

the brandy I was sure he'd taken, he'd know the difference between breathing air and water.

I don't know how we reached the shore which had looked so close yet ever receded as we swam toward it. The darkness came down all at once like a thick black cloth. I don't remember when we lost the boom, how often we reached toward each other and found only the water, or how many waves broke over us and lifted us to terrifying heights.

How long it took us, I'll never know. But even now I can feel the urgency of our struggle, the hope that delivered me from the depths and brought me up to air again and again as though most of my true life had taken place in that stretch of sea.

The Old Man

WHEN WE AWOKE, IT MUST HAVE BEEN IN THE first light of morning. The tranquil sea was turning from gray to a mild blue as the sun's pale rays spread out over the water.

I breathed in the land smells, earth and trees and the sharp salty aroma of sea wrack.

But chickens! I suspected my own hunger had made me imagine I smelled them. I lay still, grateful for the thin warmth of the sun. Something ran across my ankle. It tickled, and I sat up and saw a crab no bigger than my thumb. The boy, still dressed in the woman's undergarment, lay a few feet away. He was sniffing the air.

"Chickens?" I wondered aloud. The boy said a word in his own language and smiled. We got up, both of us brushing off patches of sand that had dried on us. He started to pull off

the garment when something caught his attention in the long defile of palms above the beach. I looked. Behind the palms was the thick dark green of what appeared to be impenetrable underbrush. There was no wind at all, only a great stillness.

Chickens! It was no imagining. Out from the trees, bobbing its head as it clucked came a large yellow hen. *People*, I thought. My knees began to tremble. That feathered lump meant farm and man, and I was afraid.

I stood poised for flight, waiting for the chicken's owner to make his appearance, armed with pistol and whip—God knows what else! The chicken scratched the sand. I grabbed the boy's arm and pointed down the beach. But he continued to stare at the creature as it advanced in our direction. Suddenly he grabbed up a stone, then looked at me inquiringly. How I wanted to nod *yes*! It was such a plump chicken! But I shook my head vigorously and waved at the trees. He took my thought and dropped the stone, then he hitched up the skirt of the undergarment and we started off down the beach. We had nearly gained the point, when a voice called out, "Stop!" But we kept right on going until we were on the small neck of land and could see to the other side. I saw with dismay that there was no beach, only a line of steep-faced rocks covered with hair-like ferns. We stopped dead. There was no place to go except into the water. Dreading what I would see,

I turned. To my astonishment, an elderly black man stood watching us from near the place where we had slept, and where I could still make out the faint outlines of our bodies in the sand. Beside him was his harbinger, the yellow hen, her head cocked. She grabbed up something, and I guessed it was the crab which had so recently ascended my ankle.

I looked at the boy. His face was radiant. But the glow was gone almost instantly. He must have realized that although the old man's clothes were ragged, they were those of white men.

The old man began to come toward us with slow steps. We went to meet him. I could not think what to say, how to explain the circumstances which had brought us to this shore. I wished the boy and I had landed on one of those uninhabited islands Purvis had told me about—out of the reach of others—for I found a bottomless distrust in my heart for anything that walked on two legs. It was the old man who broke the silence.

"Where you going? Where you come from?" He looked at me quickly, then away. I observed how carefully he began to study the black boy. Then, when I hadn't answered, not being able to find words, he said, "Well, master?"

"No!" I croaked. "I'm not his master."
The old man reached out and took the boy's arm and

turned him around. Then he pulled the woman's garment off him. He touched some old scars on the boy's back.

"Our ship sank in the storm," I said. "We swam to shore."

The old man nodded and released the boy. "Where are the others?" he asked.

"There was the crew," I said. "They drowned." I looked out at the sea. There was nothing.

Everything marched at dead measure. The sun's heat had grown stronger, and I was suddenly aware of my thirst.

"We haven't eaten for a long time," I said. "We've had no water, either, and we don't know where we are."

"You in Mississippi," said the old man, looking at the boy. "He don't say nothing. Why is that?"

"He speaks his own language," I replied, wondering if we would, at least, get something to drink. There must be food and drink there in the forest. The old man had come from *some* place. "But he's not learned our language yet," I added.

"Our language . . ." echoed the old man.

"My name is Jessie Bollier," I said desperately. The old man seemed to be weighing us, deciding . . .

"What's his name?" he asked.

I touched the black boy's hand. He tore his gaze away

from the old man. I pointed to myself. "Jessie," I said. Then I pointed to him. "Jessie?" he questioned.

"What's your name?" I asked the old man. He looked out at the water. He would not find a trace of *The Moonlight*. During the night, it must have been carried off whatever had held it up and was now resting on the bottom. He had not answered my question. I turned again to the boy, pointed at myself and repeated my name. Then I touched his shoulder. This time he said clearly, "Rasi!"

I walked away from him. "Rasi!" I called. "Jessie," he answered.

The old man made up his mind. "You come with me now," he said. He walked up toward the palms, grabbing up the chicken without changing his pace. It squawked with rage. We followed. There was nothing else we could do. He might give us something to drink.

I would not have imagined there was anything like a path in the forest, but there was, just a slight indentation wide enough for a foot. The old man kept looking back at the boy. He took special care to see we were not whipped by the close growing branches, holding them until we had passed. He led us for perhaps a quarter of a mile, then halted for no apparent reason and dropped the hen to the ground. She ran off into a thicker, clucking indignantly.

"She go where she pleases," said the old man. "I spared her so far."

Then with both hands, he grabbed up a great tharch of branches and thrust it aside. To my surprise, a large clearing was revealed. In the center was a small hut and a few yards of spaded earth and to one side, a pig pen, where a sow nursed a number of piglets while a giant pig grunted and rolled in the mud. A few chickens scratched in the dirt. The old man led us to a large cask nearly full of water. He handed a dipper full to Ras, then held the boy's hand and pressed it and said softly, "Slow, slow . . ."

Ras finished and held out the dipper to me. At the first taste of the dank cool water I forgot all else and drank steadily until the old man shook me and drew me away from the cask. "That's enough," he said.

He took us into his hut. The earth floor was hard and smooth. I saw a crude hearth with a few blackened pots and utensils grouped around it. A tree trunk served as a table. On the floor, there was a bed of straw and leaves.

I sank to the floor, resting my back against the wall. Ras remained standing, watching the old man set out food for us on the tree-trunk table.

On land at last, in a silence broken only by insects chirring, warmed by the damp breathless heat of the forest around

us, resting on a surface that remained steady, about to assuage my hunger, I couldn't understand the heaviness that weighed me down, that made it so difficult to breathe. I wanted—and this made me wonder if I'd really lost my wits—to be dropped in the mud with the pig outside, to roll in the wet dirt, to bury myself in it. I wanted to cry.

How soon before the bodies of the crew would be washed up on the sand? Would I look once more at Ben Stout's face drying out in the sun? I felt again the violent heaving water through which Ras and I had struggled to the shore. How had I done it with my dog's pawing? Suddenly, I heard an inner voice crying out "Oh, swim!" as it had whenever I'd thought of my father sinking among the dead drowned trees in the Mississippi River. I wondered if it was that plea that had served me so well at last.

A few days later, when Ras and I and the old man were walking on the beach, we found a few things from *The Moonlight*, Ben Stout's waterlogged Bible, pieces of Ned Grime's bench and many odd pieces of wood which the old man gathered and piled up out of the reach of the tide. I found, drying out in the sun and buzzed over by small biting flies, a long piece of rope.

"You won't find nobody," the old man said to me. "The sharks will crack their bones. They don't leave nothing."

I was thinking of rope, how, leading up to the topmost sail, it had hummed with life, how, stretched and taut, it had guided or restrained the sails just as bridles and reins guide and restrain horses. I picked it up and waved away the cloud of insects. The rope smelled of decay.

I had not eaten much at our first meal, but I made up for that in the next few days. One night, the old man made a stew of okra and greens and ham. Ras and I ate until the food ran down our chins and we were covered with grease. He pointed at me and laughed. I drew my finger along his chin, showing him the ham fat that had collected on his cheeks. He laughed harder. It was still daylight. The birds were calling each other to sleep. The old man smiled—very slightly—and rose to light an oil lamp. I took the pot outside and scoured it with sand. Then Ras and I squatted near the hut. A huge beaked bird flew above us toward the dying light in the west. I heard from far off the great breathing of the sea, taken in, expelled. We sat there until dark when the bugs drove us inside.

Ras and I talked together, knowing we couldn't understand each other. Sometimes, pointing to a tree or a bird or some feature of his face, he would slowly pronounce a word. I would repeat it, then say it in English. In this fashion we learned a few words of each other's languages. The old man

had given us clothes, and though they didn't fit in a way that would have won my mother's admiration, we were at least dressed.

The old man was entirely dependent upon the little patch of ground he had planted and his few animals for the sustaining of his life. He was seldom idle. I wondered at some of the things he had in his hut, where they had come from. I knew by then he must be an escaped slave who had founded for himself this tiny place of liberty deep in the forest. Often I felt we were as remote from other people as we would have been on a deserted island.

At the end of the first week, the old man told me his name. A piglet had gotten out from under the fence. I chased it, crying "Old man! Old man!" He caught up with me in the thick undergrowth, swooped down on the piglet, saying at the same time, "You can call me Daniel."

I could tell by looking at Ras that we were both gaining weight. I began to feel the return of my strength. We rose at dawn and went to sleep with the birds. Daniel cautioned us not to go too far from the hut and to be careful and watch out for snakes. We brought to the hut the wood held collected on the beach, and we fetched water to keep the cask full from a nearby stream. There were always chores to be done. But there were games and idle times. We hid from each other and

sought each other out; we built a small shelter out of fallen branches; we chased the chickens until Daniel stropped us. It was a time without measure in which no thought of the future intruded, when the memory of the past was put aside for a while.

One evening, Daniel rested his hand on Ras's head. The boy looked up at him questioning. Daniel parted him gently. Watching them both from the doorway, I shivered.

The very next night, I learned what was to happen to Ras. After we'd cleaned up the pots from dinner and Daniel had lit the lamp, I heard a footstep. The sow grunted. Daniel went outside. He spoke at some length to someone. Then he came back and said, "You be quiet, Jessie. I want you to sit outside. Here. Take this and wrap it around you against the bugs." He handed me a dusty cloak. I shook it out. A smell of mildew rose from its creases. "Don't look so scared, boy," said Daniel. "Nothing bad is going to happen to you."

Standing at the edge of the clearing were two black men. They watched me go to the pig pen and sit down against the fence, then they entered the hut. For a long time I strained to make sense out of the murmur of voices inside. I felt pitiful and alone, then the pig came and lay down behind me on the other side of the fence and grunted softly. I grunted back.

It was better than talking to myself. I must have dozed for a while. I heard Daniel speaking from the doorway, "Come back now, Jessie."

When I entered the hut, I saw the two men had gone. Ras was squatting on the floor, his fingers tracing some design on it.

"What's going to happen?" I asked.

"We're going to get him out of here," he said. "We got a way of taking him north, far from this place. One of those men speaks his language. Look at him! See how he's thinking?"

Ras was looking at me now but I might as well have been invisible. He didn't see me at all.

"He's going to be all right," Daniel said as he sat on the straw bed. He was rubbing his ankle. Beneath his fingers, I caught a glimpse of an old scar.

"And me?" I asked.

"You got to go home to your family," he said. "You rested up now. It'll take you a few days walking."

"When is Ras—"

"He's going tomorrow soon as it gets dark. They coming for him."

Daniel got up suddenly and walked to where Ras was sitting. He took the boy's hand in his own.

"You be all right," he said over and over again in a kind of lullaby.

On our last morning together, Ras and I went down to the beach. We found, resting amid the sea wrack at the high water line, a curved piece of the ship's bow.

Ras was quiet, given to long silent staring pauses when he stopped whatever he was doing and went off into a private vision of his own. We stayed close to each other all that day.

Daniel made us a pudding of yams for supper. Ras had little appetite, but the old man kept heaping food on his plate with a pleading look on his face. I saw Ras try; he knew he had to eat.

At dark, one of the two men came back. Daniel had made a packer of food which he gave to Ras. He had dressed in clothes the man had brought him and they fitted him well. I wondered to whom the clothes belonged, and where *he* was. Ras looked taller—almost unknown. He and the young man who'd come to fetch him spoke infrequently. Whatever would happen to him now, Ras was resolved, tight with intention. I could tell it by the way he determinedly struck his narrow feet into black boots, the way he took the food from Daniel's hands, the way his glance rested constantly on the doorway. Daniel bent over him. I saw Ras's arms slide around his back, his hands resting on the old man's shoulders. Then he came to me.

"Jessie?" he said.

I nodded, uneasy under the expressionless stare of the young man.

"Nose," said Ras as he touched my nose.

I smiled then. He placed a finger against my front teeth.

"Teef," he said.

"Teeth," I corrected.

Ras laughed and shook his head. "Teef," he said again, and then, gravely, "Jessie."

He was gone in an instant. Daniel and I were alone.

I felt such a hollowness then, and the awakening of the memory, asleep these last weeks, of the voyage of *The Moonlight*. My mouth went dry. I sat on the floor and hid my head in my arms.

"Come here," said Daniel.

I looked up. He was sitting on his straw bed. I got up and went to him.

"Now, sit down, Jessie. And tell me the whole story of that ship."

I told him, leaving out nothing I could remember, from the moment when Purvis and Sharkey had wrapped me in that canvas to the moment when Ras and I had slid into the water from the sinking ship.

When I had finished, the old man said, "That's the way

it was," as though everything I had described was only what he already had known.

I wanted to ask him if he too had come in that same way to this country, but something held me back. I asked him nothing.

"That boy, he be safe soon," said Daniel. "Now you go to sleep. You need your rest. You got to start before light. Listen, boy!" He stopped speaking and looked at my face intently. The lamp was low, and now the hut was like a clearing in the forest lit only by the last burning twig of a campfire. The shadows deepened the sockets of his eyes. He seemed very old.

"If you tell your people about Daniel," he said, "Daniel will be taken back to the place he run away from. Are you going to tell them?"

"No, no!" I cried. I yearned to show him my resolve as though it were a thing like a shoe or a hoe that I could put in his hand.

"All right," he said. I couldn't tell if he believed me or not. He woke me before the birds began their twittering. I dressed in the dark in the clothes he had given me. But I had no boots. He said, "You wrap your feet in these rags. They make it easier for you to get through the woods."

I bound my feet with the strips of cloth he handed me.

"Now listen sharp. I'm going to tell you how you get home."

Slowly, often stopping to make me repeat what he had said, he drew a chart of words that would lead me home to New Orleans.

I looked out into the woods. It was utterly dark.

"Here," said Daniel, as he handed me a packet. "Something to eat," he said. I heard a grunt from the pig pen, a few squeals from the piglets, a drowsy cluck from a hen.

"Thank you, Daniel," I said.

"I hope you have a safe journey," he said.

I wanted him to touch my head as he had Ras's. But his arms remained unmoving at his sides. I looked into his face. He didn't smile. The distance between us lengthened even as I stood there, listening to his breathing, aware of a powerful emotion, gratitude mixed with disappointment. I thought of Purvis.

"Go on, now," he said.

I stepped out of the hut. Daniel had saved my life. I couldn't expect more than that.

fire. The smell of the ashes had been revived by the morning dew. I was comforted as though I'd met someone whom Daniel and I knew.

When the sun had risen to its zenith, I came to a rutted road where farm wagons had left their wheel tracks. The forest had thinned to a few sparse clumps of trees, and I saw the sea glittering a quarter of a mile away. Once, as I was crossing a scraggy meadow, I startled a small flock of brown birds which rose like an arch beneath which I glimpsed a great white sail on the sea. I wondered what sort of ship she was—and what she carried in her holds.

In the late afternoon, I passed through a marsh where I was surrounded by loops and circles of still water on the surface of which floated patches of flowers, and where long-legged birds gazed down at their reflections with grave looks. I was the only human being abroad. The sky seemed immense.

That night, I ate a portion of the food Daniel had prepared for me, and made myself as comfortable as I could in an abandoned wagon, its shaft aimed at the sky. I felt like a fool, but before climbing under it I had tossed stones at it to frighten away the snakes I was sure were nesting there.

Daniel's markers drew me through the second day—one was a curious pile of stones on each one of which was painted a human figure; another was a tiny gray cabin far off

Home and After

I WAS FRIGHTENED IN THE WOODS, IN THE DARK.

The path was no more than a tracing on the thick underbrush. With my bound feet, I often had to stop and feel around with my fingers until I found it again. In my wake, birds woke with sharp cries and complaints. The dawn's light was still too weak to penetrate the forest, although when I looked straight up, I could see the paling of the sky.

I was caught between the urge to move as rapidly as I could and to stay right where I was until daylight. What I dreaded, what turned my forehead damp with sweat, was a vision of snakes beneath the brush, snakes like strings of wet brown beads, or thick like the weathered gray hafts of axes, or brilliantly colored like precious stones.

Then I came to Daniel's first marker, a small clearing near a trickle of stream where someone had recently built a

at the edge of a field. There was nothing to shelter me that night. I simply lay down on the ground. Before daylight, I was awakened by the soft close chittering of some little field animal which ran right across my chest.

On the third morning, I woke to mist and heat. The wagon runs had disappeared. Instead, at regular intervals as though they'd been embroidered, were the distinct shapes of horses' hooves. On my left, the fields ran down to the sea where they ended at low sand hills. On my right were woods but these were tamed woods, more like a vast park. A low stone wall ran along the side of the dirt road. I followed along it until I came to the place where two tall columns marked the beginning of another road which ran straight as a plumb line to the steps of a great plantation house. A small lizard the color of blood ran up one of the columns, then stopped and played dead.

Splendid flowers bloomed along that road. The wide porch of the house was empty. Not a leaf moved in the windless air. Then, all at once, a man on a black horse rode into view. He halted. The horse pawed the ground then flung up its head. At that, as though summoned by the horse, three black men ran to the rider and helped him dismount. They dashed before him up the steps to open the doors while a fourth man led away the horse.

I forgot I was in full view—as they were. I saw the doors close behind the rider. The windows reflected nothing. There was no sign of life. The lizard ran down the column. I felt frozen, choked, as I had that first time on *The Moonlight* when I'd been summoned by Captain Cawthorne to dance the slaves. Then I heard a dog bark from far away, and I bounded down the road like a rabbit that has regained control of its limbs.

Later, the sky turned the color of soot. The rain began, slowly, hesitatingly, until the sky opened up and the water fell in sheets. I sheltered beneath a hedge, soaked through, watching the road turn to mud. I knew I could not be far from home now. To my dismay, I felt I could go no further. The water blinded me. It roared in my ears. I was filled with an apprehension that had no reasonable shape in my mind. It spread around me like a dark sea. I did not think my legs would move when I wished them to. Suddenly, moved by an obscure impulse, I held my breath. Somewhere, someone had once told me that there were people who could choke off their lives by an act of will. I toppled sideways and lay exposed to the rain. But I was breathing. I couldn't not breathe.

At twilight, the rain stopped and the sky cleared. From every blade of grass, from every leaf, hung glittering drops. My spirits revived. I tore off the rags from around my feet and continued down the road, mud oozing between my toes. I was

hungry now but hunger didn't surprise me as it might have once. I slept that night in a fishing boat upturned on a narrow beach bordering an inlet. The last morning of my journey, I was awakened to bright sunlight by small buzzing flies.

By late afternoon, I was walking down Chartres Street toward Jackson Square. I looked like a muddy scarecrow but I didn't attract much attention, only a warning look from a lady sliding along beneath her parasol, and a vague smile from a riverboat captain who, having long since begun his day's drinking, allowed everything strange to amuse him.

I opened the door to our room as I had done in my imagination a hundred times. I took my first step inside. I heard a shriek, a cry. Betty and my mother and I stood silently for a moment, then we ran toward each other with such force I felt the little house shake in all its boards and bricks.

We talked through half the night. I learned of their frantic search which had followed my disappearance, how even that very day my mother had questioned vendors in the market as she had done every day since I'd been gone. My mother often wept, not only because I, whom she'd thought dead, had been returned to her, but at the story of *The Moonlight*. When I described how the slaves had been tossed into the shark-filled waters of Cuba, she covered her face with her hands and cried, "I can't hear it! I can't bear it!"

It did not take long, to my surprise, for me to slip back into my life as though I'd never left it. There were signs—brooding looks from my mother, Betty's way of speaking softly to me as though I was an invalid, and, most startling, the change in Aunt Agatha who treated me now with affection and never called me a bayou lout. My mother guessed that the shock of my disappearance had changed her into what she had once been, a slightly soured but not bad-hearted woman. I was back in my life, but I was not the same. When I passed a black man, I often turned to look at him, trying to see in his walk the man he had once been before he'd been driven through the dangerous heaving surf to a long boat, toppled into it, chained, brought to a waiting ship all narrowed and stripped for speed, carried through storms, and the bitter brightness of sun-filled days to a place, where if he had survived, he would be sold like cloth.

I found work on the Orleans Bank Canal which was to eventually connect New Orleans to Lake Pontchartrain. That might have kept me occupied and earning my keep for some time, but I grew restless and began to think about what profession would suit me, and what would be available to one who could not afford much schooling.

At first, I made a promise to myself: I would do nothing that was connected ever so faintly with the importing and

sale and use of slaves. But I soon discovered that everything I considered bore, somewhere along the way, the imprint of black hands.

With the help of an acquaintance of Aunt Agatha's, I was finally apprenticed to an apothecary. It would be a different future from the one I had once envisaged when I had wanted to become a rich chandler.

When my apprenticeship was finished, I went north and settled in a small town in the state of Rhode Island. Eventually, I sent for Betty and my mother. We were out of the south, but it was not out of me. I missed the sharp sweet smell of fruit lying in the sun in the stalls of the great market, and I dreamed of the long muddy Mississippi and languorous green twilights and the old amber and apricot colored walls of the houses of the rich in the *Veux Carré*. I knew that some part of my memory was always looking for Ras. Once, in Boston, I thought I really saw him, and I ran after a tall slender young black man walking along in front of me. But it was not he.

In the war between the states, I fought on the Union side and a year after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1864, I spent three months in Andersonville, surviving its horrors, I often thought, because I'd been prepared for them on *The Moonlight*.

After the war, my life went on much like my neighbors' lives. I no longer spoke of my journey on a slave ship back in 1840. I did not often think of it myself. Time softened my memory as though it was kneading wax. But there was one thing that did not yield to time.

I was unable to listen to music. I could not bear to hear a woman sing, and at the sound of any instrument, a fiddle, a flute, a drum, a comb with paper wrapped around it played by my own child, I would leave instantly and shut myself away. For at the first note of a tune or of a song, I would see once again as though they'd never ceased their dancing in my mind, black men and women and children lifting their tormented limbs in time to a reedy martial air, the dust rising from their joyless thumping, the sound of the fife finally drowned beneath the clanging of their chains.