

Blue

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1867 Springfield, Arkansas

The Negro man Bailey went to the river, rolled his frayed pant legs up, and walked in. Waa'ter rippled out from his careful steps and gently moved into familiar circles which let him know he had no need to test the waa'ter like he did his freedom, Bailey smiled. Nothing of his feet could tell him the story of soft; the bottoms of each were as hardened as the rocks each encountered.

Bailey had never known shoes for more than a month in his enslaved life. This day in was no different. It was late in the afternoon, and the only hint of shade rested in the wide patch of trees on the other side of the Grove River. Bailey was feverishly hot, but not much interested in the promise offered in the distance; the cool movement of the waa'ter up to his calves would have to be enough for now; Bailey's heart had something on it that needed tenden.

He took a tin cup off a loop made of hemp plant from his pants. The loop held all that he owned: a tin cup, a small knife, and a pouch with a few seeds from a squash. Bailey bent down into the river, dipped his cup, stood up, and drank in the sweetness of the river before eagerly dipping again. Satisfied, he turned into the full face of the sun's direction going back. Back was to his woman Mary. The sun felt new to him in freedom. He closed his eyes and let the sun in. His face dark and glistening with sweat, he inhaled deeply and followed the air that went inside his nose. He opened his eyes but looked down to the warnings of going blind. He was still getting used to the sun being friendly with him.

Too hot sometimes yes, and gone too soon sometimes yes, he agreed with himself, but it was, after all, the sun. It being the sun, he knew it laid itself on everything it came upon and each thing it touched had its own understanding of the sun. It was not the first time he questioned if he might be smart, even if he could not write or recognize his own name. How often, in the time he himself as a slave in the fields, he had cursed the sun's fiery spirit. . Too many times after being chastised by the slave masters and his flesh tore open by the whipping, his pain was made worse by the sun's heat, *you saw dat right God?* A prayerful man always, he begged forgiveness for his ignorance. But then he told himself he was bent under another command of understanding. And when the sun laid itself upon his broken flesh, he cried inside, feeling most betrayed. "I cursed your sun den, God, forgive me."

He knew God would forgive him for that misunderstanding now freed, he got to know the sun differently, and in this new understanding he had no need to curse it. He knew the sun as god intended it to be a service to the earth and everything on it. Bailey respected that, sho nuff nodded his head to affirm his new understanding. He headed back away from the river; the sun went with him.

Not too far away, less than a quarter mile, was his woman Mary. Mary was standing in a field of lotus berries. She had been keepin' herself company with the print of her dress thinking she'd cut the bottom and put it in the quilt she was making, reminding herself to ask Bailey if he'd 'membered to sharpen her cutting scissors.

She glanced up at the sky then, around and saw the field was as empty as it was at her last glance. Mary had, in the last few minutes, taken to worrying about Bailey, asking herself, *Wh'er he runs off too?* She cupped her hand over her eyes to shield the sunlight and looked in the direction of home. *Na*, she thought. *He ain't gone home without me.* She looked around to see if he was hiding in the tall willowy stalks of grass, playfully watching her. It would not surprise her, Bailey was just dat way, she thought. Jump high as a horse but quiet as a grasshopper.

As she waited, tiny trails of sweat ran slowly from her scalp, tickling her head under the twisted braids. The day, she thought, was hotter than most others and making her tired. She reached to pick one flower from the lotus stem. Then she placed it in her hair; the stem tingled her scalp. It felt good. She heard something rustling and turned.

"Der you be!" she whispered. She saw him coming, walking with ease towards her and parting the tall stalks with his arm and smile. His smile, as much of her body as her own breathe, she exhaled but could not return his happiness. Mary was determined not to let her man think it was okay to just walk away and leave her alone.

Bailey had told or asked no one, not the man that owned the land, not the woman herself; he had just walked off. Now, here he comes smiling, as if the act of him up and leaving is like any other day he has ever known. He got close enough for Mary to look in his eyes.

"Here u's go." He handed Mary the cup.

She gazed up at him with as much intensity as the sun on his face. She did not take the cup at first. She was waiting for him to tell her something of his leaving. He said nothing. Instead he touched the braided hair close to the flower with his free hand and smiled.

"Pretty."

Her face still pulled tight with worry on her mind but, satisfied he was back, she took the cup.

She asked, "How you know I was thirsty? I didn't even know it myself." She blinked twice quickly. "But I am."

He was squinting from the blindness of the sunlight and smiling at the same time.

"You never ask for nothing. I wonder sometimes." He paused and looked at her round face.

He would not know what to say if anyone was to ask him what she looked like. Yes, he could say she was pretty, but the prettiest of things can become ugly. A man's heart is smarter than the eyes, but the heart is always looking for the truth and truth is beauty. This he knew for sure. He did not know how he came to know it, but he did.

"My Mary's face," he would tell 'em, "is the same as dat sun coming up dat let me know its morning, and sundown to tell me it's night." He'd think for a moment before he'd say, "And be'tween the two, her face let me know I be awright." If he could have shared his thoughts with Mary, he would have, but he did not know how to say his mind.

Again she asked, "How you know I was thirsty?"

"'Cuz I wonder sometimes what I can give you."

He did not own a handkerchief or a rag, so he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand before it got to his eyes. He lowered his voice and put a bit of a song to it. "*Dat attt... mouth full of rrriver called on me, and say BAILEY! Give yo woman dis water, promise you Bailey dis free.*"

Mary squinted her eyes and smiled up at her man.

"Dat what the river sounds like?"

"Yep, dat's how it sounds to me."

"Free, huh"

"Free, Mary"

She laughed, forgetting she was upset at his absence. He saw the frown lines appear on her forehead and knew she was about to think hard enough for both of them. He hoped to interrupt those thoughts.

"Er'body gits thirsty, I figure." He paused, nodding his head up and down. "I thought it be time dat you be." He gently touched the tin cup with his ring finger and then the tip of her nose - the only thing he knew to do other than just saying how he felt. Which he realized in the moment was a bit scared but said what was on his heart.

"Dat you might be thirsty."

He was just a bit taller, and that bit provided more than enough shade for her turned up face.

“Me?”

“You.”

Mary pondered the question for a moment before saying it to herself, “Er’ body gits thirsty?”

Mary looked into the waa’ter; she saw her reflection, her eyes looking back at her. She wondered who she might look like. Her face in the waa’ter moved a bit with her hand. She had no memory of the woman that birthed her or if she carried her in her face. Wonderin’ at times if she, too, was free or even alive.

“Er’body gits thirsty,” she said it solid like the earth beneath them.

No wind moved in this part of the day, and the only sound beyond them was of a single bird singing in the sky; nothing answered the bird’s song.

“Er’body,” he repeated and lifted her from the ground as gently as daybreak.

“Hum.” Still holding on to the cup, she folded herself into his arms, tucked her head in the nape of his neck, and inhaled the day off his skin. She wondered what she would make of her days now that she could answer her own body needs, er’body. She smiled at the thought.

He felt the sun hot, yes. But then to the sun he thought, *we are like everything else, dat river, dem rocks, each blade of grass*. He held her close to him and silently prayed one day to put his thoughts in a letter. One day he, now free, could learn to write Dear Mary.