

Saturday night, after Joah stopped whipping me, he dropped his razor strop on my back and walked away. I was tied down with no view at all, but I could hear all right, heard him pour a drink. Rum, I reckoned, on account we kept a barrel of it right there in the kitchen. I wished it was for me, I was the one need of it, but by then I knew better.

Next I heard him settle in his wing chair right near where my feet were tied, swilling rum and breathing hard, like whipping me took a toll on him. I never in my life known him so out of sorts. I couldn't tell if he was resting up to hit me some more or if he was finally finished.

I hurt so bad. Head pounding, eyes burning, belly tight like a rock. Something drooled out my mouth, but I couldn't pull away from it. Plus I was too tired to move, more tired than I ever been. In my whole life, I never got whipped before.

I could've begged him to let me up. All I had to do was promise never to sneak out again. But I wasn't about to make that promise, not in this life. Nothing, not even Joah's razor strop, going to keep me from Milla, I thought then.

Plus, I never sneaked out. I just did what I always did, and there wasn't a damn thing wrong with it for Joah to get so tore up about. Weren't no crime to visit Milla. He just upped and changed the rules for no seeable reason.

I was shivering, but my backside burned like he laid hot coals on it. The pain soaked down deep into me till I was all played out, like a jellyfish washed up on the beach.

Together Our Whole Life

Jellyfish got me to thinking about the beach—the one over toward Gulfport, where me and Joah used to go in summer. Remembrance of them outings took me off that cursed table for a breather. I don't favor country, but the shore's different, all winter I pined for beach days. The suppers Momma packed us--jerky, pickles, green tomatoes, rye bread dripping with goose-fat--I could near taste them. And feel the sand tickling between my toes. Me and Joah dunking each other, water so cold it sucked your breath out. Hiding from sun showers under a tree. You maybe won't like this, but when we came on a stranded jellyfish, we piled up sand on it till it was buried out of sight, else took a stick and flicked it back in the water.

In my head I was thinking Joah, we been together our whole life. Those years should matter. Is washed-up jellyfish all that's left?

I tried to stay at the beach, calm, breathing deep from my belly like Joah showed me. But then my arms cramped up. I got scared, lost my breath altogether, shook all over. I tried to pull out them straps, but I couldn't move. I never got tied down before and needed to get free. I said please Master Joah, please let me up. Let me help you to bed and forget all about this.

But all he said was shut up. Shut up, Jacob, unless you want more.

Then he got up and poured himself more rum, put out the fire, took the Betsy lamp, and left me tied there in the cold and dark.

Sunday morning something pressing on my shoulder startled me awake.

I figured it was Joah, so I didn't cry out in pain; back then, I still had some pride in me. "A little pride keeps you alive," Momma always said. "Too much can kill you."

A voice came at me all hushed and worshipful, like at a funeral: "The Jew did some work on you, boy."

That sure weren't Joah.

With no warning what felt like a finger drilled down on my back, paining me like a hornet. I twisted and squirmed to see who's jabbing me, but tied as I was, I could see no more than I could last night. About all's I did see was a slice in the tabletop, a white gash snaking across the dark wood finish. With Joah so finicky about his possessions, I hoped I could cover it over with boot blacking or something. Fixing my own rump, I supposed, would be more troublesome.

Another jab. Some stranger poking at me and not a blessed thing I could do about it. I near cried out for Joah, but stopped myself; no way I'd give him the satisfaction. Nothing ever in all my twenty-three years prepared me for this. Past the tabletop, dust motes drifted down in the sunlight, slow, like when the snow up North first starts falling. I thought maybe it's a bad dream, but the way the sun sliced in, I allowed I was awake all right, and slept well into morning. Milla'd already be off to church--unless she stayed back for once, to learn what happened to me. I hoped she was waiting for me, that'd please me.

Another poke. I needed to get free and feel my backside myself, see in the mirror what damage Joah'd done. "You think there'll be scars?" I asked the voice.

In my whole life I'd got but one scar on me, on my shin, from falling like a fool in Rickwood Cave, and I didn't fancy another.

"Nope. No scars," the voice said. It came at me deep, with authority, but dreary, like ages ago it gave up caring. "Skin ain't broke," it droned. Sounded like an old rabbi, maybe the same one from Joah's grandma's funeral, but that made no sense, some rabbi in here poking me.

Whoever it was bore down again, off toward the side where it hurt worst, and I couldn't help but squeal. Came out loud and high like some pig or little kid, no way for a grown man to sound. But the stranger paid me no heed, kept poking away. "If you was any darker, these welts'd scar up like rope," he said. "But month out, these'll be plumb gone."

"You seem to know a lot about it," I said, armpits soaked, shivers and gooseflesh all up my backside. "Scars and welts and such."

"It's my line of work."

"What line of work might that be?"

"Patroller, boy. Patrolman Grimm. Sir to you."

I never trafficked much with coppers--they wouldn't dare pester Joah Mannheim's people--so I reckoned this must be the same one from last night that helped Joah drag me out of Milla's and tie me down here. But that one never spoke a word, so I couldn't say for sure.

I heard him plop himself down on Joah's wing chair--after last night, I knew that sound better than I cared to--so I took stock of myself. Neck moved all right, and I could roll my shoulders and flex my butt, and thighs, calves, and

wiggle my toes; I figured I weren't wounded bad. I needed to get out of there quick, get back to Milla; after all the ruckus, she'd be plenty worried. Seems I spend my whole life trying to keep women from fretting about me--first Momma, now Milla, too. I said, "Please, Sir, could you let me up now?"

"Not yet," he grunted. He slapped something--his belly, I guessed, from the deep sound of it. "Be some time before I need to loose you."

He had plans for me? By what right? Weren't fitting for a stranger to know more about what's in store for you than you know yourself, and Sunday my day off, too. Joah never took away my Sunday before. Milla'd be beside her wits, and if I didn't show up in time for Sunday dinner, Momma would be, too. I had to get up off that table.

For years I watched Joah boodle coppers, and I made Grimm an offer: "I give you two dollars, Sir, you let me up now." I was willing to go higher.

He kind of hesitated. "Hmm...Two dollars a lot of money..." he muttered, "...from the likes of *you*." Said it like I'm scum. Went silent for a bit, and then he said, "I don't see no money on you."

I told him my money's in the bedroom--Master Joah's sleeping room.

"Oh." Clacked his tongue, said too bad, I can't go in there.

Says who? Why not? And me so cocksure a bribe would work. Best try something else. "I got to use the necessary, Sir."

"Don't lie to me, boy," he snapped. "Way you been beat, anything in you come out already."

“Oh.” I hadn’t meant to turn him ornery. Crazy, some stranger thinking he knows more about my innards than me. “You must be right, Sir,” I said. “You sure know a lot about these things.”

“It’s my line of work,” he said again, like he was right proud of it. Kept patting his belly, too, like he was proud of that as well. “Now shut up and leave me be.”

“Yes, Sir.” I counted to five, took a breath, and added, “Master Joah’d be upset fierce if there was an accident in his kitchen.”

“Jesus Lord, all right already,” he growled. He untied my wrists. “Lay steady till I tell you sit up.” Freed my ankles. “Now rise up slow.”

I righted myself and sat up facing him, trying not to grin over besting him like that. Dizzy as I was, I saw right clear it was the same copper from last night. Big-bellied as a rich man--and worn, his eyes glazed over like death come on him early. Scary, those eyes; made me fearful to ask where Joah was.

He helped me down off the table and held me steady while I took my first wobbly steps, but his breath and body odor didn’t sit well; I backed away. “I’ll be OK now, Sir. Thank you.”

He loosened his hold, but when I started to untie the straps, he smacked my wrist with no more care than swatting a fly. “Leave them be,” he told me. “We’ll need them soon enough.”

What in tarnation for? And what gives him the right to hit me? Made me mad, but I didn’t say anything, just left out the kitchen. The tethers bounced against me, irritating, like a fool costume Joah’d have me wear to Vixen--the kind

of night I'd sooner set behind me, thank you, least while Milla's on my mind. On my way to the chamber, I planned to find Joah, get things settled, and rid myself of Grimm.

The copper trailed me to the sitting room, but froze at the threshold like he saw a gate there. Likely cause that room's so elegant--leastwise in Joah's estimation. Empire-style he calls it, most everything black and gold. Hard to keep clean, I call it.

As I headed toward the chamber, I peeped into Joah's bedroom. But I didn't find Joah in there, just my bed all smashed up in the corner. When I got back to the sitting room, more troubled than relieved, Grimm nodded up at the chandelier. It's this huge thing, Federal-style Joah says, three whole tiers of crystal prisms long as your fingers. Burns whale oil, came all the way from Europe, cost a lot. "How long's it take to light that thing?" he asked.

I couldn't believe Joah put some lowlife lamplighter in charge of me. "Just a minute or two, Sir."

He pointed at Joah's *chaises longues*. Two of them, ebony frames all shiny, covered in the same black damask as the drapes, only the drapes have gold fringe where they swag.

"You ever sit on them?"

"No, Sir," I lied. Made me recollect the first time I did sit on them. Happened last spring, bit after I met Milla. Joah lurched home one night more soused than usual, collapsed on a chaise, and ordered up oysters and brandy.

When I brought them out, he told me sit on the other chaise and have some oysters. At first, I wiggled in my seat.

“Read to me,” he said. I always sat cross-legged on the floor when I read to him, but that night I settled in on the chaise, eased up, and read him the day’s gossip. He fidgeted, then jumped up and played waltzes on the harpsichord while I just lolled back, stretched out like a white man, shucking oysters and drinking brandy. It was strange. Now this? Made no sense.

“Never seen any place like this,” Grimm said. “A Jew palace.” He sized me up like he had Joah’s furniture, probably wondering how much I cost. “You a Jew?” he asked.

Made me laugh. “No, Sir.”

He muttered something and turned back into the kitchen. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing to a glass thing by the stove, shape of a figure eight.

He was full of questions, like a little kid. “Makes coffee, Sir,” I explained. We carried it here all the way from Princeton; Joah said it made the best coffee.

“Humph. No cowboy pot, that,” the copper said. “A Jew pot.” He sniggered at his own joke and poured the cold coffee into a mug. “Here, drink this.”

I brewed it--strong Arabica coffee, no less--Friday morning, and I couldn’t fathom swallowing those greasy dregs. “Got to heat the whole stove for that, Sir.”

“No time, boy. Drink it cold.”

What’s the rush?

He unwrapped a hunk of rye from brown paper and tossed it to me. “Eat this. You’ll need nourishment.”

I wrapped that bread Thursday when it was already stale, for Milla and me to feed the birds in Congo Park today. I wouldn’t offer it to a beggar. “Please, Sir,” I pleaded. “I’d rather go hungry.”

“You never been hungry in your whole damn life,” he griped.

“That’s true, Sir,” I said. But I reckoned this’d be a ripe time to try.

I just stood there till he stormed over and thumped my chest. “Eat up like I told you, damn it.” Another thump. They hurt. “And shut up.” He plopped back down in Joah’s chair.

No one but Joah had the right to hit me like that--but what was I supposed to do? My face blushed hot, like when I was a sick little boy and Momma made me swill down castor oil. Used to be I’d fuss about it till she got all worked up and acting funny; then I’d go ahead and down the stuff. A little mischief keeps you alive, I decided early on; too much, I don’t know, can’t say I ever tried it.

But weren’t like I’d fuss at Grimm, so I forced down his muddy coffee and gnawed his stale bread. When I finished, he lobbed a paper sack at me from off the floor. “Put these on,” he said.

“No, please, Sir. I’ll wear my own clothes,” I told him. But my clothes from last night weren’t nowhere in sight.

Grimm said, “Put on what I give you, boy, and shut up already.”

I dumped out the bag on the floor. The drawers and stockings were missing. Besides, nobody but Joah ever told me what to wear. Where was Joah,

anyhow? This foolishness had to stop. “I can’t wear these, Sir. Please. Master Joah be shamed for me to be seen in these clothes.”

“Put them on, boy. And Jesus sakes, button your goddam mouth ’fore I smack it shut.”

I stood still, figured let him hit me again, I don’t care. I got my pride. I drunk his nasty coffee and ate his moldy bread and what good did that do me? But I wanted to get a move on, get to Milla’s already, so I put on his clothes, and they felt all wrong. Clothes are supposed to feel good and make you proud; leastways that’s how it always been. But Grimm’s homespun blouse hung loose on me like a laughingstock and chafed my back--like it weren’t already sore enough. His trowsers stopped short on my shins, leaving my scar exposed for all the world to set eyes on. And his brogans fit no better, all floppy and rubbing against my feet. I felt like a fool for it, but I was terrified somebody who knows me might see me got up this way.

Joah never told me he was selling me.

Before we quit the kitchen, Grimm tied my hands tight behind my back and attached my ankles loose enough so I could just barely get down the stairs and shuffle out to Royal Street. Once we got outside, he never said another word to me.

Joah, done up in his grey and yellow striped suit and stovepipe hat, was out there leaning on his silver-handled walking stick, waiting for us I supposed, but with his back turned away. When we came out, he didn’t say a word, just

walked fast; Grimm pushed me to keep up. I wanted to reason with Joah, ask what's going on, how can I make it right between us? But I took my cue from him and hobbled along without talking.

It looked to me like the whole population of New Orleans had turned out for their Sunday amusement, and now I was part of the show. I stumbled past nabobs without a care in the world up on their balconies, looking down their noses at us folk below, finger-feeding their parrots they had chained to perches. We passed grandees riding in fancy broughams and phaetons while their horses plopped manure for us to slip on. White men in top hats out on parade, towing their wives in huge sun hats and their children in caps and bonnets, like headgear's going to protect them from the miasma. Fine-looking mulatto women, young and freed, their slaves--dark-skin, big-muscle, mean-looking men--balancing pastel parasols over their missus' bare heads. Families of Irishmen, Germans and freedmen decked out in sad, factory-made church clothes, trying to look respectable. Slaves on their day off dressed best as they could, pretending they're free. White couples up in the cafes for early Sunday supper. Street vendors hawking newspapers, pastries, flowers, puppies, tonics, elixirs and balms. Pigs still out from last night, yapping their mouths and running free till their owners come get them, freer than me. I'd been here hundreds of Sundays before, but never like this.

They all paid me no heed, like it's an everyday occurrence, a man in rags tied up and herded across town. The sun, bright and cheery for November, taunted me: *Fine day to take Milla to Congo Park, feed the birds.* Grimm

pushed on my welts so's I had to hustle fast, ankles turning raw, the brogans slipping in muck over wet macadam with a loud sucking sound or banging over dry paving stones like castanets, calling attention to my predicament. I was afraid Joah was leading me to jail for another whipping, but I trusted he wouldn't do that. Or would he? After last night, I couldn't say. But when he veered toward the river, I figured it isn't jail, and felt some relief.

He turned right on Decatur Street. Across the road, on the river side, greenhorn white boys, barefoot and raggedy, made a ruckus throwing stones and rubbish at each other. Scraggly black folk lined up for Sunday market, crude, hand-lettered signs hanging round their necks: "Sunday Hire," "For Rent," "For Sale." I always felt sorry for them.

A ways past the market, Joah stopped outside a storefront across from the Decatur Café and went in alone. Grimm held me outside under a green awning. The store's windows were glazed instead of shuttered and curtained at the bottom like a café; I would've peeked in to see what Joah was up to, but Grimm kept me facing out to the street. So I watched white folks eat their suppers in the restaurant. Joah would never stoop to eat in that place, but I wished I could. My stomach was growling, I needed a proper breakfast. Not likely, so I braced myself for more punishment; at the time punishment was still foreign to me and I couldn't fathom what sort I had coming.

After a time the door swung open and Grimm shoved me inside, up against a rack of guns that took up a whole wall, more guns than I ever seen in one place before. I recognized some from dusting the stock at the gallery: old-

fashioned flintlocks and muskets; newfangled Brunswicks and Enfields with long, shiny bayonets; shotguns and repeaters; fancy old short arms; and the latest Colt revolvers. I didn't suppose Joah was going to have me shot, but all those guns made me feel small.

The room was cool, like its walls were thick; and clean, and free of dust or any odor, like not much life went on in there. Called to mind the vault where I brought the Mannheims' cash in the afternoon, or the wine cellar behind their house on Canal Street where I used to sneak in girls. Sneak? No, Joah's father's plenty sharp, he knew damn well what went on back there. I wished Master Mannheim would show up then; he'd see that this punishment didn't get out of hand.

Joah'd stationed himself on a Captain's chair with his back to me, across a big leather-topped desk from a fat old white man also wearing a top hat. Words I couldn't make out passed between them, papers I couldn't read shoved back and forth for signing, all about me I supposed, and then the fat man leaned back in his chair and lit up a pipe. A meerschaum pipe, bowl the size of my fist. A blast of sulfur, and then the cloying stink of rum-soaked tobacco till it was all you could breathe.

"Bring him hither," the old man said.

Grimm untied me and pushed me forward to where I could see the man's mean little eyes. Underneath them, bags of loose wrinkles sagged down, spotted with black dots like someone'd ground peppercorns on them. Them spots stood out sore, his face being white and shiny like a fish belly. Coils of chins, no neck

to be seen--a fat rich man. Must be some kind of judge, I reckoned. I was fixing to defend myself, argue that visiting Milla weren't no crime, when Grimm whispered to me, "Do off them clothes."

My blood froze. I hadn't undressed before a white man since nipper days. I thought white men don't take to seeing black men naked; Joah never did, leastwise till last night. Even then, his nose was pressed up against the window like he couldn't be troubled to watch. *What kind of judge wants me naked?* No one in my whole life ever treated me like this. I clung to the same homespun that minutes ago shamed me and weighed up my chances of breaking out of there. Not good. Not good at all. Grimm tugged down on the trowsers like he was in a hurry to get them back, so I tore off his damn blouse myself and kicked off the nasty brogans, good riddance. Grimm kept a grip on my arms while the old man just sat there, puffed his pipe, and stared at me like Grimm did before, sizing me up like furniture.

The geezer didn't say anything, just pushed himself up out his chair, wheezing and coughing from the effort of it. His hips were wider and splayed out further back of him than any man's ought to be, like two bodies pieced together, or a man and a horse--like a creature from those Greek stories me and Joah read in Princeton. He tottered around his desk smoking like a dragon, haunches wobbling behind him, and I near laughed from the ridiculousness of it. I couldn't fathom what punishment this character might deliver on me.

"Let's see what we got," he rasped. Grimm squeezed my arms down to the bones, and the old man pried my lips apart. He shoved his hairy, yellowed

fingers into my mouth, pushing back and forth over my teeth and gums, pulling on my tongue. I near choked and twisted away to see if Joah was watching this. But then the hands moved down over my chest and belly to places no man's hands ever been or ought to be, and Grimm's grip was all that kept me from punching the man. I was mistaken; there was nothing funny here.

"Diseases?" he asked Joah.

Why would he care? He got no right. But the way they all acted, like it's normal as daybreak for a stranger to grope me like this, I weren't so sure.

Face still stuck out the window, Joah sneered, "I've hardly checked."

"He sired pups?"

None of his goddam business.

"I'm sorry, no," Joah muttered. "None I know of."

Sorry? Why's he sorry?

The old man waddled round behind me and Grimm scooted round front without relaxing his hold. The man pinched my back everywhere Joah'd whipped me till I couldn't help myself, I danced up and down and yelped in pain. He whistled and told Joah, "We best warehouse him till these welts heal up."

Joah said, "No, it's got to happen fast."

It was my first inkling that Joah was selling me. *But no, that can't be. All I did was go see Milla.* This was way worse than jail, worse than another whipping. I thought, You can't sell me, Joah. We been together our whole life.

Together Our Whole Life

The man said, “Welts’ll cost you. They make buyers nervous.”

Buyers? He’s selling me? No, Joah, please!

“How nervous?” Joah asked, calm as could be.

The man breathed deep and puffed up a cloud. “Lower the price on him... humph... much as ten percent.”

Joah said, “Fine, are we finished then?” and moved toward the door. Grimm let go of me. I started to call out, Master Joah, please don’t leave me here with nothing. Some clothes at least? But I reckoned he wouldn’t listen, so why give him the satisfaction? The old man dragged me toward a back door, while Joah and Grimm disappeared out the front.

He never said a word. No explanation, no goodbye, nothing. After we been together our whole life.