every last one of them. There had only been one great moment when she feared that they wouldn't be able to do it. In the workers' quarters, there were pressures to lash out at the whites. The whites tried so hard to bait the men. They'd say things, nasty things that worked to disturb a man's honour, things that included a man's sister or mother. When that didn't work, the whites would do things to create trouble. They'd knock over a tray of food, stick out a leg when a man went by just to see him fall. The worst came one night when some of the whites pissed in a black man's bed, but the men never raised any arm. Mama Rose was so proud to hear that none of them had been involved with the riot. Oh, she
promised them that things would get better. She'd see that they had their own homes, away from the whites. Some of those whites were no good with such a desire to cause trouble. Mama Rose promised that they would be answering soon enough.

It was this dance that was all important. She had some powerful magic to work, to set things right with the plantation. Yes, she let them know how it was. They'd come up to her and ask permission to fight back. "Just one beating?" they'd ask. But no, that's not the way to do it. "Just let Mama Rose worry about it. Mama Rose will deal with them." It wasn't just words either. Already she had started to fix things in this place. It would take a long time, and a lot of magic but she knew she could do it. And everything would begin with the dance. That was understood. Even some of the old ones had come, crossing that hard, cold and muddy field just so they could be there to sit and watch as the fire rose, the drums beat and Mama Rose worked her story dance.

She rose from her blanket and walked into the light of the bonfire. Everyone crept back in a great circle. For an instant, there was silence. Mama Rose reached into the small pouch tied around her waist. She pulled out a handful of black powder and flung it hard into the fire. The fire flared brightly. It showed her every one of her people. They all sat quietly trying to control their breathing, so they wouldn't make a sound. Then the drums began. They began softly, the way she told the drummers so that you could actually hear the hand rubbing against the taut skin.

Now was her chance to tell them something, to teach them about themselves. This was a powerful magic. It put her words inside of them. Her words had lives of their own. They sprang to life with each footstep, each finger laid on the drum echoing in the pulse and heart of everyone around. That's how they received it: drinking with their eyes, deeply so that it became part of the blood.

At first it began as one of the simple stories about a girl who hated her parents. It was about freedom and greed, and as she
began, shapes began to play in front of her eyes knocking her balance off. She'd want to step left, but her foot would turn. Pivot right, it would say. And she did. She'd shift forward and the ground would roll gently beneath her. Bend and sway it would say. And she did. Soon she recognized the patterns. She was to tell a different story, a dark story. It was one of the most terrible that she knew. Kwaku Ananse, Stealer of Life.

In places, the dance was furious. She felt a roar erupt from her throat that came from deep inside her and made noises that she knew didn't belong to her and never did. There was something moving through her, something attached to the earth itself. Was it a warning? She couldn't be sure. Every movement drew something from her strength. Some of the time, she would stand still and the sweat would gather on her forehead and drip down her high cheekbones, following the lines that were beginning to show in the corners of her mouth. Then the movements began again, both herself and the drummers lost in some kind of trance. After she was finished, she collapsed, her strength leaving her in one awful gasp.

Everyone was silent, stunned at the horrors she had revealed. After an intolerable moment of silence, Cora rushed forward to her side. Mama Rose was unconscious. Cora shook her and said her name. She didn't wake. A small crowd gathered around Cora and her aunt, but they didn't help. They stood and stared at Mama Rose as if she were a demon. Cora told one of them, one of the young men she had been dancing with, to help her, but he just stood there afraid to lay his hands on her. Cora shook her again. Mama Rose had gone into trances before, she'd even fainted, but this was different. This time she just collapsed, folded over and hit the ground in complete oblivion.

"Help me," she cried. "Help me get her up! Don't leave. Don't leave her here!" None of the people were coming forward. Cora couldn't possibly carry Mama Rose all the way back, not by herself.

Then she felt hands coming to her. Some of the women grabbed
onto Mama Rose and onto her. "Leave things to us, girl," they said. It was some of the older ones who had sat away from the fire, watching. She didn't know their names; they had never spoken to her before. Yet, here they were, braving whatever had entered her aunt lifting her up into a sitting position. Another held Cora's arm lending support. Things are going to be fine, Cora thought. She tried to feel more at ease, but something lingered at the back of her mind; something would not come unwound inside her breast.

The sound of a rifle cracked open the night. People began to scurry away. Two more shots echoed around them. The women holding her looked desperate. They put down Mama Rose. "You run, girl," said one of them whispering harshly in her ear. "Run!"

And then as suddenly as the gunshots exploded, everyone was gone.

She wouldn't leave Mama Rose, not for a moment. If someone was going to kill them, then she would stay and fight. She crawled over to Mama Rose and bent down behind her. She grabbed her underneath her arms and began to drag her away from the fire, away from the plantation. She didn't get far before she felt the cold metal of a rifle stuck into her back.

Cora stopped and froze. Behind her she heard a voice.

"Don't be moving, girl." The voice was guttural, full of hatred and strength. "I got two over here, boss," the man yelled.

"Let us go," Cora pleaded. She felt the rifle move away from her back and the butt of the gun hit her knocking her down over her aunt. She landed hard on her elbow and gave out a cry as it scraped along the ground. Cora turned around quickly trying to see the man who had hit her. He looked at her and actually smiled. Was he enjoying this?

"Why she ain't nothin' but a little girl."

She had to get away! Mama Rose still lay as if she were dead. Cora climbed off her. She was trapped. If she backed up any further she'd be in the fire. The man stepped closer to her lowering his rifle. Cora bunched her fists and stood to face him.
"Hey now, how 'bout making things easy for yourself?" He said. She looked in his face and knew what he was going to do to her. She took a step backward, on the edge of the fire. She could feel the bottom of her feet begin to burn through her sandals. She'd step into the fire before she let him touch her!

He lay his rifle down carefully, still watching her. He slipped his suspenders off. "You get down on all fours and stick that ass of yours high in the air."

Behind him, Cora saw a dark shape suddenly rise. The rifle butt came down hard on the man's head. He collapsed on his knees in front of her. Mama Rose stood over him, her expression as serene as ever. She hit him again, deliberately on the side of the head, and he went down. Cora ran to her and wrapped her arms around her. Mama Rose placed her palm on the top of her head briefly. Footsteps, crunching on the frozen ground, were coming toward them.

"Hurry," Mama Rose said. "Help me turn him over and force open his eyes."

Cora looked at her for an explanation. They didn't have time! Mama Rose scowled. Cora did as she was told.

Mama rose opened the flap of her pouch and drew the drawstrings apart. She nodded to Cora. With her thumb and forefinger, Cora pried open the man's left eye. Mama Rose buried her hand deep within her pouch and came out with a handful of black powder. She muttered something under her breath. Cora couldn't hear it. What was this chant? Mama Rose sprinkled some powder into the man's eye. Cora let it close and Mama Rose put her thumb over the eyelid, like a seal. They did it to the other eye, and then Mama Rose smiled at her. It was no different than as if she had been making pies.

The other men called out this man's name. "Samuel." They were on the other side of the bon-fire now. What was keeping them from coming around? Cora wondered. Maybe they knew Mama Rose was here. She tugged at Mama Rose's arm. It was time to run.

Mama rose signalled her to wait. She held her pouch with both
hands and lifted it towards the fire. Cora could see her lips moving but couldn't hear what she said. Mama Rose tossed the pouch directly into the heart of the fire.

Mama Rose grabbed Cora's arm and began to run away from the fire. Cora knew that the men were now rounding the perimeter of the fire. They moved slowly, being careful; something had happened to their Samuel.

The fire erupted sending a wall of heat in all directions. Cora felt the power of it. It gave her a mighty push, and she rode with it, pumping her legs as hard as she could, running with Mama Rose into the darkness of the night.

Dane lifted himself off the ground. He had been near the fire when it had erupted. He was sure his eyebrows and hair had been singed. Beside him Hebert was sitting up shaking his head. He had been much closer to the fire. He seemed all right.

It was harder to see now; the explosion had almost blown out the fire. However, it was coming back to life. Small tendrils of flame began to lick at the portions of unburned wood and ignited. Dane looked for Samuel. He heard a groan at the other side of the fire. "Samuel?" he called.

Samuel lay in a fetal position on the ground. His hands were covering his eyes. He bent close to Samuel placing a hand on his back. Was he shot? Christ, this couldn't be happening! Samuel was too valuable to lose, especially like this.

"You been shot?" he asked. Samuel managed to grunt out a faint, "no".

Hebert brought over a lit piece of wood. He bent over Samuel illuminating his face. Dane pulled Samuel's hands away from his face. What was that black powder around his eyes?

Together they pulled Samuel a safe distance away from the fire. He took out a handkerchief out of his pocket and brushed the powder away from Samuel's eyes. Samuel lay stiffly, not moving, not saying anything. Hebert stood over both of them looking around defensively. Neither one of them expected anything like this. The
niggers had tried to kill them. Samuel was wounded, and he suspected, blind. He and his men had done nothing to encourage this. Well, if they wanted things to be that way, he'd give them something to fear.

The only problem was Bowe. Walker wouldn't like one of his precious "negroes" to be harmed. Dane already had enough trouble with the man. He didn't need Walker on his back for executing a criminal, especially a nigger. However, they definitely would have to do something about the situation. Walker wasn't stupid enough to misunderstand that. He couldn't just let something horrible happen to one of his men with impunity. If they went back, stories would circulate among the workers. They'd lose complete control. Discipline was necessary to run an operation. No, somebody was going to take the blame. In the old days, they'd just go out to one of the shacks and pick a man and string him up. Even if he didn't do it, everyone knew that it served as an example. He couldn't do that now. He'd have to wait for Walker's return or else Walker wouldn't understand.

Dane's mind was racing; he had to find some way to maintain control. It's like they waited for Walker to go away, he thought. Maybe they have some kind of respect for him. He does pay them. He could use Walker as a threat: Maybe say that they'd all be fired if they didn't come out and say who did this to Samuel.

Dane knew it probably wouldn't work. Those people stuck together. He knew his face was beginning to turn red. It was this voodoo crap that was responsible. What business did these niggers have out there, otherwise? If he could find their voodoo priest, then he could put a stop to all of it.

They carried Samuel into the men's quarters and lay him in bed. Dane heated some water and cleaned Samuel's face as best he could, paying careful attention to his eyes. Hebert stood with a frown. Both were sure that Samuel was blind. Dane was also sure that Samuel knew, but the man never said anything about it. He's brave to the end, Dane thought. Never let you see any signs of weakness. Dane extinguished the lantern, and they left Samuel to
sleep in peace.

As they left the room, Hebert looked wearily at Dane. "Anything I can do?" he said.

"I don't know; he's blind. I cleaned all the powder off his face. I hope it's temporary. We'll send for a doctor tomorrow. Send one of the men to ride into Thibidaux in the morning."

"I'll go out now and see if I can track down..."

"Who? Who, Hebert? It's darker than a bull's arse out there and you have no idea who you're looking for. Just wait 'til tomorrow. We'll see then."

Mama Rose quit talking for good as soon as they escaped. She ran like she was in one of her trances. Cora started asking her where they should go. Mama Rose didn't even grunt or point out a direction. Clearly, she was following Cora. When Cora slowed her pace, Mama Rose did too. In fact, Cora realized that she kept exactly three footsteps behind her, in Cora's own footsteps.

Cora didn't know where to go. She needed Mama Rose. She's like a statue, Cora thought. She shook her aunt. There was no response, she didn't even blink. Eventually they would have to rest somewhere. "C'mon Mama Rose, wake up. Wake up, wake up, wake up!" Cora began to get angry. She shook her harder. "I don't know where to go!" Cora imagined that there were men out looking for them. When they were caught, those men would do things to them. Standing still made things worse. It brought those images closer. They had to move. They needed shelter.

Cora needed to know what Mama Rose had done to that Samuel. Would they be recognized or even remembered? If not, then they could go back to the shack. Cora ran along the back road, ready to escape across the field if necessary. Soon she was at the shack. She waited a few minutes: there didn't seem to be any danger. Maybe Mama Rose had actually fixed things.

Mama Rose stood back by the road. She was no longer three steps behind Cora. Cora motioned to her. They could enter the shack. It was safe. Mama Rose wouldn't move. Christ! What was
wrong with her? Cora grabbed her arms and tried to drag her. She went limp and pulled Cora over. If Mama Rose wouldn't go back to the shack, where could they go?

Ash Hall came out of the night like a dream for her. It stood silent and dark amidst all the things that had gone wrong. It was like some patient god whose influence might wrap around them and hold them apart from everything that was wrong and suspend them in a place protected from time and consequence. The warmth of sanctuary. Coming upon the house, Cora somehow knew that it was empty again. It seemed to have that strong, tender silence around it, like the even breathing of someone who holds you and lets you rest after some horrible ordeal. She needed that. She needed to be protected. Mama Rose was no longer able to do that. Tears began to well up inside her. She choked most of them down, but some crept out. What if Mama Rose stayed like this forever? She couldn't take care of her.

That was something that she didn't want to admit. She wiped her tears away and led her aunt to the side of the house. She lifted herself up to the side window she had used when she had snuck in before. What if Mama Rose gets worse? The window was stuck shut. It was probably locked. She'd have to break a pane of glass and see if she could unhook the latch. She jumped down from the sill and began to search for a rock or stick to break the window.

What if she stops moving entirely? There was no way she could carry her! The window broke easier than she thought. It was quiet, but she still froze for a short while listening, ready to flee if anyone were to find them. She forced herself not to think of what would happen if Mama Rose refused to run.

Somehow she got her aunt inside. She made sure the window was closed and locked once they were in the house. The room was dark and not much had changed since she had been there last. It was a lot warmer inside. After a short search of the room, she found a woolen blanket. She found a spot in the corner of the room. Nobody looking in a window would be able to see them. She sat her
aunt in the corner and wrapped the blanket around her. Maybe she might sleep and wake up fine. "You get better, hear?"

Cora searched the room for another blanket. There wasn't much in the room. Two high backed chairs, a table, and a settee. There were three trunks against the east wall, beside the door. Inside one of them, she found another blanket. She pushed one of the trunks up against the door. Mama Rose's breathing was coming evenly. She lay down on the settee and pulled the blanket over her. She hadn't realized how exhausted she was.

After all she had gone through that night, all the anger, all the frustration, it was amazing that all she felt now was a profound sadness. She realized that she had been feeling sad before the men had come. It happened during Mama Rose's story dance. Why did she tell such an awful tale? Everyone had been so full of hope before that. It seemed that hope had been a lie. Cora closed her eyes and the hard, dark eyes of Samuel stared at her, hating her. She could still hear the thickness of saliva building in his voice. He had been too close to her, had smelled of sweat and whisky.

She forced the image out of her head. Mama Rose had saved her. Cora wondered if she were sick. She had never seen her aunt collapse like that. The most that ever happened after doing magic was that she shook a little, but that was just in her hands. Even when Mama Rose and she hid during the war, Mama Rose never collapsed.

Tomorrow, they would have to go somewhere else. It was just blind luck that Ashe Hall was empty. Maybe they could go back to the shack. The other two men hadn't seen them, and Mama Rose had done something to Samuel's eyes. He probably wouldn't be able to recognize them. She'd wake early and go see what was happening.

Cora told herself that her aunt would be all right, would go back to the shack and be strong again. Everyone needed her strong. Cora couldn't possibly take over for her aunt; she didn't know enough. Maybe I should pray, she thought.

"Oh, Mama Rose..." Cora's sobs echoed throughout the house.
Toward morning she fell into a fitful sleep.

A cold northern wind blew through the plantation ensuring a layer of hoarfrost on the ground. In the morning, the workers woke to see their breath. Thomas Reilly lay in bed with his eyes closed unwilling to believe that the morning had come so quickly. His nose was cold, and he could hear the others complain about how cold it was. He didn't want to break the seal of warmth that his bedclothes made. Yet, if he stayed in bed he'd miss breakfast. He needed the energy that eggs and griddle cakes gave him, not to mention a couple of cups of hot coffee. The mess hall was always the best place to go in conditions like this. It was full of warm bodies, and you could get a hot meal. He groaned as he got out of bed and put his feet on the cold wooden floor. Around him, there was not one man who smiled. They were all faced with a long day of planting, and the conditions made by such weather was considered with dread. Soon they'd be out in the fields covered in mud or building the new quarters, fingers and toes frozen. There was not one man who wasn't miserable. In addition, every single one of the niggers had been out late. Thomas wasn't sure what they had been up to, but he couldn't help feeling, as did so many of the others, that voodoo was involved. He wasn't exactly sure what went on during those ceremonies, but he heard that they made sacrifices, sprayed chicken blood around and participated in orgies. It certainly wasn't Christian. When the niggers returned, Thomas was sure that there wasn't one white man who was left sleeping. And, it wasn't just because of all the noise they were making. They were excited about something, speaking that strange gullah tongue of theirs. It was down-right unnatural. He made sure his knife was under his pillow as well as his rosary.

At the other end of the building he could hear the niggers getting ready like everyone else. He didn't know where they got their energy. He was so tired; he felt almost sick. He focused on them. They were dressing and getting ready for the day on their side of the room. None of them seemed to be feeling the same
weariness he felt. Bastards, he thought.

Today would be a good time to talk to Dane Thewes. Though he wasn't sure if he wanted to. The man was too intense. He'd much rather plead his case to Walker Bowe. Mr. Bowe seemed more approachable, even though he did have a temper. Can't blame him for that, Thomas thought. I would too, if I had to handle this motley bunch. Right after the riot, some of the workers had come to Thomas and told him that he was their spokesman. They had seen him talk to Mr. Bowe, and they felt that he was the best choice. He didn't want the position. If the workers wanted something, they'd come to him. If they got what they'd wanted, then he'd be well liked. If they didn't get what they wanted then he'd be the villain. They always kill the messenger.

Unfortunately, they didn't give him a choice. He was the one that Walker Bowe had spoken to. He was the spokesman. The other workers were looking at him. They weren't happy. He didn't need anyone to tell him that he had to speak to Dane Thewes. Those niggers had to go. Dane had better take him seriously.

Dane couldn't believe the courage of the niggers. Here they were at mess acting as though nothing had happened. They all avoided him; of course, they always did that. Were they stupid? His anger seemed to be getting the better of him. Dane forced himself to look at things logically. No matter what they did, they were tied to this plantation. This was their source of life. Even that small wage was enough for them to stay. Besides, every one of them was indebted to Bowe's commissary. They couldn't leave by law, even if they wanted to, until they settled all debts. That wouldn't happen until the sugar was harvested, refined and sold. If you didn't work, then that tie would be severed. Money was a powerful form of control.

He realized that had they not shown up for work, he would have been extremely angry. As much as he liked to maintain a sense of freedom, he was also tied to the plantation. He was in as much of a bind as they. Were he to get rid of all the nigger workers, he
could never run the plantation. That was fact. He was stuck with them. There had to be some way to put a stop to all the shit that went on the previous night. Things would be so much easier had the niggers been set up in their own quarters. At least he now had a reason to do that.

Voodoo. It was as much of threat as any flood or drought. Samuel was proof of that. It disturbed the men greatly. Disturbed men don't work as well, he thought. He watched all the men eating. Their movements were slow and lackluster. A lot of them absently stuck food into their mouths without even knowing what it was. The men were exhausted and most stared with open contempt and anger toward the niggers.

When he entered the mess hall, one of the workers, that Reilly fellow, came toward him with a request. It seemed that he had been elected spokesman for the workers. They wanted the niggers to have their own place, separate from themselves. He assured Reilly that he would assign more workers to the construction of the new quarters. Reilly seemed worried, nervous. He stood in front of Dane like he had something else to say. Yet, after a moment he thanked Dane and left. This was Walker's man, the one he had told Dane to talk to. He seemed a good fellow, if a little timid. Well, Dane supposed that he had been short with him. That couldn't be helped. He had to call Samuel off the sugar-house to open the commissary. A lot of the men would be needing gloves and socks instead of other tools for planting. Today was the first day of cane planting and the ground was partially frozen. He couldn't do anything about that. He had to get the new quarters built himself. Samuel still wasn't saying much. The fear on his face told Dane that he was blind. A doctor should arrive that afternoon.

The sound of a plate crashing on the ground made Dane look up from his thoughts. Two of the men had bumped into each other causing a plate of food to spill. A worker began to grapple with a nigger much bigger than himself. It was clearly a losing proposition. Both sides of the room stood, and there were cries of "godless bastard!" and "Kill him!" coming from the white side. The
blacks were yelling things in gullah and threats in English just as strong as the whites. The smaller man was quick, but the big black, though he lacked finesse, was a force of sheer strength. He grabbed the smaller man around the throat and threw him to the ground. He bent over him pushing his full weight onto the man. His hands slowly tightened around his throat.

Dane jumped up, moving towards the fight. Jesus, they'd have a murder soon! Men from both sides began to move toward each other. Dane pushed himself through. They'll kill each other, he thought.

Then suddenly Dupree was there. He hit the black man hard on the side of the head rendering him senseless. The worker got up from the ground and began to thank him. He got a fist in the gut for a reply. Hebert was definitely playing no politics. He stood between the two groups looking fierce. Both men were reclaimed by their groups. Dane climbed atop a table and spoke loudly.

"No amount of fighting will be tolerated. Today we have a lot to do. This does not help. Since I see that you are more interested in fighting than eating, breakfast is over." There were voices of complaint. Dane spoke through them. "Anybody not willing to work can expect to miss their mid-day as well. The commissary is open for those who need it. You have ten minutes."

The workers spooned as much food into their mouths before making a quick retreat. Dane was disgusted with the whole display and headed over to the site of the new quarters. They're animals, he thought. The first day of planting was not beginning well. He had half a mind to let that big nigger choke the life out of the other man. Then he'd have two less children to worry about. It seemed at times that none of the workers knew what was at stake. Did they think they were gathered together to fight?

He wasn't sure what they thought. That was as troubling as everything else. Things had changed remarkably since the war. The spirit of men had changed. Everything used to be in its place, he thought. Things were easier.

As soon as they gave the niggers their independence, nobody
knew how to act. If it hadn't been for Dupree, he would have gone in there himself and done some real damage. He'd have killed the nigger for sure. The other man, he wasn't too sure about; he was angry enough to do it though. For the rest of the morning, he put all of his energies in getting the roof completed.

Cora bent over Mama Rose. She gently placed a kiss on her forehead. Mama Rose slept soundly; there was no waking her. Cora grabbed her blanket from the settee and a small embroidered pillow and took it over to her aunt. The pillow showed a scene of plantation life: a girl in a white dress walking with a country gentleman dressed in top coat and hat. They walked arm in arm through a grove of oaks. In the background, slaves laboured in a cotton field. She turned the embroidered side down before placing it beneath her aunt's head. She kissed her aunt again before leaving the house.

Mama Rose woke from a deep and disorienting sleep. At first she didn't know where she was. After a few moments she sat up stiffly and wondered how she came to be in Ashe Hall. She remembered dancing the horrible dance, how it had captured her and drained her. Then there had been blackness. She must have fainted. The dance had taken everything out of her. Never had she been in such a complete trance. Then she awoke and there had been tremendous anger and violence and coldness. Then they had left. Cora leading. Was there a pattern in these events? There had to be. Everything was based on the way things fell. Fate, chance, luck, the gods, hell: they were all part of a grand pattern.

Where was Cora? Mama Rose felt a wave of weariness pass over her. She was still exhausted. She leaned against the wall and tried hard to remember. Her mind raced.

His name was Samuel. She had seeded his eyes with blindness. Mama Rose saw a vision of herself holding a fist of the black powder over his eyes. It was survival, nothing more.

The drums beat the dance makes circles brings the story rebirths itself.
Kwaku Ananse stole the monkey's skin and became a stealer of life. Was the dance a message to herself or everyone? Samuel would have killed Cora after forcing himself on her.

Fire pulls truth through lies wind scatters ashes paints memory in smoke.

There was a pattern emerging from the ruins of her memory. She had been weak for a long time. Fear had begun to rule her will. Her actions had to become as resilient as stone. Everything she did now had a purpose. She had stolen sight from Samuel. Now it was time to give it back.

Whisper to eyes hiding through mirrors cling to small flames become light shadows in darkness.

He would see differently, and her own vision would be the cause of that. Nothing had really been changed between the blacks and whites. They were still slaves. Those simple stories spoke volumes. Ananse and the drought, Ananse fakes his own death... They all revealed simple, hard truths. And one had been revealed to her. Action remained the only way to elevate her people. She was their champion. Things had already begun with Samuel.

Mama Rose walked out of the front door of Ashe Hall. The cold mid-morning air wrapped around her, and she breathed it in deeply. Her head felt clearer. Normally, the cold bothered her; its dampness seeped into the marrow of her bones. But this morning she felt comforted by it. It was like the snap of a fresh, crisp sheet thrown over a mattress, bringing a room a secure, ordered feeling.

With each breath of air that filled her, certain truths became apparent. Samuel was no ordinary worker. Samuel was probably one of the foremen. Mama Rose walked around Ashe Hall toward the men's quarters. She could smell the smoke from the kitchen fires and griddle cakes, and eggs, and bread. Heavenly. She opened the door from the mess hall and went inside. The men's quarters were above it. She climbed the steep stairway and opened the door. The room was dark and stale. She parted a heavy curtain, letting the day's light in. There was a draught invading the room from around the window. Four beds lay in the room, with dressers beside each. The
furniture was plain, sturdy, functional. A man's snore resounded through the room. Samuel. He lay on his back.

Mama Rose felt the anger ignite in her like the night before. She wanted to slice his throat. Instead, she stood over him and woke him with a touch of her hand on his forehead. His snoring stopped and he flinched. His eyes opened and saw nothing. He held his breath and froze.

"Samuel." Mama Rose kept her tone even but forceful. Her language was clear and unmistakable. Samuel's head moved slightly in her direction. The colour in his face drained.

"I am the one who blinded you. Stay quiet, and I won't do anything else. You are very vulnerable right now." He let out a breath of air.

"I want you to think about what you did last night. I want you to think about each action, each small movement, every thought of harm you had planned for that small girl. Remember that. Do you think that was a good thing?" He seemed stunned. "That's fine, you don't have to answer." He took a breath. Mama Rose lay her fingers on the side of his head and placed her thumb on his eyelid.

"The problem with what you did was this: that little girl is under my protection. I think you understand how she felt. It's kind of like this." She gave a sharp push down on his eye. He cried out.

"It's like being blind, isn't it? That must be quite a feeling for you. Such a strong man, so physical, struck down by a mere woman, having your sight stolen. Nothing scares you more does it?" She placed both of her thumbs on his eyes. He began to shake.

"Don't" It came out of his mouth weakly.

"If you happen across that girl again, you will treat her with respect. If you speak to anyone with black skin, you will give them respect. They are my children. If you see anyone doing anything to harm them, I expect you will do your best to put a stop to it. There will be a doctor coming to visit you. He won't be
able to do anything to help you. That's when you ask for Mama Rose. Only I can fix what I've done to your eyes." His expression changed, slightly. A small furrow appeared on his brow.

"I can make you blind again just as easily, Samuel. Don't think I won't. When they ask you what happened last night, you tell them that a white person did this to you. You tell them that you think he was from some other plantation, or...you tell them that you been sleepin' with his wife. I don't care; just make it sound reasonable. Now I'm going to go now. I won't ask if you understand because I know you do. And I know you won't tell anyone that I been here." She lifted her thumbs from his eyes. There was a pitcher of water on the dresser beside his bed. She dipped her hand in it and flinging her hand toward him, splashed water on his face. It was cold. He flinched.

Mama Rose walked back slowly to her shack. Things were going to start getting better now. It felt good to press her thumbs against his eyes, to feel the softness give way. She had a sudden urge to go back and push her thumbs all the way through. He was cruel and destructive, and he deserved it. However, she had managed to control herself, to stay strong, and now she was directing all that badness away from her people. That's what was most important. It was for everyone else, not just her. Yet, she couldn't stop from hoping that he was stupid. If he didn't go along with her then she could make sure he stayed blind forever and give him unbelievable pain. All the things she told him were true. She hoped he recognized that. Well, she would find out soon enough.

"You're lying!" Dane couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was such an obvious lie. Wasn't it? Hebert stood right there, with him listening to Samuel's wild tale about some woodsman coming out of the night and attacking him. Yet, Samuel kept repeating that that was what happened. Hebert was quiet, as usual, but wore an expression that said he was seriously considering all possibilities.
"A renegade?" Hebert said. "It could have been some deranged individual come out of the bush. Perhaps someone who still thinks he's fighting the war. It's possible: I've heard about people like that."

Dane looked at him as if he were simple. Are you really as thick as you look, Hebert? he thought. Sometimes you need to think a bit more. Use some horse sense. "Listen to you;" he couldn't remember being as frustrated. "There was no wildman that attacked Samuel last night. It was somebody here on this plantation. It was some bad nigger at that voodoo fire. Now, who was it Samuel?"

"Wildman." Samuel said as few words as possible. That way I won't be lying as much, he thought.

Dane slapped his hand against the headboard, a few inches above Samuel's head. He had finally lost his control. Dane, who led the men through the running of two plantations, put down slave insurrections, survived numerous voodoo curses, had finally snapped. Where had the sense of people gone? There was no way what Samuel said was true. Someone was making him say these things.

Samuel lay, seemingly unaffected by Dane's anger. Hebert placed his big hand on Dane's chest and pulled him back.

"That's not going to help him. The doctor..."

"Yes, yes. The doctor says he's blind, Hebert. How do you explain that Samuel? Tell us again about the wildman. Just how did he blind you?"

"I'm tired now." Samuel turned his head away from Dane.

"You said something about powder?" Hebert said.

Dane looked at Hebert. He wanted to beat some sense into him. Samuel was hiding something; he had a reason for what he did, but Hebert was just being stupid. He had no excuse to be acting this way. None. Someone was threatening each of them, and they refused to see it. Why? Was it fear? It was so much easier not to see that voodoo was involved with Samuel's blindness: then it couldn't happen to them; they couldn't be cursed; they wouldn't be struck blind. If they thought that encouraging ignorance was the way to
stop things... Well, he'd explain things later, in detail.

"Hebert, get the hell out of here. Samuel and I are going to have a discussion." There it was again, that feeling of being a parent. It never used to be like this, Dane thought. He watched Hebert leave the room and shut the door. Dane grabbed a chair from the other end of the room and placed it beside Samuel's bed. He did have some sympathy for Samuel, but it was disappearing fast. The doctor had given Samuel's eyes a thorough examination. He had told Dane that he did everything that he knew, but the eye was a complicated thing. "Very delicate," he said. With that pronunciation, Dane knew that Samuel was blind. The doctor told them to wait a while, but Dane knew that nothing could be done for him.

A natural response would be to find and punish the person responsible for doing this. Revenge: Dane was for it and would have backed Samuel fully, regardless of what Walker Bowe would say. Then Samuel came out with his story. Instantly Dane went into a fury. Samuel kept his story simple and consistent. He wanted no part of retribution.

Dane sat on the chair and watched Samuel for a couple of minutes. He was waiting for Samuel's breaking point. Eventually, he would begin to talk. His loyalty should amount to at least that much, Dane thought.

"Do you think that the person who did this to you really cares about what happens to you? If you are trying to protect them then you are only making things more dangerous for us. This is what you're doing, Samuel: you're giving them a message. You're telling that person that they can come in here and do anything they want to any of the workers, any of the men, including me and Hebert, and get away with it. Hell, that person has no responsibility toward the rest of us or even you. You think that they are done with you Samuel? Look at you; you're as helpless as a newborn. Do you enjoy that, knowing that you're helpless and have decided to damn the rest of us? That's what's going on here."

Still no response. God Dammit, the man was stubborn!
You know that you will be blind forever. Those eyes of yours will never again see how beautiful a sunrise is, never see a fish wriggling in the moonlight on the end of your line. Think about this Samuel: If you happen to be lucky enough to rut with a woman, you won't even know what she looks like. You'll never see what colour hair she has, never know what her eyes look like. You'll never see breasts hanging down over you again. That's your future. That's how miserable the rest of your life will be.

I don't understand how you can make up such a stupid story knowing full well that your life is going to be so empty. Just to protect this person. You must really hate yourself. That's your own business. But how can you hate us so much to condemn us to the same thing?"

Dane didn't wait for any response. He figured he had given the man enough pain and guilt to think about. Samuel was a stubborn man, but he could be counted on for his loyalty. Dane replaced the chair at the opposite side of the room. When he opened the door Samuel's voice stopped him.

"Find Mama Rose," he said.

"Who the hell is that?" The look on Samuel's face showed he was afraid for more than one reason. "There's no way I'm letting some nigger in here." Samuel's eyes flooded with tears. "There's no way I'm gonna let some nigger woman near your eyes. Your eyes, Samuel."

Samuel swallowed. His voice was tight with emotion. "Please."

"What is she, some kind of nigger priestess?"

"No. A healer."

"Witch. There's no way I'm letting a nigger witch in here!" Samuel sat up, suddenly. His face became a mask of rage. "Get her."

"Why? Did she do this to you? She didn't do she? No, don't worry, I'll make sure things are set right. I'll..."

"Get her!" Samuel yelled. His eyes roamed wildly, blindly, full of panic. "You get her! Don't do anything else, Dane. Or
something bad will happen. You bring her here..."

"She's got to pay for what she did. No nigger, man or woman..."

"No! You have to get her."

"I don't have..."

Samuel's voice broke. He was pleading. "She's the only one who can make me see."

After Mama Rose had done something to Samuel's eyes Dane had hurried her out of the men's quarters. She was tall for a woman, he thought. Surprisingly, she was attractive too; she was not covered all over with paint and didn't wear animal skins or a necklace of ears. She didn't look much like what a voodoo witch should. However, when she administered whatever foggy solution to Samuel's eyes he lay very still, like a calf caught in barbed wire. It was all bullshit, trickery, as far as he was concerned, but Samuel believed it. He was frightened of her and that alone made Dane watch the woman closely. She was responsible for Samuel's condition, he was certain. She worked slowly, calmly, as if she had nothing to be concerned about. Dane had half a mind to throw her out the door. That would be a huge mistake he knew. When she came in she walked with the airs of a queen, and Hebert had stepped clear of her path. All of his men were victim to Samuel's voodoo spell. Who knew how far this madness was going? It had probably filtered down to the workers. Now that they knew the source of the magic: this woman, they would treat her with the respect given a poisonous water snake. If he did anything to her, he'd have panic on his hands. Still, when she first came, he gave her a warning that nobody could mistake. He grabbed her arm roughly and pushed her against the wall. He heard her gasp as the air escaped from her lungs.

"If you do anything to him, to hurt him I'll kill you where you stand."

She regarded him coldly, not afraid of him at all. "Maybe I'll let your boy stay blind forever."
Dane changed his grip on her arm and guided her into the room where Samuel lay.

After the healing, Dane dismissed everyone from the mess hall, and he sat across from Mama Rose at one of the tables. He promised himself he would speak rationally. With the table between them, he might not kill her.

"I don't put much stock in your voodoo or magic or whatever it is you say you do." Dane stared directly at her. She smiled madly.

"You don't know anything."

How was he supposed to keep calm if she was deliberately going to provoke him? He leaned across the table.

"Listen, you think I won't kill you like some fuckin' wild animal? What's to keep me from harming your nigger ass? Think about it."

"Fear. Maybe not you, but everyone on this plantation. They know who I am. You kill me and I'll come back stronger."

"Don't tell..."

"No. You know it. Your workmen, your men, all go to bed at night with fear. They have their charms against what can happen: maybe they wear a cross; maybe a rabbit's foot in a pocket; prayer beads; some light a candle. They're not all terrified, but there is fear in each of them. You watch them reach out for their charms when some animal calls out in the night. They hope that what they're hearing is a wild animal. They hope it isn't some spirit or demon or devil. Maybe it's me, ready to damn their souls or make them blind.

"You have fear in you too, Mr. Thewes."

"You can use a spooky voice and make your eyes wide and smile like a gator, all you want. Go ahead and prance around with your charms and amulets. It'd make for a better show. Draw all the symbols and diagrams you want. I know parlour tricks when I see them." Dane slapped his hand down on the table.

"No, this time you shut up. Here's a little story for you. Make sure you know it's a cautionary tale. We had a man come
through a plantation that I used to work on. This was before the war. He was selling potions and oils designed to cure every disease you could think of. He could even cure blindness, so he said. He had a big, black case with him full of all sorts of bottles—round ones, tall thin ones, green ones, blue ones, red, all colours and sizes. Each was for something different: different illness, different bottle. He claimed he had cured kings in far away countries like France and Persia and China. That's where most of his ingredients were from. Even still, he didn't sell many of his bottles. Well, that same night one of the workers came down with a mysterious sickness. He complained of an upset stomach; he was seeing spots; he was dizzy; he had tremendous pain when he peed. It was simply awful. Luckily that potion man had just the right bottle to cure him. Soon that worker was feeling fine. That salesman damn near emptied out his case he sold so many bottles. Things were going so well that we decided to have a little party in his honour. We drank a lot that night. The worker who got sick drank so much that he started saying all sorts of stuff. In fact, he told some of the men how he had been paid by the salesman to act sick. I'm afraid the rest of the story isn't so pleasant. This is where the cautionary part starts.

"I don't need to tell you how people can become upset. We beat that potion salesman so bad that he couldn't even crawl away. And the worker?" Dane leaned over the table so close to Mama Rose that she could feel his breath. That worker we beat so bad, you'd have thought he was a nigger."

Dane reached out and grabbed Mama Rose by the throat. He stood and lifted her with him. "I don't like what your voodoo mumbo jumbo does to everyone around here. You can scare people only so much, then they'll strike out at whatever it is that scares them."

Mama Rose's hand came up blindingly fast. Pressed against his eyelid was a crow's foot. Dane could feel the sharp talons dig into his flesh. If he moved, he knew he would lose his eye. Slowly, he let his grip on Mama Rose relax.
"See, everyone has a little fear in them. Right now, I imagine you're afraid of blindness. Step away."

Dane leaned back across the table.

"You better hope that you don't scare me, Mr. Thewes," Mama Rose said before she left the room.

Mama Rose walked back to Ashe Hall. She was surprised at how calm she was with Dane Thewes. For some reason he didn't worry her. His big speech, the story he told her, all his drama, she could see through as if it were smoke coming out of his mouth. She was not so naive to misunderstand that he could be and was dangerous, but for now she could manage to keep things under a certain amount of control. The balance of strength on the plantation belonged to her. However, she would have to be careful not to do anything that might influence that balance. Patience, she told herself. That is what I need right now.

Before the ceremony began, she knew that she would not have been able to stand so proudly against his threats. The story, that horrible, horrible dance had left her with such a strength. It flowed through her and made a peace inside her. She found Cora waiting in the room they had spent the night in. Cora rushed over to her, tears in her eyes, voice angry.

"Where were you? You can't just run away like that. I almost left without you."

"Where were you going?" Mama Rose said.

"They're looking for us. It's just blind luck that they haven't found us."

Mama Rose smiled at her niece. She was so full of concern and impatience. "Calm down..."

"How? If they find us..." Cora continued oblivious of what her aunt was trying to tell her. Mama Rose began to straighten the room. She folded blankets and arranged them as she imagined they were when they came. Cora stopped her tirade.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"We will return home. Wait." She held up her hand. Cora's
mouth refused to close.

"Everything is settled. At least for a while. Help me set
this room the way it was, and I will tell you about it." She
watched her niece and marvelled again at how quickly she was
growing into a woman. She had a feeling that the next year would
be a crucial one for Cora.

As soon as they were in sight of Ashe Hall Angelique told him
about her dream. She held tears in her eyes like an exiled
princess finally coming home. She gripped the railing of the
steamer with both hands, her small body standing so still while the
boat fought the current, and the wind whipped her hair and made her
skin so chilled, cheeks so red.

"I'd close my eyes, Walker, and I'd just listen to all the
sounds around me. Crickets chirping and the wind blowing through
the oak leaves and sometimes a slave singing or humming. I could
feel the sweat gathering all around me: underneath my arms, on down
my back, and collecting on my lip. Some people mind the heat, but
the humidity is such a part of how things are that I can't help but
like it. It brings out all the smells of things. It cooks them
out and you can just smell nature and how things really are. A lot
of times people, women, don't want to smell things that are all
hot-like, and they squeeze up their face and say it's disgusting
and uncouth. Well, they're liars, every one of them, because I've
seen them stand beside a man after he's been working all day in the
fields, and he stinks, and they comment on it, but then when they
think I'm not looking, they breath it in. Nice and deep. But
that's what the heat does to you. Every once in a while a breeze
comes along and pushes the hair out of your face. Glory. I'd keep
my eyes closed really tight and think that everything that is out
there is really all mine. There's no father or mother, and I can
walk through the place and everyone will say hello to me, not
because my daddy owns the plantation, but because I do."

Walker carried her off the steamer and set her gently on the
ground. Angelique stood in front of Ashe Hall for a few moments,
hardly daring to breath. Walker took her arm and made her go inside. He told her to look around while he made sure the rest of the luggage and plantation supplies were taken care of.

Ashe Hall is so big, she thought. The whole thing was like a dream. She walked slowly throughout the entirety of the house running her hands against the dark, wooden door frames, the white plastered walls, the stone fireplaces. She listened to the echo of her footsteps on the hardwood floors and made her way upstairs tracing her finger along the polished wooden railing. She noticed there were places for portraits to hang above the staircase and made an immediate plan to have one painted of her and Walker. Upstairs she opened and secured every shutter, letting the light pour through on the walls, the floors, the ceilings. This was her house! She would dress it up right. A house like this deserved a dedication to style that she could master. She would make it beautiful.

When Dane first saw Walker Bowe's new bride, he wasn't too impressed. When Walker talked about her, he made her sound like a vision. But there she was, trying to conduct the off-loading of her chests and furniture from the barge. Like her husband she seemed to have a propensity to get in the way. There was nothing remarkable about her, at least as far as Dane could tell. She was short, and had thin, blonde hair. Her skin was pale and her expression slightly soured. Obviously, she was not satisfied with the way her belongings were being handled. She was young, younger than Walker. He had forgotten that she would be so young. If he had a daughter, she would be about her age, he imagined. He hoped to hell he wouldn't become a father figure to her as well. He introduced himself, tipping his hat. She held out her hand, expecting it to be kissed. He grabbed it with a grip that was much too firm and shook it.

That's just what I need, he thought, a princess. She recovered from her shock and began to say something. He didn't wait to hear what it was. Walker appeared from Ashe Hall, and Dane
walked over to him. They had a lot to talk about. He's the one in charge, Dane reminded himself. He's the one who should be worrying about everything.

Kwaku Ananse was very careful with Monkey's body. There was a lot of blood and a big ugly mark right where he had crashed the rock on Monkey's forehead. He cleaned it as best he could.

Ananse had brought with him five earthenware jugs. He put them in a row beside Monkey's body. Then Ananse took a big knife and he cut into Monkey's flesh. He cut Monkey right under the chin. It made a sucking sound when he cut through the throat. He moved the knife downward between Monkey's breasts. He had to use a lot of force to break through his chest plate.

"This is tough work," Ananse said. "I'm beginning to sweat." He thought of just sawing through Monkey's bones, but he forced himself to be careful. He didn't want to create more work for himself later. Ananse had to stop to wipe off all the blood; it was making his grip on the knife slip. There was so much blood. Ananse hadn't counted on that. It was spraying on the ground and soaking red into the sand. The blood was sticking to Monkey's fur and drying, hanging off his body in clumps.

This is too much messy work, Ananse thought. I should trick someone into doing it for me. He went to the mouth of the cave and looked out. There was nobody around. He called out for help, pretending that he was in distress. The only answer he got was the sound of his own voice. There was nobody to help him.

When he went back into the cave, he realized that he couldn't have tricked anyone into believing that what he was doing was a good thing. Monkey's body lay so exposed, the hole in his chest more revealing than any life of hate or lies or tears. He was stripped of every dignity, more naked than anybody should ever be. It was too much for even Ananse to look upon fully. Ananse decided that he would work with only one eye open. He grabbed the knife and began to cut into Monkey again. He cut downward swiftly,
almost to where Monkey's penis was. When he got down to the stomach the opening emitted a powerful stink. It was too strong for Ananse to ignore. He retched out the sand and rocks he had eaten for breakfast.

Kwaku Ananse pulled open the hole as wide as he could. He reached inside and began to pull out monkey's guts. He severed the heart and put it in one jar. He ripped out the lungs and set them in another. The liver he dropped into another jar. In his biggest jar, he put the intestines. He wrapped the rest of the guts together in the stomach and put them in the last jar. Then he sealed each jar and put them very far inside the cave in a cool place.

He dragged monkey's body outside so it would dry. After it was ready, he sharpened his knife against a rock. Then, carefully, he began to shave every hair on Monkey's body except for his head, under his arms and around his penis. Then he began to sew up the hole, using an inside stitch and an outside stitch. It left a nasty scar but not unbelievable. Ananse studied his work from every angle.

"You look very strange now, Monkey," he said. "No one would ever know that it was you."

Ananse crawled into Monkey's mouth and down into his body. His new suit fit perfectly. He made the body stand up and walk around. At first it was awkward, he fell a lot. But after practicing for a while it became like his own body. He could even pee with it. Next, he practiced talking. His voice came out deeper through Monkey's mouth. It sounded very strange, but it was perfect for Ananse's scheme.

"I am man," he cried, "Lord of all the animals!" He raised his arms encompassing as much of the land as possible.

Then he began to laugh.

The first harvest of the sugar cane began in July. Dane and Hebert headed a controlled burn of the fields that fired off the excess cane foliage. The smoke rose steadily for over a week, the
fires clearing great areas in radial patterns. The smoke kept inventing black shapes that hung over the fields until a gust of wind would battle them away. Workers surrounded the fires, ready with shovels to dig diversionary trenches to direct the fire if it tried to escape. These were difficult times. Despite water for the men and large straw hats, the combination of the sun's heat and the hot, dry burn of the fires caused at least two or three men to pass out each day. They fell feebly, like sickly children right where they stood. They had to be moved away from the fires, usually out of the fields where they could be revived in the cool path of a tree's shade. In cleared areas, the workers began to cut the cane. They held scythes and machetes, the sound of which could be heard following regular sudden patterns all through the plantation. They walked through the rows of cane, bending to cut the stalks at ground level. The leaves and upper portions of the cane were stripped right on the field. There were trails of the long, thin leaves strewn behind the workers as they made their way up each row. Tons of cane were gathered in bundles and heaped upon large wagons and sent down to the sugar-house. Walker spent most of his time here during the harvest watching Samuel work the presses and boil the impurities out of the sugar solution. Walker marvelled at Samuel's knowledge of the process, how he did things to maximize efficiency like shredding the cane before putting it through the press and re-using the sweet water instead of throwing it out. There was so much the man knew, and despite his anxious manner, he was, just like Dane said: the finest around. He predicted at least one other harvest, probably in late December or January. Finally, things were working out. If his luck were to hold, he'd have his original investment back and more. Most of the workers owed him a lot of money from the commissary. Some of them wouldn't be able to pay him back for the entirety of their debt. Dane called it business, but it preyed on his mind nonetheless. He wanted his workers to be, if not happy, then content. Thomas Reilly seemed unconcerned about the situation. It was a fact of life that some people would always be carrying a debt. At the
moment it didn't matter. The plantation was up to its full production, and there wasn't time to be concerned about individual finances. At the end of the day, the workers collapsed into their bunks, many not bothering to take off their pants. The night was made comfortable by loud rolling snores that kept dreams at bay and tensions confined to the whacks of sharpened steel on the cane.

Cora's duties seemed immense to her. They included the able running of the entirety of Ashe Hall. Those words sounded strange to her. "Able running", as if Ashe Hall could not take care of itself, as if the house was dependant on those who lived in it. Apparently, that was not what Miss Angelique had meant when she described Cora's job. Miss Angelique had a funny view about the house. It seemed that when she considered the house she meant all the objects inside it, which wasn't really the house at all. Mama Rose didn't like the way she decorated it. She said that the house had a character of its own and that Miss Angelique was trying to hide it. Cora thought it was grand what Miss Angelique had done. Every room was full of furniture: couches, settees, divans, mirrors, full bodied draperies, oriental rugs, and long thin carpets called runners that fit neatly down the length of stairs. It made the house look rich, like a good coat over a crisp white shirt with a pair of pressed slacks and cufflinks on a man spoke of good breeding. Cora even had a uniform. It was tailored to fit her; a white cotton dress with a slip underneath and a blue apron. Miss Angelique had taken the measurements herself and then sent them to New Orleans to a seamstress just so she could look like a proper maid. That's what she was: a proper maid. It was a serious responsibility. Cora told her aunt about all the things she was learning. She had to make tea and serve it in a silver service; seek out all the places that dust could hide and make sure nothing was dusty; place the canisters that contained music in the Victrola; extinguish candles with the snuffer so that no smoke smelled up the room; put fresh flowers in vases full of warm water so the flowers would open and their scent would mix with the breeze.
making the house smell nice; replace flowers in the dining room, the sitting room, the drawing room, and the bedrooms, every other day. It was work.

Mama Rose listened to all her stories and muttered something under her breath. Cora didn't have to hear it to know that she didn't particularly like Miss Angelique. She also knew that she didn't like Cora living in Ashe Hall. When Cora told Mama Rose that she would have to live back in Ashe Hall because that's what a maid does, she didn't really understand Mama Rose's reaction. Mama Rose was angry. It wasn't because she wasn't glad for her to live in the house, and it wasn't because she might be lonely without her. Mama Rose said she was glad and that it was a good idea that she live there, and that she was proud of her. But she was still mad. Maybe she didn't want her to work anymore. Yet, it was Mama Rose who suggested that she be a maid. Sometimes Cora couldn't understand her aunt.

What was important was that Miss Angelique was teaching Cora all sorts of things. She was learning how to act properly, how to be just like Miss Angelique. Cora had never known anyone like her; she was so delicate and refined. Miss Angelique talked a lot about high society and the way that things were supposed to be. At times Cora fell silent. She was ashamed that she hadn't known any of the ways to act. She never knew that you shouldn't talk so much or ask so many questions. That was the hardest part for her: keeping quiet. That was an attitude about how to be demure. That was especially important when a man was around. You wanted him to think you were shy and innocent.

"Even if you aren't?" Cora asked.

"Even if you aren't." Cora made Miss Angelique laugh a lot. It wasn't a laugh that came from the gut; it was a "polite amusement; that sounds musical. Like a song." Cora was even learning to walk. She was learning how to swish her skirts so that they sounded all silky and fresh. She was learning that you smooth your skirts with the palms of your hands before sitting down, and that you arranged them around you so you seemed always at ease,
always ready for a compliment. Miss Angelique was teaching her lots of things, lots of things. How to be a woman.

Cora was wary of Walker Bowe. When she first came back to Ashe Hall she avoided him, never locked him in the eyes, and rarely spoke around him. When she finally did look at him, at the absent way that he spoke to her, she felt relieved. It was obvious that he didn't recognize her but she wasn't so sure that she liked that, especially when he smiled.

Miss Angelique kept a pair of white songbirds in a brass cage in the sitting room. During the day she'd take them down and put them on the table by the window so that they could see outside. They had a fine view of the river, and they could sit and sing about it. Miss Angelique had so many ideas about what those birds were actually singing about. She'd tell Cora to stop doing her work at least once a day so they could listen to the birds singing.

"Do you know what they're so happy about?" she'd say.
Cora shook her head.
"They're happy because the sun is reflecting off the river and is making waves of light in the air. It reminds them of flying. Did you know that?"

Miss Angelique had so many reasons why the birds were chirping. Cora wanted to tell her that she thought the birds were just bored and talking to each other to pass the time. But she didn't; Miss Angelique seemed so struck by her own ideas that Cora thought that maybe she was right.

"Oh," was all she'd say.

Around midday, just after lunch, Miss Angelique would go into the drawing room and loosen the thin white curtains over the windows and shut the door. Cora heard her turn the key in the lock and the sharp click it made when it locked. She tried to imagine what Miss Angelique did in there. It was more of a man's room by her own admittance. That's where Mr. Bowe put the desk that Miss Angelique had given him as a wedding present. On the wall, between two lamps was a stuffed gator head that showed off its clean, clever teeth. Cora hated cleaning it; she imagined that it might
come alive and bite her. She tried to peek into the room through
the keyhole, but Miss Angelique left the key in the lock so she
couldn't see. She even asked her why she went in there all alone.

"Because a woman needs her alone time," she'd say.

It wasn't much of an excuse, but Cora came to be glad that she
had the time free of Miss Angelique. Often she'd go into the
sitting room and pop open the tiny door on the bird cage. Then
she'd put in her finger and one or both of the songbirds would hop
onto it. She'd let them rest on her fingers, and they'd sing and
chirp and talk to her. Sometimes she'd tell them tales about Kwaku
Ananse, but none of the terrible ones because she didn't want to
scare them. Then she'd put them back and close the door, and Miss
Angelique never knew because she'd have a fit for fear they'd fly
away.

A week after the first harvest began, Cora slipped out of Ashe
Hall at dusk and went for a walk. She went down to the river and
watched it grow dark as the sun sank low and orange into the trees.
She gripped three round rocks in her hand and tossed them high into
the river. They made lovely arcs and entered the water each with
a small splash. The current quickly smoothed away any evidence
that she had thrown the rocks.

Mama Rose wasn't in the shack. Cora walked inside and called
her name, but there was no answer. Every window was open and the
door ajar. It wasn't strange that Mama Rose wasn't home; Cora
hardly saw her. She'd be out giving one of her potions or powders
to one of the black workers. It might be a charm or an amulet. It
was amazing that she could work her magic. After Miss Angelique
arrived, and they built the new quarters, she had done her magic
openly. Nobody gave her permission, but nobody said anything
against it either. The black workers had begun to wear her
talisman openly: bird wings with painted feathers; small pouches
full of different powders, sawdust and spit; pieces of coloured
glass wound with twine and wire hung from a leather string. Even
some of the white workers came to ask about certain problems. But
they did so secretly. Cora heard that if they were caught fellow
workers beat on them.

There were no more dances though. Not even in secret. That was Mr. Thewes' doing. There were forces inside him that kept that weathered face stern and his manner abrupt. He held himself rigid like wire stretched taut between two fence posts. He was polite enough to Cora, and when he spoke to her, it was in a quiet voice. Mama Rose said to beware of people who smiled too much. She said a smile hid worse things than an angry face.

"An open hand can easily turn into a fist. Stay away from that man." Cora knew she wasn't joking. She could see herself that Dane Thewes had placed a darkness way down in his secret heart, and it was only a matter of time before it got out. She knew by looking at him; the same way she knew that there were gators all over Cajun country. You could look out over a swamp and not see one of them, but if you looked hard you could see tiny bumps that were eyes that saw you as a juicy snack. She saw that same look pass briefly over Mr. Thewes' face whenever he came to the house, and it wasn't just impatience. No, there was something eating him from the inside out. She made sure to stay clear of him.

Cora walked into the cane fields. It looked so different, now that the harvest had begun. It looked like some great beast had come into the field and eaten everything up. She imagined it moving around in there snorting like a mad bull, hungrier for more than sweet, sweet cane. Cora stopped and looked around listening just in case someone or something was following her.

"You're going to scare yourself old," she told herself and shook her head at how foolish she was. Absently she bent down and picked up a few cane leaves and began to weave a simple hex. She decided that she could probably make one for the front door of Ashe Hall. It would be like the one Mama Rose made for her when they were living there, only better. She could do a really big one, a complex pattern that was tight and hard to break. She held the cane leaf between her thumb and fore-finger. It was smooth as long as she rubbed it one way, rough when she stroked it back. It was
perfect material for a hex. She spent a short while gathering
leaves and then headed back to Ashe Hall.

Night had fallen by the time Cora returned. She crept quietly
inside the house, not wanting to disturb anyone. During the night,
she was supposed to stay quiet. Miss Angelique said it was because
her and Mr. Bowe were trying to sleep. Cora knew otherwise; Miss
Angelique was trying to have a baby. It was funny that they
thought that Cora couldn't hear them jumping up and down on that
bed of theirs, calling out each other's names. It was not so funny
that they had been fighting lately, and they didn't expect her to
know why. It was all about a baby.

Cora listened and was relieved that she didn't hear a thing.
The door to the sitting room was partly closed. That was strange,
since she was supposed to leave all the doors open so they could
get a breeze going through the house. She pushed it open gently
and then winced. The door caught itself on the frame making a
scraping sound. Walker Bowe slept in one of the high backed chairs
that faced the fireplace. He was still dressed in his work
clothes. The noise from the door didn't wake him. Cora watched him
for a while, saw his chest rise and fall with a thick, even
breathing. He was exhausted. He slept the kind of sleep that
compresses time and provides anonymity. Cora put herself back to
the time when the moon illuminated her against the square of
window, and she stepped through it holding a lamp. That was the
first time she saw Walker. He seemed more handsome to her now.
Months of work had made his face more defined, stronger. She
looked at his hands and saw the cuts made by the cane, saw the
earth ground into his fingers and gathered under his nails. She
thought that she should wake him, tell him to go upstairs to bed
with his wife, but she realized she didn't want to. She sat in the
other chair and watched him as he slept. He seemed so at peace
when he slept, he hardly moved. She found herself getting tired
and laying her head against the high back of the chair. Wouldn't
it be nice, she thought, to slip into sleep right here. It was so
perfect with Walker sitting beside her and a night breeze blowing
the curtains apart. She got up abruptly; it wouldn't do to have her fall asleep. What would Miss Angelique think if she found her there?

Before she left, she stopped in front of him. She leaned toward him and placed her fingers softly on his knee. She kissed him once slowly, softly beside his mouth. He had a day's worth of stubble, and when her lips touched his cheek she felt how rough it was. He smelled like the cane fields, like the sweat of hard work and like someone whom she might want to kiss fully on the mouth.

Like an imposter sun, the moon rose after dusk. It pulled the night in tightly with its pale yellow glow so that Mama Rose could see everything that it touched. When she walked into the cornfield, she made herself go gently so that she would not disturb any amount of moonlight that brought the thick green and leafy stalks into such a pure and rich focus. It was as if each turn of leaf, each pendulous weight of corn cob were within reach of her understanding; how it all grew and would grow, to what heights each plant would reach, or be trampled by harvest or wither and brown, standing defiantly before the cold weather came again. Standing in the middle of the field, so far from everything, that all she could see were the landscape of leaves, she imagined herself tied by thin long strings to the tip of every stalk and that those strings captured things beyond her vision but were tied to her nonetheless. She stood for a long time feeling the weight of responsibilities and listening to each breath she inhaled and expunged in a steady unbroken rhythm.

There were times that she felt that she could stand against the entire onslaught of demands that the world made. If there was such a thing as control, it was only a veneer, a ruse, held together by a small knot of personal will. The situation on the plantation did not escalate into any violent means of extremity during the entire summer because of an unspoken promise between herself and Dane Thewes. It was hard to discern where that agreement began. It was all hidden in actions that both of them
had taken and the way that others had responded. Dane Thewes had so many who were loyal to him. That was his strength: he held old ideas so openly like so many who liked to think that nothing ever changes. Mama Rose had penetrated that sense of loyalty through Samuel. That act that she had done instinctively, through a cruelty that survival dictated had affected a greater number of people than she had realized. That may be only respect through fear, but there was a kinder show towards her people than before. Ever. Walker Bowe now appreciated that segregation had its values. His idealism could be tampered with; Dane had already done that. Walker wore his weakness openly: his princess wife. She still held pre-war values; they had been altered somewhat by Walker, but they were ingrained. Dane had won Angelique's respect, and she valued his opinions because he cleverly twisted them so that they closely resembled her own. Walker had the final say on the plantation. There was no mistaking that it was his. He had the money, that was something that every worker understood. However, he could be influenced and that was dangerous. Yet, he did at times go against every sense of him that Mama Rose had. He had the unusual power of being unpredictable and that was a wild tool to try to wield. Mama Rose could not let him forget that they were people. That's one reason that she sent Cora to live in Ashe Hall. She was quick; she was adaptable; and she had a force of personality that could impress itself into the strongest of hearts.

Dane Thewes worried her. His relationship with the workers had grown over the past few months, and though he said nothing too extreme against the black workers, his treatment of them was difficult. That carried through to almost every white individual on the plantation. There were small incidents that crept up occasionally, but they were nothing to take of great concern. Overall, they were treated decently, but there was still a tension whenever a black stood in the same space as a white man. She had to be careful all the time; she knew that if she were somehow to be removed, it would be as if the banks of the river disappeared. The plantation would be sent reeling, backward and her achievements
would escape into a folk story.

There was no successor to her vision because she didn't know exactly how to communicate it; she couldn't put it into specific words, and at times, she wondered if she understood the extent of what she was trying to do. She grew tired of standing and lay down on the earth between the stalks and looked upward at the sky. A breeze passed occasionally stirring the leaves of the corn, making the stars seem like fireflies caught in the river's mirror. She thought about the myth of permanence. She wondered if there were some way to trap things as they were and hold them still forever. There would always be hatred between blacks and whites, but they could live in relative peace. There was no method of freezing the world that she had been attempting to create, either through the magic that she practiced or through an indomitable force of will.

They were really the same thing; a spell cast was just a projection of will with a certain amount of formality and ceremony thrown in. That was perhaps the reason why people feared it: when it worked, it worked well because one will was stronger than another. People naturally fear things stronger than themselves. They were really scared of their own weaknesses.

She focused on the sky. Each star a pinprick of dreams seeping through into the world and fusing together to form desires and hope and life. It was the kind of sky that made eyes close. But dreaming wasn't enough to make the impossible happen. The whites would never leave, she would never walk through the corridors of Ashe Hall again, and Cora would never command magic as powerful as she did herself. Perhaps that was an indication of a way of life that was dying. People tended to reject the unexplainable in the hopes that they could simplify things in comfortable, pleasant ways. It was cyclic, this interpretation, and would revert to more potent means as soon as some disaster or catastrophe struck, and the world would reveal itself to be lethal and destructive and full of nastiness. Her mind swam with the implications of her thoughts. Was she defeating herself and her way of life by trying to create harmony between her people and the
whites? No, that was why segregation must be maintained, so that her people could survive any catastrophe placed on them by the whites or otherwise. Faith in tradition must be maintained and not replaced by things that the whites deemed proper. They deserved as much of a say in things as the whites. They didn't own the plantation, but its existence was as dependant on them just as much.

With a sudden clarity Mama Rose realized that it was time to push things forward again. They couldn't be scared of Dane Thewes any longer. Aspects of their life had to be shown as good. They had to formalize it. Dancing had been banned. She would find another way to make them live again.

Returning to her shack, Mama Rose saw three figures waiting for her. As she neared she noticed that a man and an elderly woman waited with another man who was badly beaten. His face had a shiny lock to it as a face would look if it had been hit many times.

"Mama Rose, you gotta see this, what they done, saying he's lazy." It was the old woman who spoke, standing to meet her. The other man stood quietly over his friend who lay semi-conscious on the ground.

"Who did this?" Mama Rose knew the answer already. It didn't matter that the person or people who were directly responsible remained nameless to her; she knew where the source of the blame was.

"Some men ganged up on him after dinner. They left him lying on the ground all bloody and sore like this. It ain't for no good reason, Mama Rose, no good reason at all." There were tears in the old woman's eyes. She was beginning to shake.

"I'll get some salve to put on his face." She gave a small smile to the old woman and went inside.

"You gotta make them people pay. He's a good worker. They just sayin' he's lazy so nobody'll get mad, but he's a hard worker. You make them pay."

The woman's anger was genuine. She complained as Mama Rose set the salve on the man's wounds. There had to be something she
could do. She had to do something. It wasn't a plea, but a command. The other man stood beside his friend. He didn't say a word, but the anger in his eyes hung over her with the weight of a threat. If she wasn't able to do something, then they would.

She knew where to find Samuel immediately. It was too early for him to bed down, so he would be either playing cards or out walking close to the river. Cora had told Mama Rose that she thought Samuel felt the need to distance himself from everyone ever since Mama Rose had her talk with him. Samuel was always close to every event on the plantation. Tonight he'd be too worried to be playing cards.

She approached him noiselessly, timing her walk with the flow of the river. She met up with him as if she had always been beside him. He was visibly affected by her appearance. He paled and stepped back a few paces, holding his hands up at waist level toward her. He knew what had happened. Mama Rose looked at his hands. They were rough, but that was from work, not from smashing them against a man's face.

"You know...," she began.

"I can't know what happens all the time. I can't control everybody. Please. These things are going to happen; I can't stop it all."

She leaned backward against the trunk of a tree.

"He... He was lazy anyway. That, no it's true, he was... they told me..."

"Don't lie to me. Don't give me excuses that you can't even tell me straight. Both of us know that he was beaten because people like to do things like that. They like the way it feels."

She stared at him until he dropped his eyes.

"What? What?"

"The river looks so nice when the moon shines on it. I think so." She walked away as calmly as she came. Samuel was not stupid. He would do something to fix the situation. That she was sure of.

Dane sat across from Thomas Reilly at a table in the mess
hall. There was a lantern between them, and though it was bright it still created shadows that made the room seem smaller than it was. With only the two of them in the room, late at night with quiet and darkness around a radius of light, Dane found it surprisingly confining. He hoped Reilly did too. The man didn't blanche when asked about the beating of the nigger. Dane expected him to say nothing and that was what happened. He thought the whole episode ridiculous.

"So you have no idea who is responsible for beating the nigger?"

Reilly kept his face expressionless. "No."

"None at..."

"None."

Dane had to stop himself from laughing. This was not something he enjoyed. Reilly was a good man, and now he, he was using him to save some kind of negro honour. Dane cursed Mama Rose silently. What was the cost? Samuel would be blinded? He didn't think so. But in Samuel's mind that voodoo threat was as real as rain and losing Samuel to some sort of madness was worse than what he had to do to Reilly. Samuel had woke him and told him about the witch coming to him, threatening him. The man cried as he told it. Cried! That witch had done too much damage already. Dane envisioned himself throttling her. She had too much of a hold on Samuel. Now, with this latest gem, Samuel was threatening to leave. Samuel was such a part of the plantation that losing him would be something akin to tragedy, especially now that the harvest was on. Dane had no choice.

"I want you to find who did it, who beat the nigger."

Reilly's eyes narrowed and he sat back.

"You're serious?" He looked at Dane as if he was crazy.

"Find out who it is." Dane kept his voice firm. It was a command.

Reilly was silent, it seemed, for a full minute. His mind was racing.

"You don't expect someone to come forward and confess?" He
smiled, incredulous. "Nobody's going to do that. Not voluntarily. No way."

"Then you find some way to make someone confess. Maybe it's you who's responsible."

Reilly pulled his hands down to his lap. "What's going on Mr. Thewes? How come all of a sudden you're interested in some nigger? How do you know he didn't deserve what he got? I can't just start askin' 'round about that. No. If you want someone bad enough, you just pull him aside yourself."

"Is that what it'll be?"

"Remember what happened before? When all those fights broke out and you and Mr. Walker wanted to know what happened, who was responsible? It doesn't matter who did it. We workers have our own ways of dealing justice. That's that. But that was with white folks. Nobody cares about a nigger. Not even Mr. Walker, not really. If you go shaking up things on account of a nigger then things are going to be worse than before."

Dane reached across the table and grabbed the front of his shirt. He pulled him roughly against the table. Reilly grunted in pain.

"I'll make things plain. Find some bastard who you don't like and get a couple of men. Then go and beat the shit out of him. Hell, I don't even care if you do it yourself. When you're done, you leave him out in the open so everybody can see how bad he is. And if I get one sniff of a riot, I'm coming after you." Dane threw him back in his chair, swept up the lantern and left the room, leaving Thomas Reilly sitting in the dark.

Dane felt like doing something entirely physical. Something that would take the last of his energy and focus it entirely. He needed to chop through a cord of wood, swing a scythe, dig a trench, anything that would make the muscles in his back, legs and arms burn. And most of all, he needed something that would keep his mind from thinking. Thomas would go back now and soon, perhaps not tonight, but tomorrow, he would be faced with a lot of angry workers. It was he who would have to calm things down; he who
would have to arrange discipline, and it was he who was responsible for damaging the plantation right in the middle of harvest time.

Angelique woke suddenly and opened her eyes against half-remembered dreams of vague people and ephemeral happenings. The bed felt large and empty without Walker. This was the third night in a row he had not come to sleep beside her. She closed the thin romance that she had been reading and put it on her bed-side table. Things seemed to work out for everyone in novels. Well, except for initial tragedies. All she wanted was a baby. It was a natural thing for a married couple. That was the progression: you got married; you consummated things; hopefully many times; and you became pregnant. Walker had not touched her since she had mentioned it. His reasons were not convincing, and she couldn't help being insulted.

They lay in bed. He was close to the edge of sleep, when she whispered her request. She thought he didn't hear her; he was still for so long. She repeated it again.

"I know," was all he said. He didn't even give her an explanation for his tone, which was one of dread. He was acting as if she had asked him to, well, for something awful.

Angelique felt a breeze blow through the window, and she realized that she was sweating. The breeze felt good. She lifted the thin white sheet that covered her legs and rose to stand beside the window. She pulled the curtains wide and leaned palms down on the sill. Below her the plantation was dark and quiet.

A pale flicker of light caught her eye. There was someone walking through the small grove of pecan trees behind Ashe Hall and the men's quarters. She extinguished the lamp beside her bed, so she could see better. The person swung a lantern as he walked. The lantern was turned low, so it was obscured by his body and the tree branches as he walked. It made the tree branches seem like old arthritic fingers. The figure walked quickly; she could tell it was a man because of his clothes and the strength with which he walked. He was walking in no specific direction, but followed the rows of trees. It wasn't Walker; she knew his walk.
Walker had refused to sleep with her the next night. She had told him that he was acting like a child, and that prompted a furious argument. It ended in the loud slamming of mutual doors.

That was the first night she slept alone...

A cicada started to hum and Angelique saw the man stop and cock his head to the side. He was definitely familiar to her, but she couldn't make out his face. She listened trying to hear if he was whistling or singing. Men did that sometimes as they walked. The crickets and frogs were loud; she couldn't tell.

His excuse was a simple and pervasive one. He wanted to insure the child a secure future. Until the harvest was in and all the money collected for the sale of the sugar, he wasn't ready for that type of commitment. She argued that the child was her concern. Walker would be successful; that, she was sure of, as long as he listened to everyone around him and that he wasn't too idealistic. He grew angry instantly, saying that she didn't respect him and that he didn't wish to raise a child with "certain Southern attitudes." She countered by calling his ways "Northern foolishness". He was willing to talk rationally and smoothed his tone. He explained that things weren't so simple. She didn't, no couldn't, understand. She wondered aloud to him if he knew how simple it was to make a baby. All he had to do was stick his manhood in her.

It was Dane Thewes who was walking through the pecan grove. That was unlike him. She thought that he was as iron inside as he seemed outside. She thought that he never worried. The way he was walking suggested otherwise. Maybe she should invite him in and talk. The running of the plantation affected her as well. Perhaps she could help in some way. If Dane was troubled, then she should help out. That would help ease Walker's mind as well. And with an easy mind, there was no telling what simple miracle Walker and she could perform.

"Just lay beside me and sleep," she asked him. "I'm tired of sleeping alone."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Walker said.
"You're supposed to sleep with me. You're my husband."

He remained noncommittal.

"I'll be good, honest." She was really trying to make things easier for both of them. If she could coax him back to bed then she knew she'd have a better chance.

"What are you afraid of?" She kept her tone light, humourous.

"I'm afraid that I'll be lying there, sound asleep and that I'll wake up with you on top of me."

"That would be interesting, but I promise I won't."

"I don't think so."

Angelique grew tired of watching Dane march circles within the grove and returned to bed. She decided that she would call him into the house for a private meeting very soon. In the meantime, she'd ask Cora if there were any love potions or anything that she knew about.

In the earliest moments of the morning, light seeps under the line of the horizon giving a distinct impression that the day is about to begin. There are subtle transformations with which the land awakes between false dawn and dawn. It can be felt in a new direction the wind takes; the way the dew paints itself over the trees, the ground, the fields; the way a ribbon of blue lies in the sky like deep river water, waiting to be exposed; the way the quiet night chatter of frogs and crickets slowly begins to recede.

Outside Cora's window, there was a pair of morning doves whose cooing began as a reassurance of which direction the sky was in. Cora heard them in the manner that consciousness makes itself known to hundreds of waking dreams. She turned her face away from the window trying to avoid the cooing that was rising with steady pitches so that they resembled some frantic mating ritual. The doves built their replies on each other so that they came out in cries. By the time Cora rose with half open and angry eyes to shut the window, they sounded like the screams of a man condemned to a painful death.

Workers found the body of a man close to the edge of the river
down by the sugar-house. He had been severely beaten, and it looked like the blows to his head and body had got the better of him. They buried the body after breakfast in a solemn and empty ceremony. The man had lived the unremarkable life of a crop cutter and army deserter. He had no known relatives and kept mostly to himself. Nobody could think of a reason as to why or who had killed the man. His death left everyone quiet and protective of their own feelings the entirety of the day. Walker said a small service for the man and surprisingly Dane Thewes buried the man himself in a sturdy pine coffin that Samuel had built. They buried him in an open area beyond the pecan grove, close to the black workers' quarters. Dane planted the cross himself, a construction of black plain iron with a wooden plate where they carved the man's name. Dane made sure the grave was in full view of Mama Rose's shack. He hoped she enjoyed looking at his crude cross.

Later that day, Thomas Reilly put down his scythe in the fields and looked around himself as if waking from a long and fevered sleep. He watched his fellow workers bending low, swinging scythes and cutting the stalks of cane. It all seemed to him a savage type of dance, one calculated by someone who has never known the feel of a wooden handle as it bites into the cane, or the way that sweat collects underneath the brim of a straw hat and becomes too heavy with itself, so it falls in salty drops over the eyes. All this activity, in all this heat, so someone can take a small spoonful of sugar and stir it vigorously into a glass of lemon and water so it tastes sweet.

Thomas walked out of the fields then, in a line directly towards the new grave. He paid no attention to which way the rows of cane were set, but walked through them with an indifference that deliberation makes every unnecessary thought fall away except the ones essential to an objective. The other workers watched him go, and when he failed to answer to cries of his name, they figured that the heat and the sun had become too much for him to bear, and that he was probably going to sit somewhere in the shade.

When he got to the grave, he stared at the simple cross and
the fresh mound of dirt and took his hat off. He thought about the quick funeral that morning and about how some of the workers had forgotten to take off their hats. They were back to work before shovel-fulls of dirt began to fall into the hole.

After he and two others had chased this man down like some kind of wild dog, the man knelt and held up his hands to them. He started screaming like a woman, like a child. Thomas closed his mind to it, and it was over before any of them realized. He was sure that the last few blows with the ax handles fell after the man was dead.

There was something about a fresh grave that looked awkward. It lay exposed on the ground like a sore on a woman's face. He spent the next half hour stepping heavily over the dirt, trying to pack it down, trying to make it look like it had been there for a while, for a long time. The sun was hot, and he felt the sweat fall over his eyes, but he kept his hat off out of respect.

Angelique could hear her husband's voice rising as he spoke with Dane Thewes. They were speaking in the main foyer, a place where voices could be heard throughout the house. She began to feel embarrassed for Dane. Couldn't Walker be a little more discreet? Perhaps he could go into a different room and discuss things calmly with the door closed firmly. It was true that the death of the man was a tragedy, but all things could be handled in an orderly fashion, especially something as messy as this.

Long ago she had decided to make a conscious effort to try and balance things that involve the emotions. Put simply, she felt that the bad should not outweigh the good. Obviously the beating death of the worker was a terrible thing, so, it should be handled with the utmost politeness. That will make it easier for everyone to bear, she thought.

"One man has killed, murdered, another, Dane." Walker's voice was still rising. Angelique knew that he didn't intend to handle anything with the least amount of politeness. Silently, she repeated the promise that she made in her head to assist with the
running of the plantation. She took a deep breath and began to
descend the stairs.

The soft movement of her dress and the fall of her foot as she
descended the staircase caused a pause in the argument. Walker
noticed Dane look sharply upward toward the top of the staircase,
and then down quickly at him again.

"I want to find out who as soon as possible." Walker's tone
was still strong; he was just as angry that Dane wasn't giving him
his full attention. Dane opened his mouth to say something then
closed it and gave a curt nod instead. He glanced upward at
Angelique. Was it possible that Dane was distracted by her
presence?

Walker turned abruptly and shot a mean stare at Angelique.
Couldn't she see that they were busy?

She ignored him and continued toward them. When she reached
the bottom of the stair she rested her hand on Dane's arm. He
pulled back from her.

"What is it?" Walker demanded.

Angelique gave him a soft smile and folded her hands in front
of her. "I thought that maybe I could help. Everyone seems to be
so angry."

"No. We're done. There's nothing to be concerned about. Mr.
Thewes knows what needs to be done." When Dane left Walker noticed
that he tipped his hat to his wife. She returned with a polite
nod.

"Mr. Thewes," she said, "did you notice the ornament on the
door that our Cora made?" Dane paused and looked at it
quizzically.

"Yes, it's lovely." Dane tipped his hat again and left.
Walker thought he lingered on the word "lovely" a little too
long. He also noticed that both of them smiled at each other, like
they knew something he didn't.

"What is wrong with you?" he said to his wife.

"What's wrong with you?"

He felt the anger rise inside him like a heat. "When I'm
discussing something with Dane, or anybody else, don't disturb us. It doesn't concern you."

Angelique watched the colour in his face turn to red. She withstood it. "It concerns me when you just about rip the roof off this house of with your yelling."

"The way I talk to my men is none of your business. That's the way I do things, the way I do..."

"Maybe yelling at people isn't the best way to do things. If you want to wreck what you have because you're being stupid and petulant, then don't expect the rest of us to fall into the same hole with you. You're acting like a little boy..."

"You have no idea what I do, or how we run things. Why don't you just find some way to keep yourself from wrecking things. Yes, I'm blaming you for part of this! Did you think that it's normal for me to yell at my men. It's probably because I have to worry so much about how things are with this plantation and then at night how you have this obsession with having a child. Well, go dream your little dreams about being pregnant and leave me alone so I can set things right with this plantation!"

"You start having some respect for the people around you. Dane Thewes is a good man, and you don't seem to realize it. The reason things are working as well as they are is that he didn't let you do all the stupid things that you wanted. There are still rules that you have to follow to make things happen. You start respecting the proper people, and you start respecting me, because if you don't, Walker Bowe, all that will be left is you and your niggers!"

Angelique turned quickly and strode into the study and made sure that the door was locked. She wasn't sure, but she thought that before she slammed the door, he called her a "little bitch" underneath his breath.

Later that night, Angelique unlocked the study door to receive her dinner. Cora placed a covered dish on Walker's desk, together with a bottle of wine. Thankfully, Cora left without saying a word.
After two glasses of wine, Angelique uncovered her meal. On the edges of the plate were lilac petals. If this is Walker's doing, she thought, he'll have to do more than scatter some flowers around. It did seem uncharacteristic of Walker to do something as romantic like this, and though she tried to deny it as a friendly gesture, she was, very slightly, impressed.

"Maybe he is sorry," she said as she ate. "But that doesn't make things any better." She poured herself another glass of wine and sipped at it quickly, several times. After she finished eating, she gathered up each petal in the palm of her hand. She poured another glass of wine and left the room with the glass and the petals.

She found Walker in the study. He watched her coldly from his chair as she came in. Angelique stood in front of him. Clearly, he hadn't lost any of his anger toward her, he hadn't had any wine. Fine, she thought, stay miserable. She threw the lilac petals at him and turned to leave.

The sound of his laughter stopped her.

"What are you laughing at?" she said.

He rose from his chair. "I'm still mad at you. You look ridiculous." He stepped on the trail of petals between them and took the glass from her hand. "This is what you came here for? Are you going to throw your wine at me too?" He lifted the glass to his lips and gulped the wine down. She ran to the study and grabbed the wine bottle. Silently, they drank what was left of the wine. At the point of exhaustion, she led him into their bed. Neither of them said an apology and she almost told him to go back downstairs when he accused her of getting him drunk to make her pregnant. She bit her lip and stayed silent a moment.

"I've taken measures," she said.

They made love twice that night. The first time it was ferocious and loud and quick. The second time, she knew that he was sorry, and his apology came in how gentle and careful he was.

It was the first night that she knew of that he actually fell asleep in her arms. She had to wake him to move him; she was so
hot. She rose from the bed and pulled the curtains apart. There wasn't much of a breeze.

She imagined that if she were pregnant she would feel the heat just like that and that she would dream of cold flakes of snow falling gigantic and silent all around her.

Kwaku Ananse's decided that he should go for a walk and test the limits of his new body. He had already spent a great deal of time stretching, feeling each muscle respond as he determined just how far his arms could reach, how far he could open his stride. He climbed high into the mountains to get the best view of the land. The fingers of his hands were strong, and he could hang from them for short periods of time. He determined that the best way to climb was foot following hand, so he concentrated on a system: hand up then foot, hand up then foot. He climbed quickly to a high ledge and sat with his feet dangling over the edge. He marvelled at how easy it was to climb with this new body. It had long, strong arms and feet like hands so he could hang upside down if he wanted. (Ananse liked seeing things upside down.) He looked at each part of himself. With all the hair removed, he could see each of Monkey's muscles clearly defined. He could even see the blue lines of veins mapping their way down his arms and ending in what looked like a river delta in his hands. Soon he grew tired of bending his limbs and flexing all his new muscles.

Monkey's eyes were perfect for seeing things far away. He stared in all directions and tried to see what was there. He decided that the land was full of a lot of open space. He made vague plans for orchards and cattle and rows and rows of vegetables. He'd plant more than anyone could possibly eat. His stomach began to grumble and complain. This time it was louder than before. He couldn't ignore it. He tried to soften the grumblings with sand and rocks, but it wouldn't be ignored. He tried not to listen to what his stomach was telling him, but he heard it anyway.

"Eat, Ananse. Eat or you will die." This was hunger, and
even Kwaku Ananse wasn't strong or clever enough to fight it.

Instantly, a picture of Mandril dancing around in a field full of yams conjured itself in his mind. He set off towards Mandril's fields, climbing down the mountain and past Monkey's Cave. He passed the bodies of Boar and Goat in the Hills.

"Starving is a horrible death," he told himself. He turned away from Leopard and Gazelle when he ran through the Plains.

"Starving must be very painful," he said. Turtle's body made him very sad as he walked along the bed of the river. When he saw Snake's body, he wept openly.

"It is not fair for Mandril to keep all the yams for himself," he said. "Doesn't he realize that nearly all the animals have died? Don't his eyes see that they have all lay down and let starvation claim them, all their dreams and all their stories? That isn't right. When I see Mandril, I will tell him about all the things that are his fault."

Filled with what Kwaku Ananse considered a noble purpose, he sped toward Mandril's field with a renewed strength and a taste for yams on his tongue.

It was the season for storms. When everyone seemed concerned that their shutters were intact, that roofing tiles were whole, Mama Rose sat on her little porch and enjoyed the September heat. She enjoyed this season the most, she thought, because the days were not as long, and the sun not as hot. When breezes came up from the river across the fields, and in through the square frames of open windows, they were actually cool. Most of all, she liked the way the rains came in: blowing hard and full, with drops big like pregnancies and heavy and wet and cool. Soon there would be a storm, complete with thunder and lightning and winds so strong you could lean against them. It was an exciting time, almost as fulfilling as when she danced. During a storm was when she did the best dancing. There was going to be another one, she decided. Things had calmed down enough that there wouldn't be too many repercussions. She planned to have one right after the white
worker was killed, but she decided against it. There were too many people that went to see the man's grave, too many people disturbed by his death, that she felt a dance would destroy everything she had tried to build. The reaction of the whites, of Dane, would have been too strong, and she would place too many of her people in danger. To justify one man's beating with another was fine, but when faced with dozens— that was too much to handle without losing all sense of authority.

She, herself, went to see the man's grave. It didn't hold much interest for her: she thought it more an admission that violence is a form of lust. She had held that all along, so when the white worker turned up dead, she didn't place too much effort worrying about what went wrong. The blame didn't fall on herself. If they accidentally killed one another then that was their problem. That was Samuel's problem. She didn't ask for a man to die in answer for another's beating. That wasn't the answer that she needed or asked for. The black worker was beaten. That was all.

She had gone to the grave for Cora.

"Isn't it awful?" she told Mama Rose. "Isn't it just awful?" She kept saying it as if she had somehow known the man. That worried her. Cora, she felt, was beginning to feel too much a part of the white household.

So she accompanied Cora to the grave. They stood silently for a while. Mama Rose listened to Cora breathe. It was uneven, full of thought.

"You don't much care that this man died, do you?" Mama Rose thought about the question. She knew that Cora still had bouts of girlish sympathy and that this was one of those times. Perhaps she should lie.

"No." It was best not to lie. The world was too harsh for her niece not to accept some truths.

"Why?"

"People die. Everyone does. I'll tell you what I don't like: people killing each other. White folks killing us, killing blacks,
and then forgetting about them. Who was this man? He was a worker, and he gets a grave. That's the way it should be for everyone. Do you know how many of us are just buried with no markers on their graves? Or thrown into the same graves to save from digging another hole? Don't be so surprised Cora. I've seen it done."

They stood a few moments more, and Mama Rose waited a while longer.

"So that's why I'm not too sad," she said.

"Oh. I think I'd like to be alone."

Mama Rose still could see Cora standing alone in front of the simple cross. That was a strange request: to be alone. It came so abruptly. At the time Mama Rose had left silently, pretending that it didn't bother her.

She stood and stretched and stepped down off her porch. It was better not to dwell on the things that happened, on the bad feelings. Cora was becoming independent and that meant that she was building her own values. That was a good thing.

In the distance, thunder began to rumble. It was still far away and up high in the sky. There was a storm coming, and it made Mama Rose smile. There was nothing like the anticipation of a storm. It felt like everything around her was suddenly brought to life, as if every blade of grass, every clump of dirt, the stones, the wind, the air, each of them suddenly was rich with life and felt it within them. She had thought about the feeling before. It rippled through her as if every hair on her body was standing and that she could run for a long, long time without getting tired.

She began to walk inland away from the river, through the cane and the thin leaves. To her right, the sky grew thick with thick dark clouds that blew and billowed toward her making one dark band that covered the bottom of the sky. Gulls circled at its edge. She imagined them caught by the immensity of the thing, the winds pushing them far inland, their panic increasing as they tried to circle back toward the sea. She heard their shrill cries; they were frightened because they could no longer see the water that
defined their home.

She walked until she was out of sight of the buildings on the plantation. The field opened up into a clearing of dry, brown grasses, and an oak tree stood by itself. It was old and gnarled; its branches seemed to be burdened by the weight of many uncountable days of sky. She approached it running as hard as she could, feeling like she was young and meeting someone who could still tell her half-truths about how life would turn out beautifully. She placed both her hands on the trunk and felt the rough bark and saw the cracks and creases telling her that this tree had long ago felt its loneliness and had done so much beyond that sentiment. Here it was, standing by itself in a field with only the wind and sun and sky and grasses for company. Its branches still grew upward and its leaves were still supple and green and filled with such a glorious song that played as the wind came and blew through them.

Big drops of rain began to fall. She saw their tiny explosions as they pounded into the dirt and brought the smell of the ground and weeds and grasses up to her nostrils. She stepped away from the oak and raised her arms. The clouds came like a wave over the sky, and she turned to face them as drops of rain cascaded down upon her. She opened her mouth and tasted them and gathered the water in her cheeks and spit it out like a fish in a fountain. She kicked off her sandals, not caring where they landed. Within moments she was drenched. Her clothes clung to her, and her hair felt heavy with rain. She undid the buttons on the front of her dress, flipping them open with one hand. She laughed and pulled the dress from her body, letting it fall around her feet. She stepped out of the ring her dress made and removed her undergarments, throwing them onto the lower branches of the tree. Then she stood in the open and spun slowly letting the rain come down on her, letting each drop hit her skin. For the first time in a long while she felt cool. Her skin felt firm and began to get little bumps on it, like they do when someone is cold. She stopped spinning and stood still with her eyes closed and concentrated on
the sound of the rain falling around her and on her body. She was cool and wet and good.

It was still raining when she walked back to her shack. The only limit to her joy was that Cora was not with her.

Cora stood in the cook house while Walker Bowe sat at the table and calculated figures and wrote them neatly in columns in his book. She had just set a pot of tea down beside him and stared out the window at the rain.

"Something wrong, Cora?" he said.
"No, Mr. Bowe. Well... no. I'm just watching the rain."
"It still amazes me how much water comes down."
"Sometimes I think the window will break."
He smiled and watched her. She had not turned around when she talked. That was unlike her. He set down his pen and poured himself a cup of tea. She turned at the sound of pouring water.
"Oh," she said. "I guess I should get that."
He waved her off. "What is bothering you? I know something is."

"It's nothing. Silly." She shook her head.
"You're not frightened of me?"
"No. No, not at all. I..." She thought about how handsome he was, and how smart. It was like magic, what he was doing with all those numbers.
"Then tell me. I can't concentrate with you moping all day. It's bad enough that Angelique won't let me in to work at my desk."
"It's a dream I had."
"A nightmare?"
"A nightmare? Well, no. Yes. Sort of. You weren't in it."
"That's good. I'd hate to think I'd been in your worst dreams."

You could never be, she thought, then caught herself. She had almost spoken out loud. That would have been awful. She began to get nervous. "It was Miss Angelique. She was... No, it's just a dream. Sometimes they just stay with you, even though they're not
real. It's probably because of the rain too. Rain makes me tired. Rain is the best time for sleeping."
"You're sure it's nothing else."
"Yes."
"That must have been some dream, then. What was Angelique doing?"
"She was lying under a man with her skirts lifted up." It came out quickly. Cora couldn't believe she had said it.
"A man?"
"I think it was Mr. Thewes." I shouldn't have told, I shouldn't have told, Cora repeated to herself.
There was a definite pause. Cora couldn't tell if he was mad or not. She just wanted to leave. She chewed on her bottom lip.
Walker took a short sip of tea and jerked his head back sharply. He set down the tea quickly spilling some as it landed on the saucer.
"Sorry," Cora said. "It's hot. I boiled the water. I should have told you."
He lifted his hand to his mouth. "It's all right, I wasn't paying attention. My fault."
"It's a stupid dream. I was standing right beside them, and they didn't care."
"That is odd." She still couldn't tell if he was mad or not. It was stupid of her to tell him such a dream. She grabbed a rag from the counter. She wiped the spilled tea from Walker's book.
"It's messed up some of your numbers," she said. She tried to pat the page dry as best she could. The tea had soaked through a few of them.
"What does Angelique do in the study when she goes there?" The question didn't seem normal. Walker's tone had changed. It was strange, like some of the words weren't fitting properly in his throat.

Cora stepped away from the table. She leaned against the counter. "I don't know. She says it's her alone time. She goes every day."
"You've never peeked through the keyhole or listened at the door?"

"No, that would be impolite." She turned and folded the rag, making sure each corner was matched and set it on the counter.

"You're sure?"

She had done nothing wrong. Why was Mr. Bowe asking her all these questions? "She leaves the key in the door. I can't see past it. I'm sure that Miss Angelique isn't doing anything. She just likes to be alone at times. There's nothing strange about that."

"She must be doing something." He wasn't mad, exactly. She wondered all of a sudden if he had heard her correctly. He hoped she thought she wasn't trying to tell him something she wasn't.

"It was just a dream I had. It doesn't mean anything."

"No, I'm sure it doesn't."

There were a couple of loose floorboards in the sugar-house. Samuel wondered why he had never noticed it before. He was very good at keeping things in order, noticing nails that weren't flush, planing doors so they hung right and closed without a sound. That he had not noticed that two entire floorboards were loose and were not set into one another with the rest of the floor was disturbing. He was very careful about how things were built. That was his job. In the past few months, just after his blindness, he began to take more of an interest in detail. He had always been a fine carpenter, but now he was exemplary. Nothing he had built after his blindness had fallen apart, leaked, fit awkwardly, or needed improvement of any kind. All the workers marvelled at how dedicated he was. At the same time they wondered if a certain amount of madness had not asserted itself over him. He worked far too hard, often hours after the day's work had finished. Once, repairing tiles on a roof, he had found slight evidence of rot and had ripped the entire area out when the replacing of three tiles would have sufficed.

There was more to the fact that he had to make everything
solid and sturdy and functional. It was more than an exaggerated sense of pride and work ethic. When Samuel worked none of the thoughts of what had happened could creep back into his head. He worked as hard as he could. As long as he was sweaty, as long as the muscles in his arms and back and legs kept a slight ache, he could continue on. Tiredness was something that was good; it meant you worked hard and slept soundly. At night, if he wasn’t asleep in moments, he began to panic. The memory of his blindness came back to him. It wasn’t anything tangible, like a picture, like a failed romance associated with a pretty smile, it came in the form of a sound. When he lay in bed, worrying that he would never be able to open his eyes again and see, he began to listen intently to the things around him. He recognized the creaks of the building settling, the wind as it curled against the window, the sound of familiar foot-falls as they came up the stairs and hovered near him like uncomfortable ghosts. The sound of his own breathing came loudly to him. He played with it, trying to control it and noticed how ragged it became when he tried to keep from crying. The sound of his heart beating and the pulse of blood rushing through his veins was even louder. There were times, when he lay alone, that his heart set off echoes inside him, and they began to drown out every other sound so that the pounding of his heart became the only sound of his existence. It became the sound of blindness, of darkness, and the sound of drowning without water. When Mama Rose gave him back his vision, all sounds began to recede, except in the quietest moments when the pounding of his heart came back to him just as loudly as before.

He managed only through an intense effort at work to hold back the sound and most reminders of his blindness. The better a job he did, the less he was reminded. When he built the coffin for the murdered worker, he was terrified; his heart began to beat loudly. He made sure the coffin was as strong as he could make it. He set each piece of pine together tongue and groove, then fortified each edge with nails, staggered and counter sunk. His heart beat a steady rhythm and he tried to drown it out with each bite of the
saw into pine and each strike of the hammer. Along each coffin edge he painted pitch so that there would be no danger of leaking. On the lid, he carved an elaborate cross. He could feel the blood rushing through his body. This was agony.

"Stop it, stop it," he whispered. "Stop it, stop it." It came out like a chant. Only in some back corner of his mind did he realize that he was speaking.

It was the best coffin he had ever made; it was the best he had ever seen. By the time he finished, he was exhausted and when he fell asleep, the sound of his heart beating had receded.

Samuel puzzled over the loose boards in the sugar-house. He stepped on them watching the way they shifted. It was probably due to the way the floor had settled. He'd probably have to cut new ones and fit them in somehow; it was too much of a job to take out the entire floor, especially with all the equipment in place. The few workers in the sugar-house seemed to be doing all right without his direction. Things had slowed right down and all that they were doing was making sure everything was ready for the next harvest. There wasn't too much to do. The only troubling thing was keeping mud and water off the floor; the rain was torrential.

Samuel pulled up the boards with his hammer. They came up easily; he could have done it without the hammer. The way the boards came apart suggested that someone had loosened them deliberately. He peered cautiously in the hole. There was something there covered in some kind of patchwork quilt.

He reached down and gave it a tug. It made a metallic clink and he pulled it up. The quilt was tied to form a sack. When he undid the knots he realized that someone had put it under the floor for a good reason. This was someone's cache. He didn't remember anything about theft on the plantation, but that could have been because he had been so busy. The things in the quilt weren't of any great value, but if someone had stolen them, then it wouldn't matter—punishment would be harsh. The sight of the murdered worker came instantly to mind. Samuel tied up the edges of the quilt and set it back under the floor. If this was done by one of
the negroes... He'd have to answer to Mama Rose. She'd show up again with her dark threats. He'd had enough of voodoo, way too much of her. He fit the floorboards back into the floor. There was no way he was going to let anyone know what he'd found. He decided someone else should be lucky enough to find it.

He stood in the massive doorway of the sugar-house. He leaned against the frame, his face, wearily practiced in revealing nothing, was silent. The rain that fell splashed over his boots and on the thick leather apron he wore. He saw every drop of rain distinctly as drowning men in sight of an unfriendly shore. The knowledge that there was a thief on the plantation was like a plague to him. Every honest tendency he had told him that he should reveal the cache to Dane or Walker Bowe. Yet, the importance of catching thieves was not something he could fathom anymore. There was no nobility in it. He wondered if any instinct of exposing truths remained to him.

He had done many things that weren't savoury. Certain acts might even be termed cruel, but that was due to an excessive level of passion. Prayer and confession in any form always cleared the conscience, always restored an essential feeling of goodness within him. But that had failed long ago, a process as cheap and memorable as a card trick. Prayer too closely resembled an elaborate telling of lies; a set of excuses and common market bargaining. There was no longer any balance left in forgiveness.

He looked toward Ashe Hall. He wondered if with all the rain the river would rise up and swallow it. He could see them all: the workers, Hebert, Dane, Miss Angelique and Walker Bowe hanging to a part of the house: loose timbers, pieces of flooring, the peak of the roof, being swept down the length of the river. That image gave him a sense of relief. It would be a terrible, graceful end to everything, he thought.

Angelique lay on the floor of the study curled beneath the open window. She lay with her face pressed against the floor and felt how cool it was, needing that coolness to stop the room from
tilting and swaying and spinning. She had pushed the oriental carpet aside with her feet, digging at it like a dog. In the process her dress rode up exposing her legs. She didn't care about decorum; the floor was cool against her legs, and the breeze that came through the window even more so. Her body was sweating despite the breeze. She could feel droplets of sweat collecting on her forehead, under her arms, in the small of her back on her palms, on the soles of her feet. She knew that she had paled, and all the colour had drained from her face. She lay so still, fighting the nausea, afraid to move in case it overwhelmed her. She had felt the storm coming and had been excited by it. She had gone into the study as she did every afternoon and locked the door behind her. This was her alone time. There was nothing more precious to her than a much needed rest or escape from the realness of the day. During that time she gave herself time to reflect on things, to think about past conversations, the cause of arguments with Walker and how they could have been handled better. She thought about other people's problems: arguments she overheard Dane have with her husband; what Cora could be thinking about when she sighed and pouted; why Samuel was so quiet and intense; how rough mannered and scary the Cajun, Hebert was; how the September storms would make the fields too wet for the horses to graze. She listened to her birds and thought about opening the little door on the bird cage so the twin songbirds could fly through the house and enjoy the flapping of their wings.

Today, as soon as she had unlatched the window and opened it wide her stomach began to feel queasy. She told herself it was only the suddenness of the storm. The wind was stirring up all sorts of nasty smells. They never bothered her before, but she had noticed during the past few days an increasing sensitivity to her sense of smell. Once she picked up a scent of something it lingered, refusing to disappear even after the offending source was removed. After a few minutes of enduring such a smell, her head would start to ache and she would get short of breath. Today was worse. The smells coming through the window went straight to her
stomach. It was a mixture of weeds and mud and pungent wood smoke, everything wet and unpleasant. She told herself she could withstand it. There was no reason that she should be bothered by anything as insignificant as a smell. Her nausea was only the shock of the first cool air, a simple passing chill, that was all. There was no other reason for it that she could think of, at least, none that Walker would like. But as she lay on the ground trying to block out the day's pale light with her eyelids, she reasoned that maybe such a sickness was caused by the storm churning up bad vapours from the river bank. The sole excuse of bad air was all too plausible and entirely unconvincing.

She waited until the nausea passed and then rolled over onto her back. She let her arms fall behind her head and took a slow deep breath through her nose. There was a strong breeze blowing through the open window. It caught on one of the curtains and filled it when it came through. Every time the wind collapsed the weights sewed into the curtain hem tapped against the wall. She could accept the hard way that the rain fell and the fierceness of the wind that blew it, but the tap tap tap of the curtain was so out of place that she imagined tearing it from the wall until another wave of nausea rolled over her.

Cora knocked softly at the door of the study. She called out Angelique's name. When there was no answer, she waited a full minute and tried again, knocking louder. Cora was worried. Miss Angelique had been in the study for a long time. Lately Miss Angelique had been acting a bit strangely. It was nothing so erratic, but it was like she had something preying on her mind. Usually, she let Cora ask her any number of questions, but the past few days she had cut her off only after a couple. Of course she denied that there was anything wrong.

"Besides," she said, "secrecy is a lady's privilege." Cora couldn't get her to talk, but that was partly a relief. Miss Angelique had neglected the lessons that she had been teaching Cora and that wasn't at all bad.
Cora pressed her ear against the door. She didn't hear anything. It was never like this, not so quiet. Usually she could hear her singing softly or humming, or moving around. The key was in the keyhole, so she couldn't see through it. She knocked and called out again. Perhaps Miss Angelique had just fallen asleep. It would be easy with all the rain. Or maybe she had fallen and hit her head on the corner of the desk. Cora pictured her lying crumpled beside the desk with a small puddle of blood leaking out of her head.

"Miss Angelique?" She knocked again. "Miss Angelique, you all right?" She gripped the doorknob and gave it a sharp twist. The lock on the door held fast.

Cora walked through the main foyer and onto the porch. She didn't have time to worry about putting her sandals on, even though Miss Angelique would have frowned at that. She walked out into the rain and felt how cool and wet the ground was. She walked to the side of the house, hoping that Miss Angelique had opened a window.

She cursed the prickly bushes that were planted beneath the window. Two spurs stuck to her foot giving her a sharp pain when she stepped down on them. Nobody likes these kind of bushes, she thought. She decided that she should dig them out when nobody was watching and plant flowers or something nice instead. She hopped up onto the sill and stepped through the window. Her feet left a set of muddy footprints on the floor, but she didn't notice. Miss Angelique lay curled beneath the window, her face pale like she was fevered. She seemed to be sleeping. Cora waited until she could see her chest rise and fall with some regularity. No, she wasn't dead. Cora bent down beside her and placed her hand on her forehead. She was warm, but didn't have a fever. Angelique's eyes fluttered and she looked up at Cora and gave her a weak smile.

"Miss Angelique, what's wrong?"

Angelique breathed deeply like waking from a nap that was too long. "I think I might have a touch of something," she said. Cora helped her sit up and began to pull down the skirt of her dress over her legs.
Angelique pushed her hand away. "It's okay. I like the breeze on my legs. I got so hot. I felt like my stomach was going to come out of my mouth. I think it's past. I hope so; there's not much I like less. Terrible feeling."

Cora helped her to the couch.

"Maybe I should close the window. You might have breathed some bad air."

Angelique nodded. "Yes, and pull the drapes."

Cora did as she asked and made sure the drapes were fully across the length of the window. "It is awfully drafty. I can't expect this rain to get any worse."

Angelique leaned her head back on the couch and closed her eyes. She felt a twinge in her stomach. She could still smell the musty outside air. She fought it. "Some tea would be nice."

Cora pulled the window partly shut. "I'll get it right away."

Angelique opened her eyes suddenly and sat up quickly.

"Cora. It's important that you don't let Mr. Bowe know that I'm sick. You have to promise me that."

It seemed a strange promise. "Okay, I won't let Mr. Bowe know anything."

After she brought Miss Angelique a pot of tea in the silver service Miss Angelique made her shut the door behind her when she left. She was going to tell her about the conversation she had with Mr. Bowe, except for the dream, but she didn't look like she was in the mood for any of it. Miss Angelique locked the door after she left.

Cora washed the floor between the study and the kitchen. She had tracked in some mud. She needed to do the floor in the study, but thought that she better wait and not risk disturbing Miss Angelique. She needs her rest, she thought. The way she was lying all curled up made Cora believe that Angelique was sicker than she was telling. When people did that, pretended that nothing was the matter with them, that didn't make much sense to her. Not telling Mr. Bowe was hard. Maybe he could help, perhaps send for a doctor.
Well, that wasn't going to happen. When she made a promise she stuck to it. That was the importance of a person's word. Miss Angelique had told her that. And that wasn't just manners that was a rule: something you could live by. If she couldn't tell Walker Bowe about his wife's illness then she would do something else. Mama Rose could help.

Walker Bowe didn't like any signs of magic in the house. Cora wasn't surprised. Everyone knew that white folk didn't go in for any type of voodoo. It scared them. Mama Rose told her all about how people get mad just because they're afraid. So, if she was smart, Cora wouldn't let Walker Bowe or Miss Angelique know that she was involved with anything like the voodoo. It hadn't been hard at all to hide it. She just hung wreaths and wove mats and things. There wasn't much to the stuff she did anyway, and she hadn't been using her magic too often. Sometimes she still wished she knew as much as Mama Rose, but then it didn't much matter if she didn't need it, did it? Now that Miss Angelique was sick, she could do a little something just to help her on her way. Mama Rose always had powders, ground from roots and bone and such that made people feel a whole lot better when they got sick. It wouldn't hurt anyone to slip some into Miss Angelique's tea, or mix some into her food. She'd be feeling finer than a sow in mud, that was the main thing.

She knew that Mama Rose didn't like Miss Angelique all that much, but since she was sick and all...It's just to make her feel better...She needs our help...She was passed out on the floor...

Cora couldn't see Mama Rose saying no. Not to her.

Mama Rose wasn't home. Cora went inside anyway. She knew where Mama Rose kept all her magic stuff, knew about the trap door in the floor, underneath the thin rug in the main room.

She opened the trap door. It was heavy and hard to open because the rope that was tied to the small iron ring hurt her hands. The room was more of a pit. It was only about four feet deep. She lowered herself into it. The light wasn't good, especially with the overcast sky. She had to crouch down to see
properly. The walls were dirt, as was the floor and rough shelves lined the walls. They were packed too: glass jars and old cups full of strange roots and weeds and seeds, most of which Cora didn't know the name of. There were also jars full of cucumber preserved in vinegar with dill weed and garlic. She lifted one of those jars out of the pit and set it on the shack floor. If she was going to come all the way out for some healing powder, she might as well take some dilled cucumber. She looked for awhile trying to find some healing powder. She remembered it was brown with some yellow in it, and it smelled like ginger and wet sand and moss. She began to get hungry. Those cucumbers looked tasty. She opened a small jar full of a powder that was close to what she remembered. It smelled similar, maybe a touch stronger. Close enough. That was it; she was sure.

She turned slowly in the pit, making sure that there wasn't anything else. When she stood something stood out just below the frame of the door. It was a small discolouration, a small area darker than the rest of the wall. She brought her fingers up to touch it. It was a small ledge carved into the wall. She withdrew her fingers. What if there was a spider or snake sitting in there? There was no way she was going to stick her hand in there. But if she didn't she wouldn't find out what was there. After all, she had found it for a reason. She held her breath and slowly probed the hole. There was a small package inside. It felt oily and damp and cold. Cora made a face of disgust and pulled it out quickly. It was something wrapped in oilskin. Mama Rose had felt it necessary to keep the object protected. Cora unwrapped it tentatively, still wary of spiders. It was a thin cardboard book, the kind that daguerreotypes were kept in. She didn't know that Mama Rose had any. They were rare and expensive.

She opened the book. It was a picture of a black woman holding hands with a white man. She stood so she could see with the light in the room. The people in the daguerreotype struck a familiar portrait pose. Their faces were stern, serious like they were enduring some tragic news. They were dressed in their best
clothes. The man was undoubtedly a southern gentleman, and the woman was trying to look her best in a thin cotton dress that probably had lost most of its dye and had grown threadbare in places. They were both young and smiling, but the look in the woman's eyes spoke of embarrassment and fear. Her hand was set firmly at her side; she was trying to smooth out her dress. One part of the portrait made Cora suddenly feel sad: the woman wore no shoes. Her left foot was pointing inward and she was lifting her heel slightly and curling her toes underneath. Cora did that often. Sometimes when she grew agitated and truly upset she would lift her heel, always her left, and curl the toes under. Often she didn't realize it until her foot cramped.

Cora inhaled sharply. The woman's face was very familiar. It was almost identical to her own.

Cora made sure the shack was back in order before she left. She took the jar of dilled cucumber and the jar of powder and stuck the daguerreotype securely underneath her arm.

Walker folded his accounts book closed and sighed. He hadn't cleared as much money from the first harvest as he thought he would. He lay his head down on his desk and closed his eyes. Was he going to get his investment back? Only if the second crop does exceptionally well, he answered himself. Could be frost or disease or a market collapse...He sat up. There's no sense worrying about things before they happen.

He opened his book again and looked at the figures. Christ, that second crop was going to have to be a good one.

He heard Angelique walking across the hall. She opened the door of the study. He closed his book and put his hand on top of it.

"You seem in a fine mood," she said. "Ah, finances." He shrugged and she moved behind him, placing her hands on his shoulders. She began to rub them gently. "Things will work out. You want to do so well, all the time. Sometimes you have to relax."
"What if I can't make things up? That's a lot of money. How am I going to pay everyone? What about supplies for next year's crop?"

"There'll be another harvest, maybe two. Walker, calm down; you can't do everything on your own. What about Dane, what does he say?"

"It doesn't matter what he says. Look at these figures." He pushed the book toward her. She moved to the side of the desk, opposite the book.

"Figures are fine, but you have to look at what's going on out there. You hired Dane for a good number of reasons. He's a good man. He'll know..."

"I run the plantation."
"Yes, but you did hire him to..."

"I run this plantation! It's up to me for things to work out!"

His anger was sudden. Angelique straightened herself. There was no reason for him to get angry. "I'm not saying you don't. But you can't do it all. Dane's a good man..."

He stood and looked down on her. "So am I. I can do it. Everyone thinks that because I'm not from here I can't do a good job."

"Who? Nobody thinks that."
"Yes, I see it in their eyes when they talk to me, when I tell them to do something."

"Have you talked to anyone about it? Dane?" He winced as she said it.

"What's he going to do? Dane isn't the answer to everything, Angelique. It's me, it all falls on me. This is my plantation and I'm going to run how it's supposed to be run."

"Oh, I see: everyone is out to get you. Dane especially. Yes, a conspiracy to take this plantation over..."

"I don't need your sarcasm."

"Then stop being ridiculous. You hire Dane Thewes to run the plantation, but you don't want him to run it."
"That's not it."

"Yes, I think it is. Listen to yourself, Walker."

Walker looked like he was about to say something, then thought better of it. She raised her eyebrow at him. Maybe she could coax him back to bed.

"C'mon, you're just worried. Let's go to bed."

"I think I'll stay here for a while. See why you spend so much time of yours locked in this room."

There was no need for that, she thought. His last remark was a barbed comment, meant to be nasty, to draw her into another argument. Tonight, she clearly didn't feel like it. No, perhaps it was better that he didn't come to bed. Her stomach was beginning to become unsettled. She let him know that she was disappointed and left the room.

Walker listened to her climbing the stairs that led to their bedroom. She had invited him back to share their bed; why didn't he go? He fought the urge to go up those stairs, but he'd be there to ask her so many questions not for any reconciliation that she might wish.

I know you so well, Angélique, he thought. What would you say to my questions? What would you say if I told you I was going to get rid of Dane? Would you insist that he stay? Probably. What if I accused you of loving him, or worse? What's the real reason you want him to stay? Would you answer me or just turn on that icy exterior and demand I leave?

No, she wasn't going to answer him, he knew that.

He sat for a while thinking of what he would ask her, and what she might say. A breeze filled the room. He cursed, someone had forgot to close the window. He got up and went to close it. As he did, he noticed that there was mud on the floor beneath the window. It could have been splashed there by the rain, he told himself, but a fear grew inside him. He bent down. The mud looked an awful lot like footprints.

Was this how Dane came in? Like a thief through the window? He knew he should go and ask his wife directly. Even as he had his
hand on the doorknob he started to question himself.

The footprints were small. Maybe they were Angélique's or Cora's. He sat down at his desk. If he went upstairs now it probably wouldn't accomplish anything. Angélique would just get mad. Some things he could find out on his own.

Dane threw his ante in. Hebert dealt the cards to each of them. Dane watched their faces as they received their cards. Hebert revealed nothing, he concentrated on dealing, on making the cards land precisely in five piles. His mind was solely on the game. Thomas Reilly touched each card as it came in. He was too anxious, impatient for the big hand. The other worker, Reilly's friend, Dane couldn't remember his name, he would have to gauge, but he didn't think he'd be a problem. Besides, he acted timid and nervous when Reilly brought him to play. Walker was learning, but he was still too stiff. He sat back and waited for the cards to come in, but he wanted to look at each one because he pursed his lips slightly. He was going to have to learn to hide his impulses better. He was playing like he needed to. There was something that he wanted to say but didn't know how or what exactly it was. Dane knew it concerned him because Walker kept glancing at him when he thought Dane wasn't looking.

His hand wasn't bad; a pair of tens. It was one draw of three. Hebert kept the hand simple, that's the way he liked it. It seemed to work for him, his pile of chips had grown steadily as they played. Hebert was the only one that Dane couldn't read. His face was like stone, except when he won a hand. Then he'd sweep his big hand forward and pull in the chips with a big shit eating grin.

Samuel was off his mark tonight. His mind was clearly on something else. He mis-dealt twice and dropped the cards once when shuffling. Of course, he wouldn't admit that anything was bothering him. He made the excuse of being tired. Well, Dane thought, if he wants to give us his pay, that's fine with me.

Some thunder rumbled in the distance. It was still raining.
There was a quality to the rain at night that Dane didn't like. It made things wetter and darker. It was slightly claustrophobic.

"Your bid, Walker." Walker gave Dane an odd stare. It was more than a wonder of what he was holding. Jesus, he's competitive, Dane thought. We haven't even drawn yet. Walker threw in a small bet as did everyone.

"Give me some good cards for a change, Hebert." Samuel wanted two.

"Hey, wait your turn." Reilly said. "How many will it be, Mr. Walker? Oh, just one. Look out he may have some timber in that hand."

"Shut up." Samuel glared at Reilly. Reilly sat up straighter and glared back.

"Hey, hey. Friendly game, remember? How 'bout a cigar?" Dane pulled a couple from his shirt pocket. Hebert took one, but the others declined.

"Sorry," mumbled Reilly. He leaned back over his cards. Samuel didn't say anything. When he did exchange his cards he threw them down on the table. They slid into the middle scattering the small pile of painted wooden chips.

"Forget it, I'm out. All of you are making me sick. Playing merrily along with each other. Come on, it's so obvious the Cajun's dealing crooked."

Hebert stood suddenly and placed his hands fully on the table.

"Wait!" Dane stood up and moved between them. For Samuel to suddenly explode with anger was unlike him, but making accusations against Hebert was downright foolish.

"Samuel, calm down. You know we wouldn't play with anybody if they were cheating. You know Hebert isn't."

"Oh, do I? What, are you in for a cut of the winnings? That asshole is too clever for his own good. You see what he's doing: he goes along, playing the backward swamp boy, the simple man, and then when he knows you trust him that's when he cheats you. That's when he hits you with a sucker punch."

"Is it your plan to insult everyone here, Samuel?" Dane said.
"No, let him. Let him come at me. Samuel was livid. He was flushed and breathing hard. Dane noticed his fist was clenched. There was no reasoning with the man. Hebert, he didn't worry about. There was no match for him. Even if Dane had a shovel he seriously doubted he could best him.

"You want this, Samuel? Think about it. You know what he can do." Dane stood directly in front of him. Samuel had to look at him. "Think about it. I'm not going to stop him. Is that what you want?"

Walker stood slowly from the table. "What's going on here? You can't just let them beat on each other. We can talk things over, come to an understanding."

"Mr. Bowe, begging your pardon, but you take a look at Samuel. He's not in any talking mood." Thomas Reilly picked up his chips and put them in his pants pocket. "Tonight's game is over."

Walker made them go outside into the rain and mud. Samuel watched Hebert come toward him. The man was big and had maybe seventy pounds on him. Yet, this was something that he needed to do.

Mostly it was because Hebert was so sure of himself. It was the same in everything he did. Even tonight Hebert had sat there with a blank expression playing cards calling simple hands. One draw of three, or two draws of two, never more. He didn't call wildcards: no one eyed jacks or suicide kings. He was so direct and simple.

If there was a problem Hebert could handle it. "Get Hebert," Dane would say, "Let Hebert fix it," and Hebert always came through. Did the man ever doubt anything? Did he ever wonder if the rain would never stop falling, if the river stopped flowing or even if the cane would be destroyed by flood or disease or frost? If he did, he never showed it. That was his plain manner. He was direct. Attacking things head on was the best solution for the Cajun.

As Hebert's punches began to fall, Samuel knew that he didn't have a chance. He started by putting up a fight. He dodged and
threw some good punches of his own. But inside, he knew that he
didn't intend to win. Each one of Hebert's punches that connected
reminded Samuel of something he'd lost. Eventually, it became a
struggle to stand. He heard Hebert's harsh whisper, full of
warning, and even concern.

"Stay down," he said. "Stay down, damnit!"

But he still tried to get up. And each time he would get
knocked down again. He did this until there was no longer any
strength left in his legs.

They had the decency to leave him alone afterward. They held
enough respect for him to let him climb into his bed by his own
devices. He wondered if that constituted any shred of dignity,
that he was able to pull himself inside and climb the stairs
placing one foot in front of the other like some kind of broken
down doll. Did it prove something that he withstood the pain
enough to strip himself and wipe as much of the mud and blood from
his face and body that he could before collapsing into bed? He
wondered if the way his muscles screamed in pain, and that he was
entirely to blame for all his pain, was any indication of nobility.

What has happened, he thought, is all that you let happen. As
his eyelids closed, he realized that his heart wasn't beating so
loudly anymore.

"I'm not satisfied with the way things were handled." Walker
had pulled Dane aside after the fight. He was angry. The way
things had ended up was a direct sign of how little respect he had
gotten. There was no good reason that the situation had to
escalate as it did. Samuel and the Cajun could have been separated
long enough for them to calm down.

"What would you have me do? There's no way to stop that kind
of thing."

"Yes. I think there is."

"Oh, well, if you think there is then you know best. Do you
know...Do you have any idea what was going on?"

"Don't talk to me that way." Walker stuck out his finger and
pointed at Dane. He stepped closer. "Sometimes I think you forget who you are."

Dane followed an overwhelming urge. He grabbed Walker's finger and bent it backward. Walker cried out and fell to one knee.

"You listen here. Right now I don't care that you're the one who hired me or pays me. You piss me off. Those men out there needed to fight. That's right. It lets them know they're still alive and have some control over themselves. What you may not have recognized is that you, me, and everyone here is a slave to this plantation. Everything we are comes out of this place. When you come to a realization like that, do you know what you prize the most? Freedom, the chance to make a decision that doesn't involve the crop. It's selfishness, that all. But it's enough to keep most of us going. That's why I let Samuel go against Hebert. I knew that he couldn't win, and here's a secret: Samuel knew too. Maybe Samuel wasn't really fighting because he was angry with Hebert. I suspect it wasn't. But it doesn't matter what the reason was. The point is he could do it and nobody stopped him.

"You hired me, Walker Bowe, so I could run your plantation. That's what I'm doing. Every stalk of cane growing out there knows me by name. That's how I feel. That's the responsibility I have shown. So, if I feel like letting two of my best men sort out their differences with a little boxing match, I'm bloody well going to." Dane let go of Walker's finger. Walker stood up quickly and opened his mouth to say something. Dane cut him off.

"I suggest that you keep whatever it is you're about to say to yourself. You've probably got something important to tell me but I want you to think about it carefully. I'm not going anywhere. I'll definitely be here in the morning."

Walker let him walk away. Dane was right, he did have a lot to say to him. It would wait. His turn would come. Dane had said a great deal; his anger was genuine. Walker knew that it came nowhere near his own. He had good reason. There was a distinct image that kept playing within his head. He looked toward the
direction that Dane had gone.
Are you fucking my wife?

Cora waited until the only sound she could hear in Ashe Hall was the sound of the rain falling on the roof and splashing against the windows. Walker Bowe had come home angry and yelled at her to get some tea ready. She made him a blend of camomile and crushed rose hips to calm him. He retired in the sitting room and dismissed her with a sullen wave of his hand. Cora made sure she shut the doors firmly behind her as she left. There was no noise from Miss Angelique; either she was sleeping or didn't plan to leave her bedroom for the night.

Cora lit the way to her bed chamber, above the kitchen, with a candle. She went inside the small room and closed the door. She set the candle on her bed-side table and changed into her sleeping gown. Before climbing into bed she leaned a chair up against the door, beneath the doorknob. She checked under her pillow for the portrait. She unwrapped it from the oilskin and stared at it for a long while. She had to hold it close to the flickering candle light to see it properly.

She felt slightly guilty for going in Mama Rose's private storeroom. She was justified in searching among the jars of potions and powders and roots. In many ways she knew that she had earned the right to do that. She was a woman, Mama Rose had said so herself. And she was learning how to be refined, a student of the rules of sophistication and society. When she thought of herself, she felt like a woman. Some proof was given to her in the eyes of many men who watched her. She had stopped acting like a child long ago. Yet, she couldn't explain the sudden feelings that came crashing into her when she opened the trap door in the floor of her aunt's shack. It was as if she had released certain powerful feelings that had been sealed when she tugged at the rope and opened the door. It made a little puff of stale, dank air like a drunken belch, and those little girl feelings escaped from a prison where they had been hidden away to be forgotten. There was
that old familiar sense of anxiety, as if Mama Rose might come around the corner at any time and catch her. But she wasn't doing anything wrong! She didn't do anything wrong. She was there for Miss Angelique, not for herself. She had even decided that during the walk home, she definitely wouldn't tell Miss Angelique that she had done anything for her. It would be satisfying enough to see her well again. That was very mature, very womanly, she thought.

If that was the case, why had she set the jar of dilled cucumber far under her bed and not opened it?

The portrait was something that she couldn't stop looking at. The expression on the woman's face was so much like her own. Such a mixture of excitement and fear. What was she thinking? Cora tried to handle the daguerreotype carefully. She didn't want the image to break or fade. What was this woman afraid of? Cora could imagine the difficulties involved in loving a white man. But what if this man loved this woman? He was holding her hand tightly, her small hand in his large one. He must love her and protect her. She decided that they must have been lovers. How many secret meetings must they have had? Did they meet in the barn, high up in the loft on a blanket over a fresh bed of hay? Perhaps it was deep in the fields of sugarcane, so far in that nobody would see them lying together or hear them when they loved. It must have been so terrible, she thought, to be forced to meet always so secretly, not able to walk openly in a late afternoon sun. No picnics, no open declarations of "I love you", not caring who heard it and at the same time wanting the world to know.

She thought of Mama Rose taking the portrait out of its hiding place when she was sure that she was alone and dreaming about this woman and her rich, young man. That's what she wanted to see her aunt doing: keeping the portrait because of romantic fancy. She knew though that Mama Rose didn't do anything like that. She had kept it, protected in oilskin because this daguerreotype preserved a memory of someone she knew.

Cora wanted to go to Mama Rose, full of all her freshly felt childish feelings and have her wrap her arms around her and have
her whisper a litany of words in her ear.

"Everything will be all right. You'll be fine. My girl, you're my girl." She could hear Mama Rose's voice in her mind, full of the things that adults tell children when they become frightened.

She wasn't a child any longer. The unspoken truth in the portrait that she gripped so tightly was too real an image for her to keep the facade alive. She would have to talk to her aunt because of who she was and what she had become. There were no lies that she could tell herself to make-believe that the portrait wasn't inextricably connected to her. The frightened eyes of the woman in the portrait pleaded with her to know the truth.

Kwaku Ananse approached Mandril's field of yams at dawn. He made sure that sun was rising behind him so that to Mandril his approach would look like he came out of the misty horizon delivered by the rising sun. He wanted to appear as god-like as possible. When Mandril saw him, Mandril made a great amount of noise. He beat on the ground with his powerful arms: Boom, Boom and screamed as loud as he could. It was a clear warning that would frighten even the mighty elephant. Ananse hid his fear well. He anticipated that Mandril would try to scare him away. He told himself to be calm and walk proudly as if Mandril's pounding and screaming were nothing more alarming than a sudden change of wind.

"If you don't leave my field, I will have to kill you!" Mandril yelled across the length of his field. The threat was sincere.

"Do you not recognize who I am?" said Ananse. I am Man, Lord of all beasts."

This made Mandril reflective. He had never heard of such a creature. Perhaps it was a trick.

"How do I know that?" he asked.

"Look at me." Ananse drew his body up to full height. "Have you ever seen such a creature like myself? I'm surprised that you haven't heard of me before now."
Mandril was astounded. He approached this new creature carefully. It smelled strange like death, yet it was alive. Clearly, this was a powerful creature. Maybe it really was a Lord of some type.

"How do I know you are not some thief that wants to steal my yams?"

"I am Man, Lord of all Beasts!" roared Ananse, flinging his arms high into the air, feigning great insult. "I should strike you down for such insolence."

Mandril fell back. Never had any other animal the courage to speak to him like this. This Man was truly a powerful creature.

"Forgive me. I didn't know. Our land is living in hard times. My field is the only place left in the entire land where there is food. Many animals want to steal it from me. I must protect it."

"Since I am Lord of all the beasts I can grant you protection from all the other animals. If you are bothered by thievery I will strike the culprits down." Mandril grinned at the thought of such a powerful ally.

"However, I must tell you about the things I have seen." Ananse spent a great, dramatic while telling him about all the dead animals in the land. He told it with such vividness and aplomb that Mandril felt more guilty than he had in his entire life. By the end of Ananse's tale, Mandril was weeping.

"I didn't know things were this bad. What can I do?" he cried. "How can I make things better?"

Ananse began to laugh; his plan was working so well. He disguised his laughter as crying, which drew Mandril to him more closely.

"Do not be too ashamed, my vassal. There is a solution, a simple one. If you open your field to all the animals, they may be healed. I will supervise such a project myself."

Mandril agreed, thankful that he had been enlightened by this truly wonderful creature. Man was a worthy Lord for all the animals of the land.
There were still animals left in the land who were not yet dead. Ananse and Mandril built a fire and began to cook the yams. The smell swelled, rose high and travelled with the wind. Far away animals began to catch the scent of food and moved toward it. It led them with the strength of a river, and soon, they gathered around the shores of Mandril's field.

For Mandril, the sight of them was difficult to bear. They were thin and sickly looking. Many leaned on each other for support, some were too weak to stand. Mandril looked into the sky and his chest got heavy with tears. He kept his eyes skyward; his own sleek form made him ashamed.

"I must give my share of the yams to these animals," he told Ananse. But I cannot stand the sight of them. Each of them reminds me how selfish and cruel I have been. You must distribute the yams yourself. I will go starve myself for a while as punishment." Mandril went away holding his head up to face the sky. Ananse watched him go thinking of all the yams that were now his.

Ananse did as he promised. He made sure that every animal received a share of Mandril's yams. At first the animals were afraid of Ananse's strange, hairless body. He gave off a curious smell, one that reminded them of death. He seemed a strange creature to be Lord over them all. But he had food, and they were more hungry than afraid.

As soon as Mandril was gone he began to pull yams from the earth. The animals formed a great line. Ananse gave them each a yam, and each animal thanked him profusely and kissed his hand. For the first week, all the animals made promises to him that they would do anything for him, their new Lord. He was beginning to feel as if he really were someone mighty.

Every animal began to grow strong from eating the yams. Most of them forgot what it was like to feel full, so they overate and their bellies grew big. It was a joyous time; contests were held to see how many yams could be fit into mouths, but some of the animals began to get worried. Such fortunate times were usually
followed by tragedy. Some of the animals noticed that the field was quickly being stripped of all its food. They began to grow concerned.

"We should tell Man to plant some more. Surely he has the means to keep us fed forever."

"Maybe he could plant something other than yams," said Hyena. "Something with more meat on it. He could do that, after all he is Lord of all beasts."

They brought their concerns to Ananse. He pretended to listen carefully, but really he was thinking about new delicious ways to prepare and cook yams.

"Of course, I can help you," he told the animals. "Of course I can do it. I am your Lord." Ananse had grown into the habit of saying positive things whether he meant them or not. He figured that when you agree with everyone, they generally leave you alone. Satisfied with his acknowledgement of their concerns, the animals went away leaving Ananse to think in peace.

Though Ananse was thinking of feeding his belly he did manage to hear some of what the animals said. It did not escape him that the yams in the field were all being eaten. This worried him as well. It was time to be cautious of who received which yam. That night, he hid Monkey's body and crawled out of it. He travelled under the ground and saw the types of yams that were left in the field. He walked along the rows and saw which yams were the best. He began to dig a cave underneath the field. He hid as many of the best yams as he could in his cave. By morning, he was back inside monkey's body again distributing yams. At night, he had noticed that some of the yams had worms in them; some of them had pieces of rot. It was these that he gave to the animals. They were a bit disappointed but hungry and accepted them greedily. The yams that were juicy and plump and had a fine brown skin and a bright orange flesh he kept for himself. At night, he would store as many yams as he could in his cave. As his collection grew, so did his cave. He ate so many yams that his belly began to grow bigger and bigger.

It did not take long for the animals to realize that the
quality of the yams was getting poorer. Again they brought their
concerns to Ananse. Again he pushed them away with false promises.
They began to complain among themselves.

"That Man agrees to do what we want, but he doesn't follow his
promises. We should do something about it," said Ostrich. "When
I stick my head under the earth, I can see that there aren't too
many yams left."

"I notice that Man still seems to be getting fatter while we
are having to ration our meals," Pig grunted. "We should do
something about it. Perhaps he has some secret cache of yams. We
should find it."

"Yes," cried all the other animals. "Yes, yes, yes!"

They searched all over the field. They searched under rocks
and in trees. They even dug holes, but they did not find Ananse's
secret cave. He was not stupid; he had many years of experience
hiding things. He had dug that cave very deep underneath the
field. He saw that the animals were looking for something.

"What is it you need?" he said.

"We are practicing our farming," they told him.

Ananse knew that they weren't doing as they said. He knew
they were looking for their yams. However, he could do nothing
without revealing any of his secrets. He pretended to be impressed
with the animals. He asked them many questions to delay them until
nightfall. He could fix things then.

When night came and the animals had fallen asleep, Ananse hid
Monkey's body and crawled out of it. He almost got stuck in
Monkey's anus, he was getting so fat. He snuck quietly past
Groundhog and Mere-cat, they were light sleepers. He looked around
him before he went down into his cave. There was nobody following
him. When he reached his cave, he felt a sadness overtake him.
This would probably be the last night he had with his yams. He was
proud of his collection stacked lovingly against the walls of his
cave. Each one was like a grand trick played against Mandril and
all the other animals. It was truly a great achievement.

He sighed. Now he would have to give up his collection.
There was no way any of the other animals would get anything from his hard work. He had given them enough already. He didn't have to feed them or tell them the whereabouts of the field. Ananse seriously considered all his noble actions, his biggest weakness.

"My generosity has destroyed me!"

He set about eating every yam in the cave. At first he started slowly, peeling each one and cutting it into bite size pieces. After a few, he realized that he couldn't possibly eat all his yams like that before he was found. So he began to swallow them whole, peels and all.

In the morning, the animals resumed their search. They found Monkey's dead body.

"Our Lord has been murdered," they cried. "Who could do such a thing? It's so nasty; it must be Kwaku Ananse!"

They began to search for him. They searched five times as hard as they had when looking for the yams. They were so angry. Not only had their saviour been killed, but they had been duped by Spider. It fueled their search.

When they uncovered Ananse's cave they were amazed at how fat he had gotten. He was munching on the last of the yams. His skin had begun to turn orange.

"Look at him," they cried. "A thief and a murderer." They grabbed him and dragged him out of his cave. He tried to speak, to defend himself, but his throat was so swollen with fat that he couldn't speak. He lay in silence as they decided his fate.

"We should trample him," Rhinoceros said.

"Squeeze him to death," Python said.

"Sting him," the Bees said.

"Leave him to me!" It was Mandril. He had returned from his journey. All the animals fell back. They knew that he had given up his field to them.

"I will make sure he is punished," he promised.

"As long as it is painful," the animals agreed. "Make it hurt. A lot."

When the animals had left and Ananse had defecated most of the
yams, he found he was able to speak. "What will you do to me?" he asked Mandril.

Mandril explained that on his journey he had found Monkey's entrails and fur. He realized what Ananse had done. He explained that he was very angry when he found out the heinous crime that Ananse had committed. "You are a stealer of souls. I will let you go as long as you give Monkey his body back," he said.

Ananse, of course, agreed. "Why are you letting me go?" he said.

"Because you allowed me to see my selfishness. That is worth your life."

Ananse ran away as quickly as he could carrying Monkey's body hoping he could get away before Mandril changed his mind.

The pain started suddenly like some circus strongman was twisting her insides and wringing them out. The pain was incapacitating; never had she experienced cramps like these. Angelique sat in the sitting room working on some correspondence for Walker. That was her latest victory in gaining some foothold in the running of the plantation. He was allowing her to write letters of business for him. It was nothing too exciting; you couldn't include many bon mots in letters of propriety, but it did give her a chance to practice her business vocabulary which she would need when her duties increased. Walker had begrudgingly allowed her to help with the correspondence, after she said that it would be good for her, keep her busy. He muttered something about keeping her occupied was good, "Out of trouble, out of sight" were the actual words. He was always spoiling for a fight. She felt her fist clench as he said those words; she could have hit him. She bit her lip instead and chose to ignore the statement uttered under his breath, that she decided wasn't meant for her ears. Or was it? It could be his way to broach a concern too delicate to approach head on. It was a form of accusation. But it was something you do not even think of for a wife, for her: calling her a common woman, some Cajun slut. No, Angelique blinked slowly when
he said it and pretended not to hear.

She set her writing tablet down on the end table beside her chair. The pain was increasing. She bent forward to try and alleviate some of the pain. Oh, Lord, she thought. Oh God! She reached over to the tea service and grabbed her cup. There was a swallow left in the bottom, but it had grown cold. She drank it anyway in the hopes it could calm her insides. It tasted funny. She set the cup roughly back on the service. It made a loud crash and she saw the tea pot fall: a flash of silver and a resounding bang when it hit the ground. She didn’t care that there was cold tea spilling over the floor; the cramps were intolerable. She sunk down to her knees and lay on the floor. Her birds began to chatter. It was very loud and annoying.

"Quiet," she hissed, but they ignored her. She could hear them hopping around in the cage, leaping wildly from perch to perch, whistling madly. Another spasm hit her. She cried out and rolled onto her side drawing her legs up to her chest. There was a sudden smell of cold tea and another of filth, of birds. It felt like someone were putting her insides through the cane presser. It hurt so much.

She felt the nausea rise up her throat, and she managed to turn her head in time that she did not throw up over herself.

Then suddenly she felt a cool hand against her forehead and a damp cloth wiped her mouth.

"Rest easy, Miss Angelique. I'm here. Let's get you up on the couch. Can you move?"

She didn't think she could. She nodded.

"Okay, you lie still; you just be still." Cora voice cracked. The girl was crying. "You're supposed to be better. You're supposed to be fine now. I'm sorry, Miss Angelique. I'm so sorry."

Angelique had no idea what the girl was talking about. She just wanted to be left alone, in quiet, and for the pain to stop. She began to curse Cora's crying and the damn whistling of the birds. "Shut up. Make those birds stop."
Cora was busy mopping up what she could of the tea and the vomit. Miss Angelique's sharp tone made her jump and grab the bird cage. She hurried out of the room with it and set it on the floor of the main foyer. The birds continued their whistling, but it was quieter with them out in the foyer.

Somehow Cora was able to get Miss Angelique up onto the couch. She placed her hand on her forehead and chatted nervously. Angelique couldn't make any sense of what the girl was saying. She told her to clean up the mess, she couldn't stand her hovering over her like some truncated mother figure.

There was another spasm, worse than before, and Angelique felt a warm rush inside her. "Oh God, Cora!"

Cora rushed over to her. Miss Angelique's eyes were wide like someone had stabbed her. Then Cora saw the blood.

"You're bleeding, Miss Angelique! There's so much!

Cora ran hard across the plantation. She made it in record time to Mama Rose's. Cora came to her full of tears and apologies. She told Mama Rose everything, including how she had given Angelique some powder in her tea.

"It was to make her feel better."

"What did you give her, Cora? Tell me exactly." Cora tried to the best of her memory. When she saw Mama Rose throw back the rug she held her breath. If Mama Rose was going into her secret room then things were very serious. Her eyes filled with tears again.

"Don't act so stunned, girl. When you took some of my powders what did you expect? There's a reason I never showed you where this place was. Stop crying and face the fact that that woman over there is in the shape she's in because of you. You don't go fooling around like that." It didn't make things any easier to have her aunt confirming her worst fears. She was directly responsible. Cora heard Mama Rose sigh. There was a furious clinking of bottles and opening of jars.

"Well, at least you had the gumption to come and get me. Quit
sobbing; the woman's not going to die; and quit feeling so guilty, its not going to help any. Besides, I knew you were down here anyway. You think I don't know how many jars of cucumber I have?"

Cora was incredulous. There had probably been some kind of warding sign over the trap door. Cora had been so excited, she forgot to check. She thought about the portrait. Did Mama Rose know about that too? Soon Mama Rose came up holding a few small coloured bottles.

"I expect that jar of cucumbers to be replaced." Cora nodded. Her aunt didn't say anything about the portrait. If she had warded the entrance to her secret room, then surely her little hiding place had been protected. Cora didn't speak much during the walk back to Ashe Hall, but her aunt didn't offer much in the way of conversation either. Perhaps her aunt was only keeping quiet about the portrait because she was so upset over Miss Angelique. She didn't know what she'd say if Mama Rose confronted her now.

Angelique's thighs and legs were covered in blood. Mama Rose ordered Cora to get some things to wash her with: a basin of warm water, some cloths, and a cake of soap. At first, Angelique didn't want Mama Rose to touch her. She kept slapping her hands away and screaming. This was Mama Rose: the voodoo priestess, the witch. Why had Cora let her in here? What was she going to do to her, take what was left for some bizarre ritual, some devil's spell? Oh, Jesus, she prayed. Oh, Jesus don't let this woman touch me!

"Get away from me, get out of this house!"

Mama Rose raised an eyebrow. The girl was hysterical. She was acting like she was there to kill her, not help her. There was no excuse for her to be acting this way. It wasn't that much blood. She didn't need to deal with hysteria. Mama Rose clamped a hand down over her mouth so her fingers dug into the girl's cheek and held her head immobile.

"We can do this one of two ways. I don't care which. You can co-operate or I can get nasty. Hmm?" Angelique let Mama Rose examine her. She lay like a lamb resigned to being sheared, while Mama Rose prodded and touched her. When Cora returned, they washed
her gently. Angelique relaxed a little when they were done.

The look on Cora's face showed extreme worry. Cora obviously cared about this young woman a great deal. Perhaps, there was something more to her than just being a plantation owner's wife. Mama Rose did not like the way the room was decorated. It showed off the richly upholstered furniture, the thick velvet curtains, the oriental rugs, rather than the room itself. Such a disregard for the character of Ashe Hall made Mama Rose wonder about the girl's values or if she had any at all. Yet, Cora was standing next to this woman grasping her hand tightly. She knew Cora's loyalty went beyond her feelings of guilt. Angelique must have some kind of strength. Mama Rose was finding it hard to believe. For Cora's sake, she pushed her feelings aside.

"You make sure you clean this up good, Cora. We don't need Walker Bowe seeing anything like this." She turned toward Angelique. The girl had calmed down enough to appear thankful. Mama Rose put her finger against her pale lips.

"You need some rest. I'm going to make you a special tea and you're going to drink it all. Then you're going to sleep the rest of the day. Good girl." She brushed some stray strands of hair away from her face.

After they took Angelique up to her bedroom, dressed her in a nightgown and made sure she was comfortable, they finished cleaning the sitting room. The couch was stained red, but Mama Rose mixed up a special solution that managed to leech out most of it. While they were working, Cora asked many questions about what had happened: about the thickness of the blood, about the cramps, and about pregnancy.

"Why are you asking so many questions, girl?"

All her questioning was a way to gather courage. Seeing Angelique go through such a trauma was horrifying. There was no doubt she had caused it. She wondered what the child would have been like if it had lived. Would it have been a girl like her? Mama Rose answered every question patiently, almost absently. Angelique's misfortune had affected her as well. There was an
avenue of opportunity that suddenly opened up like a hole in a cloud filled sky.

"What happened to my mother?" The question startled Mama Rose, the way questions about secrets do when you happen to be thinking about them. It was also a question Cora had heard the answer to many times. Even though the answer was always the same, she needed to hear it again.

"She went away. She disappeared one day. She walked away one day, didn't tell a soul. You were a baby. She wasn't ready for you yet. She was young."

Whenever she heard that answer she had taken some small comfort in an image of a young woman walking away with tears in her eyes, sorry that she left without her daughter. Other times, Cora just wanted her to return. Cora wouldn't even ask her why she left. She might walk in one day and lift her into her arms and hug her. For the first time she knew that what Mama Rose was telling her, that same utterance of words she had heard over and over, was a lie.

"She's dead isn't she?" Mama Rose didn't answer, wouldn't look at her. Cora wasn't mad at her. The lie wasn't malicious; it was designed to protect her. Maybe, too, it had drawn her closer to her aunt. She laughed; she wanted to cry suddenly. It wasn't sadness or anger; it was more a sense of relief. She no longer had to carry that image of a sorrowful young woman leaving an infant, tears in both of their eyes. There was no need to ask about the portrait. It was her mother standing with that white man. Parts of her mother's life were already being revealed to her. She had a white lover. Perhaps Mama Rose had lied to protect herself as well. Maybe she needed to hold onto it a while longer. Cora wanted to ask how far the lie reached. Was she killed? Did she die in childbirth?

"She looked just like you," Mama Rose said. Mama Rose was setting her back on track with that same line of questions and answers. The lie was more important to her aunt than she thought. She decided she wouldn't tell her what she knew. For now she could
enjoy some of the peace of mind that the lie gave.

"She did, didn't she? Just like me." Mama Rose nodded slowly. She looked right at Cora, full of amazement, like she suddenly saw something that she hadn't noticed before.

There was the reflective side of Mama Rose that so rarely showed itself. Cora's questions would be answered she knew, but that was going to be a slow process. The daguerreotype was enough to sustain her for now.

Angelique's sudden illness made Walker suspicious. There was no doubt that she was sick. Cora didn't want him to go into the bedroom. She was almost in tears when he insisted that he be allowed to see her. Cora's response was very strange. Had the women in this house gone mad? he wondered. A man has a right to see his wife. He pushed Cora aside and entered the bedroom. The shutters had been drawn, and the room smelled of sleep and illness. It was stifling. He'd have to give Cora hell for this. No wonder his wife was feeling ill. Angelique stirred when he threw open the shutters and opened the windows.

She looked awful. Even the colour of her hair had dulled. She lay sweating under two blankets. Her face was pale, her lips were thin and chalky, and there were dark rings under her eyes. What had happened to her? He sat beside her and put his hand on her hip.

"Christ, you look like death warmed over."

Her eyes filled with tears and she turned away from him.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't realize you were so sick." He lay his hand on her back and rubbed it gently. "Maybe I should let you sleep."

"No. Stay." Her tone was forceful; she didn't want him to leave. It wasn't a request. He was quiet for a while.

"Okay," he said. She listened to him drone on about some inconsequential plantation business. He really was trying hard, but he had no idea what he was supposed to say. He hadn't intended to come in here to play nursemaid. When he entered the house he

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called for her. His voice was tense and agitated. There was something that he was angry at again. She didn't have the strength to listen to some little annoyance of his that he had given some grave importance to. There was something bothering him, and it wasn't any of the numerous little things that he brought daily to her. She didn't know what it was, but it involved him not sleeping with her. She knew that he didn't suspect her pregnancy. Well, he would never have to worry about that. She thought she had cried all the tears she could, but the lump rose up hard in her throat again.

He finished his monologue and sat silently for a short while.

"Is there anything you need?" He was getting ready to leave, she knew. She heard him breathe deeply and his weight lift from the bed.

"I had a miscarriage today." She wasn't sure why she was telling him, or even if she should. In many ways it would be easier not to. Somehow saying it might make it easier to bear. She needed to share what had happened. She told him how she had lain in the sitting room and how Cora and Mama Rose had helped her. She heard him pause before opening the bedroom door. She wanted him to say something. He had been so caring, sitting beside her, gently rubbing her back. He acted like he did before, when they first were married. So caring.

"Walker?" What she didn't expect was his utter disregard for the situation, for her, for their lost child. The sound of him closing the door after he left the room was the coldest, harshest thing she had ever heard.

Samuel was sore. Every step he took made his body shake with pain and his head feel as if it were connected to his body with a thin wire. He was taking Dane to the sugar-house. He had awakened late in the day feeling an awareness of pain before anything else. Someone had opened the window next to his bed. He could hear birds chirping, and a breeze was playing throughout the room. They had let him sleep. And he had slept uninterrupted for longer than a
night. It was wonderful to awake naturally, coming out of that
state because his body didn't need any more sleep. He grunted and
winced as he swung his legs around slowly and sat on the edge of
the bed. He placed his feet firmly on the floor and took a few
deep breaths. His ribs were tender, maybe one broken. He felt
along his body, his extremities, probing with his fingers to find
out if anything was seriously damaged, if any of Hebert's punches
had caused irreparable damage. Mainly he was just a mass of
bruises and cuts. Parts of his face were swollen and probably had
that shine that went along with being hit. He walked gingerly to
the window and leaned against the sill. The day was glorious, the
sun made everything bright and lush and green, the way it does
after a storm. His stomach grumbled. He realized that he was
hungry. He could see the fields of cane waving gently with the
breeze. There was no definite pattern; each leaf moved as it
could, yet working in concert with the entire field. It looked
like waves, like something so simple and easy with itself. He felt
it had a sublime, relaxed power to it, and if he were to go there,
he would be buoyed by the greenness of each leaf and the scope and
generosity of each field.

He decided that he needed to tell someone about the stolen
things. Dane needed to know, so did Walker Bowe. He didn't know
who the cache belonged to. The items in it suggested that it came
from Ashe Hall. That sort of thievery was worse than murder. It
represented such a serious affront to every sense of order on the
plantation. If he didn't tell someone, he would be just as guilty.
Whatever happens would simply happen.

So Samuel led Dane to the sugar-house. He took him behind one
of the vats and let him pry apart the floorboards. Dane took
everything out and laid each piece on the floor.

"We're going to find whoever did this." Samuel could tell he
was excited. Dane took each piece in hand and examined it
carefully.

"It seems a strange assortment of things to steal," Samuel
said. He picked up a stuffed peregrine that was missing a wing.
"What good is this to anybody? Most of this stuff is worthless. You wouldn't be able to sell it."

Dane pondered over each item: What did they have to do with each other? What was the thief planning to do with all this stuff? Dane muttered each question to himself. It wasn't the type of question you answered. Samuel knew Dane liked to think out loud, and not be interrupted. It was as if the thief was a madman. That would explain it. He decided not to tell Dane his theory.

Dane stood and went back to the hole in the floor. He peered into it for a while then bent down suddenly. He thrust his arm in and pulled out a small woven piece of straw.

"What is it?" Samuel asked.

"Have you ever seen what's hanging on the front door of Ashe Hall?"

Sitting beside his wife while she was so frail and helpless made Walker feel strong again. How could he be angry with Angelique when she was like that? He had come into the house because she failed to post the letters she had almost begged him to write. What the hell had she been doing all day? He couldn't find Dane anywhere. When he returned to Ashe Hall, he heard she was sick. Cora wouldn't let him in their bedroom. Christ, were they...?

Rutting. He tried to push the image of Dane and her away. He bending her over, lifting her skirts, mounting her like a dog.

Those goddamned letters! He was relieved to find that she was very ill. She couldn't have been doing anything wrong. How could he have called her an adulteress. She was sick. As long as she was like that she wouldn't be much good for anything. She wouldn't even think of sex.

Then he heard the words. "Miscarriage." Pregnant? Everything he had feared was true. He felt an unbelievable coldness growing inside of his gut. When he shut the door to the bedroom he should have slammed the door. He should have yelled at her, hit her. Suddenly, none of that mattered anymore. That
wouldn't change anything. What did matter was that he gripped the doorknob tightly and shut the door firmly only releasing his grip when the door was perfectly aligned. What mattered was that he walked down the hallway with perfect posture, each footstep measured to keep a perfect balance, at a perfect pace. What mattered was that he descended the main staircase, letting his hand glide smoothly down the bannister, one foot on each step. What mattered was that he fished a small brass key from his pants pocket and inserted it in the keyhole in the top drawer of his desk and turned the key slightly until he heard a metallic click. What mattered was that he slid the door open, and he pulled out a small wooden box and laid it on the desk. What mattered was that he opened the box and lifted a loaded revolver from its red velvet bed.

Walker carried his revolver low, pressed against his right leg. He kept his arm rigid and walked with purpose, not too quickly, but steadily. The day's sun had passed its zenith and began to make tall shadows as if the buildings and trees on the plantation were paper cut-outs barely thick enough to withstand the strength of the light. The shadows that sprang from them looked stretched out beyond any physical comprehension. They were solid and dark grey but grew lighter toward the frayed edges and became dappled with the yellow waning light. Walker never paused to contemplate the substance of his own shadow, his movement was too steady. His eyes were opened to see more than just the quality of light or to notice that most of the time his shadow fled from him at difficult, awkward angles and distorted itself with everything it passed over. Instead, Walker generated his thoughts from a source that was thick and vicious and close to forced mirthless laughter.

The coldness inside him was like a slow moving fever. He could feel it creeping into every bone and muscle; his fingers felt swollen by it. It was astonishing how heavy it made him. He concentrated on the weight of the gun. It kept his mind focused on
what he had to do. It was an instrument of such power, such force. It didn't have the grace of a sword, none of the dramatic thrusts, or parries, none of the arcing sharpness, but he didn't need any of that. The small explosion in the chamber that sent a single bullet at intense speed out of the barrel to whomever you pointed it at was direct and pragmatic. The force that sent that bullet out was more than just the small movements that comprised pointing and pulling the trigger. Each small spinning bullet was a judgement, a sentence, a condemnation. When it hit and tore into the flesh, with the heat of a furnace and the velocity of a train it contained all the hatred and necessity behind those simple actions.

Walker thought about where he would shoot Dane. His immediate reaction was to go for his heart. Quick and painful. But did he want it to last? Did he want to see part of his face torn off, maybe shoot him through an eye ripping off part of his skull? Perhaps the stomach? That would make him live for a while so he could feel every transformation of pain and know intimately how death can bleed out of you.

He thought of how Dane would react. Would he go down on his knees, beg for life? Would he rush Walker and try to wrestle the gun away from him. How many bullets would it take? How many before he could erase the fact that he had thrust himself into his wife and spilled his seed? Oh, Angeline did you know what would happen when you let the man take you? Did you know when you spread your legs and let him inside you? Did you know that you would be responsible for every shot I will take at him? For fucking him!

Walker knew then that when he saw Dane, he would fire off every round in the gun. And Dane would be dead, utterly.

Angeline did not remember pulling the sheets away from her body, nor rising weakly from her bed or the way her nightgown fell over her legs as she stood. She did not remember brushing the stray strands of hair away from her face and leaving the bedroom. She walked slowly out of Ashe Hall through the row of oak trees until she stood at the bank of the river. The current was strong.
She threw a stick out into it and watched how it was grabbed instantly and pulled along as if it had no force of its own. She threw a bigger branch in and noticed the same result. The water looked so lazy, so serene. But it wasn't. It was a liar: presenting itself to be so full of joy, the way the sunlight reflected off of it, the way herons dove into it and splashed out again holding a fish between sharp beaks. No, not a gentleman proper. Rather, it was a serpent that could open its jaws and swallow anything of any size, expanding to engulf it entirely. A fat, slithering snake.

She took a footstep into the river. Her foot disappeared up to her ankle. The water was cool and she could feel the bottom squish between her toes. She wondered what it would be like to stand in the middle of the river. She could walk out, the water rising with each step until it covered her, until it blocked out all the sounds of the plantation, all knowledge of anything anyone ever did. With the water so far above her, it would replace even the blue evening sky. There might be a patch of thin yellow light floating above her. Below would be a remarkable silence: the silence of fish swimming, flashing their tails and the current gurgling past her like the ultimate wind. Only it wouldn't gurgle, the current would be a soft sound like a hand on her back, a hand belonging to someone who loved her and forgave her for every mistake she had made and would ever make.

There were no good ways that she could find to explain what had happened to the relationship she and Walker now had. She could cry and plead with him and tell him that she only wanted his happiness, but she didn't think it would matter. She didn't know what he needed to simply love her. Inside she felt hollow, but it wasn't solely the miscarriage. It was so many little things: it was him taking his hand away from her back when she told him about her accident; it was him saying goodnight to her and then retiring to the sitting room without even a kiss, or show of regret; it was many dinners spent together without any conversation; it was the silence at night when she heard him moving around and not once
having the courage to enter the bedroom; it was a denial of pregnancy; it was wanting to hold a child and feeling guilty because he didn't want that; it was wondering what the baby would have been like and never knowing anything other than blood.

She moved farther out in the river, up to her knees. The bottom of her nightgown was drenched, stuck to her legs like thick gossamer and trailed off like loose hair in wind. She moved further until the river felt cool against her thighs. She held her hands under so the water wet her wrists. The current was much stronger. If she sunk down she felt sure it would carry her away like the two sticks she had tossed in. She brought her hands up trailing drops of water and drew her hands down her face. She licked her lips and tasted the river. Would the water taste the same if she were at the bottom? She cupped her hands underneath the surface and pulled them up suddenly, splashing herself. She gasped. It felt good, being wet, having the cool water against her breasts, her chest, her stomach.

"Oh, Walker!" She felt a tremendous sorrow, but its strength came with the realization that it was not herself she was sad about. Walker was truly the unhappy one. If he could only see what difference a child would make...She thought about going home, back to New Orleans, but knew that was not what she really wanted. Despite everything, she liked it here. She felt like the plantation were part of her. She turned and looked up past the row of oaks. Ashe Hall stood unchanged from when she first saw it. Did either she or Walker deserve to live in such a regal house? A breeze blew up against her and she saw a few leaves descend slowly from the oak trees. Ashe Hall was a house that needed the utmost respect. Perhaps she had been wrong in what she had done to it. It didn't deserve to be subject to all the arguments that she and Walker had. They had filled it with guilt and sadness and anger. That would have to change. Somehow.

Her nightgown felt heavy like a thick, wet eel skin. She peeled it off her, crossing her arms and gathering it from her legs and lifting upward in one majestic violent motion. It sounded like
something being ripped from her. She swung the nightgown in a high arc above her head, feeling its weight, and let it fall with a splash. She watched it disappearing under the water, flowing away from her like an undecided cloud in a high clear sky.

For some reason she did not feel conscious of her nakedness. When she stepped from the river she felt clothed by the mud on her feet and by the droplets of water that covered her skin. She marveled at the way the water fell from her. She was the cause of a miniature rain shower beneath her. She stood and looked at the drops of water falling from her, wetting the ground. There was some transient remarkable power in that moment, and she didn't want to move, for it to end, but she knew that it must and that this new found ability was only a construct of happenstance and mild discovery.

"You'll catch your death of cold." Mama Rose stood next to her, coming up silently while she was lost in her reverie. She draped a dress over her shoulders. Angelique blushed and tried to cover herself with the dress. It was the same dress that she had thought ruined by the miscarriage. Somehow Mama Rose had managed to wring all evidence of blood from the dress.

"How did you..."

"A dress like that...There's no need to waste it."

Angelique finished putting on the dress. She had no idea that Mama Rose had seen her. At once she felt entirely conscious of standing in the river and taking off her nightgown. Already this woman had witnessed two of her most private moments.

"How long have you been here?"

"I've been watching you since before you took your first step into the river. I saw you but I didn't think I should interrupt. If you were going to drown yourself, I didn't want to interfere."

"I wasn't going to drown myself!" This woman had nerve. She hadn't stepped into the river to kill herself, had she? No, not that.

"That's what it looked like. Don't expect me to judge you. Maybe you just wanted to see what death looked like. Besides
there's the chance that the river wouldn't take you. Might have spit you back up on its banks."

"What do you want? What are you doing here?"

"Just came to give you your dress. When I saw you walk into the river, I didn't think it was so bad. You've been through a lot. A miscarriage..."

"I wasn't going to drown myself, I told you." She watched me step in. What if I had been trying to kill myself, would she have saved me?

Suddenly she began to feel very angry. Looking at Mama Rose standing beside her, so relaxed, so unafraid, a nigger woman talking to her like that.

"You would have let me drown!"

"It's not my business if you want everything to end. The question I had was if you could."

"What do you mean if I could?"

"You, personally. I'm not saying you weren't brave enough or strong enough, either way, to live or die. If you did then I'm not going to stop you. A decision like that is too much up to you. Of course, there's the river. It might not want you."

"I'm not going to accept that. The river it's just...It's a river. Don't change the issue. If I was drowning, you wouldn't stick out your hand?"

"I didn't have to, did I? There's more to that river than you think." Mama Rose turned and began to walk away. "You believe what you believe."

"Wait." Mama Rose walked farther than she expected. Angelique was angry now, angrier than she thought. Something had happened to her out there whether she wanted to believe it or not. Anger is good, thought Mama Rose. Anger can be used, transformed. She stopped and turned to face Angelique.

"You just wait and listen. I don't know what you expect from me, telling me all this. You say you're not judging me? Well you are. I know all about you. I know about your voodoo witchcraft and how you can make people do things they don't want. You're some
kind of woman, not a lady at all. I don't know why I went into that river and maybe I don't want to. Maybe I don't like the way that my life is, but that's my business entirely. You helped me, and I thank you for it, but that's over now. I survived."

"I'm dismissed now? I'm not ready to go. Something happened while you stood in that river. It affected you. How many nightgowns do you lose that way? That wasn't a usual thing for you. Don't dismiss it so easily. It's not like bad weather, girl. You're not the same as when you went in. All I'm say..."

"What is it? You want to be my teacher, maybe your voodoo apprentice? Yes, that would be splendid. The voodoo priestess and the plantation owner's wife. We could go bloody ourselves with chickens and curse people with a splash of our monthly juices."

"All I'm saying is that you think about what happened to you. The miscarriage and the experience in the river. You can't deny their importance. If you don't want my help then that's fine. But..."

"No, I don't want your help. Why are you here to help me? I'm not some little girl that doesn't know anything. I'm not going to be placed in some kind of struggle between the powers of this plantation. The problems you have with Dane Thewes are your own. You don't want to teach me anything. All you want is to have another weapon to use against whomever stands in your way. Everything you do is for yourself. It's pure selfishness."

Mama Rose grabbed both her arms. Her strength was surprising. Angelique let out a scream that was cut short when Mama Rose dragged her down the bank and into the river. She took a breath as she went under and swallowed a mouthful of water. She came up sputtering and coughing. Nobody had ever treated her this way.

"Here it is, little miss. I'm going to make you acknowledge what happened even if I have to drown you." Mama Rose dunked her head under again.

"You're absolutely right; I am selfish. Probably the most selfish person you'll ever meet. Selfish people are the ones who do things so they get better for themselves. I don't like the way
things are. I don't like it that you can call me nigger and get away with it." She dunked her head under again.

"I need things to change around here, and I need you to help me."

Angelique was crying now. Her anger had been replaced by frustration and then fright and then panic. Mama Rose dragged her up onto the bank and threw her to the ground. She sat beside her and told her about how Cora and her had hid in Ashe Hall during the war. She told of how frightened they were and what that was like when they knew that any day a violent end could come. She told her about the first dance when Walker Bowe took over and how it came to a disastrous end. She changed nothing, explaining the purpose for dances and the need for herself and her people to be who they were.

Angelique listened, hearing the stories, and at the same time feeling the water go over her head again and again. She had lied to Mama Rose. Stepping into the river had been for stronger reasons than she was willing to admit. There were changes that went on because of the miscarriage, because of the river. Perhaps they weren't as mystical as Mama Rose believed, but they were significant nonetheless.

She should hate this woman for every indiscretion she had committed. She should hate her even more for the ignominy of dragging her like a common woman into the river, but she didn't. There was no longer a feeling that she should be afraid of Mama Rose. The woman was still immensely strong, but that strength was no longer a threat to her. Instead, it was infectious. As Angelique lay listening to Mama Rose talk she felt something stirring in her breast that was more than empathy or excitement.

Angelique lay for a while beside Mama Rose and didn't say anything when Mama Rose stood.

"Go make things right with your husband," she said.

Angelique looked up at the oak leaves above her and watched them shift in the wind, so green and delicate, and strong.

Cora saw the three of them approaching Ashe Hall. There was
a distinct purpose in the way they walked. They looked like animals on the hunt. Dane Thewes, Samuel and Hebert the Cajun. Walker Bowe wasn't home, she knew, and Miss Angelique had left the house. Those men were deeply concerned about something, but neither of the Bowe's were there. She was sure she couldn't help them. They didn't bother knocking, just pushed the door wide and stepped in. When she saw their faces she knew that they were there for her, and it wasn't going to be good.

She escaped through the back door. The Cajun was faster than he looked, but she managed to gain some distance by catching a door as she went by. The hallway between the foyer and back entrance was thin, so the three men were slowed in their pursuit. She tore off her apron as soon as she escaped through the back door. There was not enough time to plan for an adequate escape through the plantation; these men didn't care who saw them. Cora headed straight for the corn.

Mama Rose had taught her all about hiding, especially in thick places, places like a cornfield. She called it melding. That was where you could disappear into something so well that you seemed a part of it. Cora felt the thick green leaves slapping her as she entered. She held her hands in front of her face so the leaves wouldn't catch her in the face, hit her in the eyes and blind her. She immediately found a row and charged as fast as she could down it. She could hear the three men running toward her crashing through the stalks. She had left a big hole where she went in; anyone could see it. Soon she'd have to be more careful, but she had to get more distance first. With proper time and care, she could move anywhere in that field with hardly a leaf disturbed. She got so good at it she could sneak up on birds feeding on the cobs. Behind her she could hear them closing in. She risked a quick look back. Samuel was closest. He had an evil look on his face, like the night he had first come after her at the dance. She jumped clear of the row, heading in a diagonal away from it. She had no choice but to knock down a few stalks. It would make her trail easier to follow, but give her more of a lead. Soon the
noise they made was farther away. She could hear them yelling at each other trying to decide the way she went. She changed her direction again, following a row for a short while and then jumping across diagonally, always away from them. She knew that she could keep hidden for a long time; the size of the cornfield was immense. Soon she slowed down her pace, disturbing less of the corn masking her movement. Mama Rose had taught her how to meld because of the danger of such places. She said a body could be set upon by any number of men deep in the fields. They could have their way with you and nobody would know the difference. You could scream all you wanted, but nobody would ever hear you. She said she remembered workers going missing for a while until they turned up during harvest time, sometimes too decomposed to tell who exactly it was. Cora knew that she must be extremely careful with her melding. It had to be near perfect; Hebert the cajun was known to have great abilities as a tracker. She stepped sideways through a few rows. Footsteps would be hard to hide; the ground was muddy from the amount of rain that had fallen. Her legs were covered in mud; it splashed up when she ran. She stepped into a small puddle.

"Son of a bitch," she clenched her teeth. She had made a small print with her foot. C'mon Cora, try harder. She heard Mama Rose's voice and she mouthed the words.

"Step like the wind. Step on rocks, hard patches, avoid a pattern." Cora stopped and carefully stepped back in her own prints. She walked backward like that a few metres then leapt across two rows, being careful how she landed. It would look like her prints ended suddenly. She hoped it would work. She moved a fair distance off. She knelt and tried to catch her breath. She would have a better chance without the Cajun.

What do they want? Why are they after me? She couldn't think of anything that she had done recently. It didn't really matter what the reason was, she couldn't be caught. If they did catch her...She didn't want to think about it. She knew that eventually she'd have to stop running. The way those men came after her she knew that they were hell bent on finding her. With three of them,
they wouldn't tire as quickly.

She heard a twig snap to her left. Christ, they couldn't be here already, could they? She held her breath staying as still as possible. She wished she was as good as melding as Mama Rose. She could see the form of the Cajun moving through the rows. He was following her too well. She fought every urge she had to spring up and run. She could see him bending and looking at the ground. He touched a corn leaf that she had bent when rushing past it. God, he was too close! Where were the others? She tried to listen for them, but could only hear the Cajun. Help me, Mama Rose. Help me.

When Walker Bowe couldn't find Dane Thewes, he decided that he better go back to Ashe Hall. His search for Dane was a logical one. He started at the mess hall where most of the workmen were busy eating their dinner. He hid the gun in his pants pocket. It hung awkwardly and banged against his leg as he walked, but it was sufficient to keep it hidden. They saw Walker Bowe standing as if in some kind of trance studying the room, and when asked what he was looking for, his response seemed disjointed and not at all convincing. "Nothing," was all he said. The workmen decided that he had higher things to occupy his mind and that didn't involve the meal they were eating. He searched Dane's quarters, the barn, the stable, and the sugar house. He stood at the edge of the field for a while nodding absently to some of the workmen who returned late from a hard day's work. Dane was nowhere to be found. As he returned to Ashe Hall he realized that Angelique might know where he is. If she tried to hide it from him he'd have no choice but to beat the answer out of her.

Angelique was no longer in her room. The house was completely empty and the front door stood open as if everyone had abandoned the place. Walker closed the door waiting till it swung fully shut. He walked into the sitting room. As soon as he crossed the threshold, he heard Angelique's birds begin to whistle. It was strange; they were usually silent at that time of day. He felt the weight of the gun in his pocket. As he came nearer to the bird
cage, the birds grew louder. He thought about how much she loved them, letting them sit on her finger. Many times he found her talking to them as if they could understand what she was saying, as if they were her children.

This was the room she had the miscarriage in. He looked around for any sign of what had happened. There was no evidence of the accident, no evidence of any premature life. All he could smell was the musty scent of the birds. Had they seen it all? Did they sing when it happened, singing as they were doing now? Walker opened a window. The smell of the birds was beginning to make his head ache. He crossed in front of the couch and ran his hands over the upholstery. There was a large damp area. Was this where it happened? Was this where she lay and had it all come out of her? He lifted his fingers up to his nose. There was no scent of anything. At least he should be able to sense something, some evidence that it had happened. If she hadn't told him, he probably wouldn't know. It would have been a perfect lie. He sat heavily on the couch and held the gun between his knees. His head began to hurt. There was a tremendous pressure growing behind his eyes. The noise of the birds increased.

He had given her everything: this plantation, this house, his patience, his attentions. Did it mean nothing to her? Everything seemed to be falling away from him, or he was falling from it. Had he ever had any control over the plantation? His own views were always being compromised by Angelique's and Dane's. He couldn't even do a simple thing like find Dane so he could put a bullet in him. What was important in his life was to maintain some kind of stability, some kind of authority over what happened to him. That wasn't letting Dane run the plantation; that wasn't letting Dane screw his wife; that wasn't Angelique's miscarriage; or having Dane escape without paying some kind of price. He checked the gun. It was clean and oiled. Even one bullet, correctly shot, could do immense and painful damage.

The birds were making his head hurt something awful. He lay the gun on the table beside the couch and walked over to the cage.
They turned their small dark eyes on him. Each chirp seemed tense, cut off, like mocking laughter. He opened the door to the cage. The birds jumped from perch to perch. He stuck in his hand and grabbed one of them. Both birds screeched loudly and fluttered their wings. He pulled the bird roughly from the cage squeezing it tightly in his hand. He could feel its bones popping as he crushed the life out of it. He let it drop to the ground and went after the other one.

He took more time with the second one, holding it firmly and sitting on the couch. Every peep the bird made sounded softer; Walker held it so hard. Its eyes were so round and so dark; he could see himself in them.

Angelique has really taken you in, he thought. All her smiles, her whispered promises. Did she ever love me? She's the worst kind of liar. Building up a love so she could betray it. Thoughts of self pity ripped through his thoughts, and he could feel the anger in him softening, turning to pity. The image of her with Dane entered his mind again. This time, both of them were laughing at him, mocking laughter, chirping. He wondered how many times Dane had penetrated her on the couch he now sat on. How many times had she let him part her skirts and feel her warmth while the birds chattered above them? The tears that welled up in his eyes came from somewhere deep inside. He clenched his teeth and tilted his head back. There's no way she'll get the better of me. He tried to force the image out of his mind and left the room. He wandered into the foyer and opened the main door. He let it swing open until it stopped on its hinges. This house seems so empty without her, he thought. He imagined what it would be like to have Ashe Hall forget there were ever women inside it. Though he might hate what she did to him, he could not deny that Angelique had made him love her. As much as he tried not to, he still did. Perhaps part of her loved him as well. It was hard to imagine that all those times they shared, that high intoxicating laughter she made when they first came to Ashe Hall was entirely without feeling for him. She didn't have to tell him about the miscarriage. She had
wanted him to stay with her, to take care of her. He stepped into the frame of the door. He should wait and shoot her. He should just stand inside the doorway and when she returned, smile, tell her how he felt and fire the gun. It would be an end of sorts. He had no energy to go get the gun from the table beside the couch. His attention wandered to the wreath hanging on the door. It was thick and tight, like a woman's braid. Cora really had a talent. Every leaf was in place, every leaf had its purpose. It was such a monument to order and control. Such a beautiful thing no longer had a place on his front door. He reached up and grabbed it. It was lighter than he thought.

He sat down on the stairs holding the wreath in his left hand. He realized that he still carried the songbird in his right. It had long since died. There was a tiny wound on his thumb where the bird had pecked at him. He hadn't noticed. He set the bird down gently on the step beside him and let the tears drop from his eyes.

When Angelique came through the front door she found Walker on the steps, his head between his knees. He grasped Cora's wreath in his left hand and covered his head with his right. One of her birds lay dead beside him. She sat beside him and took him in her arms as if he were a child. He leaned into her and let her comfort him. She could feel him crying and began to rock him gently.

"I killed your birds," he said.
"Ssshhh."

Mama Rose stood suddenly and quietly from her chair where she had been pondering the day's events. There seemed a strange disquiet to everything. In her mind, things should have felt finished, like the end of one of her stories. She had created a powerful ally in Angelique Bowe and helped heal her. Angelique was stronger now because of her experience, because Mama Rose had continued the anger in her and doused it in the water of the river. There should be a peace now, she thought. The fading daylight did not shine properly. It was beginning to turn the sky orange, yet it did not have any of the expansive, restful feeling that a day's
end should. Instead, it made things seem smaller, confined. Where there should have been inspiration for a languid song, there was confusion.

She stepped out onto her tiny porch and sniffed the air. Something definitely wasn't right. She could not explain how she knew; it was just that way. She felt it deep inside her. She had learned to pay attention to these kind of feelings and not to dismiss them like irritating pains felt in the body during a cold winter's night. She looked out across the plantation. Everything seemed normal: the cooking fires were lit; workers returned to their quarters, exhausted; Ashe Hall stood confidently. There was a subtle movement far away, almost imperceptible like a whistle carried by a strong wind. In the corn there was movement. It seemed like some people were involved in some kind of chase. All at once it came to her: Cora! She rushed inside and grabbed her medicine pouch. If Cora was in danger she would definitely need her talents.

The corn was high; she had to jump up to see over most of the stalks. She could hear male voices yelling at each other. They hadn't found Cora yet, but the way they spoke, they were close to her. She paused after entering the cornfield. These were voices she recognized! Hebert, the Cajun, Dane Thewes and Samuel.

Ah, Samuel, you disappoint me. She checked her medicine pouch and headed for them.

Her movement through the corn stalks was effortless. Each step betrayed nothing of her presence. The leaves gave way like water divided by the bow of a boat. She picked up a trail easily. It was one of the men. He lumbered through the field with no idea how to hide his tracks. His direction was erratic as though he were being led by some dangerous urge rather than his senses. Samuel. She followed his trail for a while. He was no immediate threat; he could be fooled by the sound of a rock thrown to provide a distraction. Hebert was the one to be concerned about. She picked up his trail shortly. It was almost completely hidden, surprising for his size.
Mama Rose heard someone rustling ahead. She stilled herself, making sure of the direction the sounds were coming from. She circled around so she stood in front of the man. She saw his short burly form through the stalks. She recognized him as Hebert. He was bending down to look for prints. He really was a good tracker. She stopped again; Cora was near, but she didn't know where. She made definite tracks away from the area. She opened her medicine pouch and withdrew a small bag of white, sandy powder. She drew a symbol on the ground. It was a crossroads, with arrows on at each end and four dots on each side of the middle. Satisfied, she stamped down a few stalks around it and blew some powder in each direction her symbol pointed. When she got a fair distance away from it, she started making the noise of someone fleeing. She heard Hebert coming up the trail. She didn't wait to see how effective her trap was. She knew that Hebert would come across the crossroads and lose all sense of direction. The Cajun would probably have no doubt he was caught up in some voodoo, but he wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

She decided to go after Samuel next. His sudden lack of respect for her was worrisome. Hadn't she given him ample proof of her abilities? His loyalty to Dane must be stronger than I thought. So is his dedication to perversity. She knew what he intended the first time he went after Cora; she didn't intend for that to happen again.

His trail was easy to follow. She knew also that Cora was very near. She could find her, but that would take time and give more risk to being discovered. She didn't want them to know she was there. If Cora knew, that might pose a danger to her as well; she might reveal herself too soon.

Samuel appeared before her. She stood directly in his path so he could see her. There was a quick look of panic on his face and then he rushed her. He moved fast and Mama Rose threw herself to the side to slip past him. She felt a tug on her arm. Her medicine pouch had been stripped from her. He hadn't been rushing her at all. She turned to him quickly.
He was laughing at her, holding the pouch. He grinned and did a short imitation of her. She moved a step closer to him. There was no way he was getting away with this. He motioned to her to be still. He started swinging the pouch above his head by the strap. He grinned again, hideous in his victory. He let go and the pouch disappeared into the corn.

"Now you can't blind me, you bitch. No more powder."

She smiled at him cruelly. "I don't need the powder to make you blind, Samuel." She raised her hand in front of her and made a slow fist. His look of triumph was replaced by one of horror. Samuel fell to his knees bringing his hand up to his eyes.

She ignored all his pleading and cries and left him in darkness.

"Samuel? Samuel!" Dane's voice sounded loudly to her right. She waited for him to call again. He was clever, he kept silent. He must have figured that the stakes were now higher. She wouldn't be surprised if he knew she had entered the field. She no longer had the element of surprise. Dane would be looking for her now; she was a much bigger prize. Samuel had stopped his pleading. He climbed to his feet and started wandering around in the corn. Mama Rose sneered. Your days of usefulness are over, she thought. You threw away my pouch. She hadn't seen exactly where it went; the corn was too high. If she started rummaging around for it, she'd waste valuable time. If Dane found Cora first...No, that hasn't happened yet.

She hit Samuel hard on the back of the neck and he fell dazed to the ground. She kicked him in the head until she was sure he wouldn't be moving for a long time.

There were things she needed in that medicine pouch to take care of Dane. He was a potent adversary; she made no mistake about it. There was no way she could best him by strength. If she had her pouch she could do so much: she could trap him at the crossroads like Hebert; she could blind him; she could make him nauseous, sleepy, paralyzed, but not without the things in her medicine pouch. It was getting difficult to see. The sun cast so
many thin shadows in the corn. Her pouch would be difficult to find. She moved in the direction she had seen it go and began to search.

"Mama Rose! Listen up, you nigger bitch. I've got something of yours. Something you'll be real interested in."

Mama Rose froze. Cora!

"You better come get it, or there's no telling what I'm going to do. You come to me, you hear? I'm through looking. I don't know what you did to Samuel and Hebert. I'm no longer playing that game. You come to me!"

She followed his voice. She didn't want to surprise him, come up on him unawares. He could have Cora, unnecessarily. If she could talk to him maybe he would let Cora go, take her instead. She rushed through the rows of corn paying no heed to the way the stalks got bent and trampled.

Dane Thewes had made himself a small clearing. He had been busy trampling down a round section of corn. The stalks made for a ragged carpet on the ground. He stood in the middle of it. She waited a moment before entering the clearing. Cora was nowhere to be seen. Had he hidden her somewhere?

"Where's Cora?" she said.

"Cora? Oh, I wasn't fortunate enough to find your girl. Instead, I found this." He held out the medicine pouch in front of him.

"I figure this is nearly as good. Do you know why we came after your girl? She's been stealing from Ashe Hall. We found her cache in the sugar-house. She left a little weave on top of it. A little magic, hmm? Maybe it was your stash? It doesn't matter. One of you, no, I think both of you stole that stuff. Yeah."

"I don't know anything about that. Cora wouldn't steal..."

"Oh, no, not your girl. It doesn't matter what you say. Walker Bowe won't care who stole it, as long as we catch a thief. Funny how you innocents tried to escape through the corn. And when everyone finds out about what's been done to Samuel and probably Hebert..."

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Mama Rose knew that he had trapped her. Thievery was regarded worse than murder, depending on the person killed. No worker would believe that she or Cora was innocent. Especially after they learned what happened to Hebert and Samuel. This time their fear of voodoo would work against her.

"It wasn't Cora; it was me."

"You sure you're not covering up?" He started to laugh. "Okay, having you off this plantation is enough for me. Let's see what's in this bag of yours. Maybe something stolen from Ashe Hall."

"You've got no right to go through that."

He pulled back the flap of the bag and peered inside. "What's this? Oh, I'm not likely to forget this. He pulled out the crow's foot, the one she had threatened him with. "I think I'll use this as evidence. He started to turn the bag upside down.

"You be careful. There's powerful magic in that bag." If he did dump her powders out maybe she could get a hold of something. Make him forget everything.

A wind sprang up suddenly and started to swirl around the small clearing. Dane started to shake the bag. Different coloured powders started to fall out and were swept up by the wind. He coughed suddenly. The powder spilled on him, over his clothes and in his face. Mama Rose rushed at him, taking advantage of his discomfort. She snatched at her medicine pouch. His grip was stronger. His left hand snaked out and grabbed her wrist and twisted it sharply. She knelt from the pain and cried out. He tossed the bag free of the clearing.

"Looks like Walker Bowe will have to take my word for it that I caught myself a thief." He raised his fist and began to beat her.

The wind picked up. Dane looked up suddenly, startled by someone entering the clearing. Cora stood in front of both of them holding the medicine pouch. The look on her face was terrifying. There was such a look of anger in her eyes, on her face. It was ferocious. Dane shot her a look that would have withered most men.
It had no effect on Cora.

"You stop, she said. "You let Mama Rose go!" She stepped forward and stuffed her hand into the pouch. She pulled out a handful of powders. She flung them at him, a wash of red and purple and brown. He threw Mama Rose to the ground in his attempt to escape. The powders hit and clung to him. He blinked and fell backward, trying to maintain his balance. Cora flung another handful at him and when it hit, there was a brilliant flash. A white pure fire sprang up around Dane Thewes. He didn't have time to scream. He was engulfed in a white hot flame; his face and body contorted with such an absolute pain. Mama Rose had to turn away. When she looked back, the body of Dane Thewes had been burned black; his skin ruptured with blisters and charred.

Cora began to shake. Mama Rose went over to her and held her in her arms. It took a long while for her to reach any sort of calm.

They buried the body beneath Mama Rose's tree, in the clearing where she danced with the rain. Cora was taciturn while they filled in the hole. Mama Rose had so many things to tell her. What she had done was extraordinary and awful. Cora's magic was immensely strong. She should be coached, taught to use it responsibly.

"I was proud of you today," she said. Was there any way to tell her what she had done, of the force of her magic? Mama Rose decided to leave it alone. Cora was intelligent enough to come to some kind of terms with what had happened. She was old enough to know right from wrong. Besides, she had done it to protect her, not for some kind of whimsy.

"Thank-you," she said. Cora came to her and Mama Rose took her in her arms. They would be fine.

The second harvest was an ample one. The disappearance of Dane Thewes was a troublesome one for the workers, but Walker Bowe seemed to take it in stride. After a brief investigation, Walker concluded that Dane must have left the plantation: no body was
found. There was talk of voodoo involved, but no sensible person would ever acknowledge such a claim. It did seem a mystery as to why Dane would leave, but Walker wasn't too upset. Hebert, the Cajun, disappeared shortly after, as did Samuel. Some of the negro workers told Walker they had seen Hebert, leading Samuel away from the plantation, heading for the Bayou. New men were hired to run things, and Thomas Reilly was promoted to overseer. A week before the harvest began, Mama Rose held another dance. This time, it ran undisturbed in the clearing with the tree. The nights were beginning to cool off again, and the fire burned brightly underneath a sky filled with crisp, swift clouds and a moon full of light. When Cora danced, she told the story about a young woman and a white man who fell in love and had a child. She told of how lies are sometimes necessary for love and how secrets can become lost by becoming truths.

The dance ran the entirety of the night. When dawn made its first furtive appearance, Mama Rose sat with Cora in the fading light of the fire. There was no need for words between them. Each was proud with their dancing and how everyone shared in a reminder of how things used to be. It gave them all strength when the dancing ended because they knew that with the returned strength of their voices, things were inevitably changed. Some things were not better, nor worse, just changed and entirely unforeseen.

In their silence, Cora felt an unspeakable strength between herself and Mama Rose. She concentrated on a few embers glowing in the bed of the fire. The fire had burned hot all night, devouring everything thrown into it. She knew how hot a fire could get and how it could burn something utterly. Miraculously, she watched as a small, fat spider made its way slowly from the charred remains of a log and walked clear of the fire's radius. It crawled toward her and climbed on her foot and sat on her toe. How could it survive in all that heat? she thought. She let it stay there a few moments then shook it off. She stood slowly and smiled tiredly at her aunt. She had to return to Ashe Hall so she could prepare breakfast for Walker Bowe and Miss Angelique. He told her to make
their breakfasts big because he wanted Miss Angelique to start eating more.

Mama Rose watched as Cora walked away from the clearing. She had things to do as well, but she decided that they would wait. She wanted to see the colours of the sky as the sun rose.
Vita Auctoris

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