

A Mother's Child

She sat by the fire praying that the intense heat from the flames would cleanse her, purify her from the shame, the sadness that saturated her body. Would her life ever be the same, Maddie wondered, as the baby softly cried from the cradle across the dark, chilled room. Were her children gone forever from her life? How could she live without them? Would they ever forgive her?

Her husband Thomas had forced Maddie to leave their comfortable foreman's cottage on the plantation; banished her to a small shack of a house over by the large pond acres away from Ellie, John, Tom Jr. after Lucy was born with blond frizzy hair, caramel skin.

When Maddie first saw the baby, tears ran down her face like a turned on faucet that wouldn't turn off. She didn't expect it to be Henry's child. Henry was the head gardener on Mr. Masterson's plantation who treated flowers and trees like family.

"Come on, Miss Rose, it's time to open your velvety petals now, show them to the world," he'd whisper every spring to every rose bush as he urged them to bloom. Henry, the gentle, kind negro who worked on the plantation since he was a child when his father was head gardener.

Henry, who left the day after it happened – after he comforted Maddie’s aching heart in a field of wildflowers, after Thomas had blackened her eye because dinner wasn’t ready on time. It wasn’t the first time Thomas had hit her, but this time, their three children were watching.

Maddie ran out of the house and sat sobbing on a bench in the plantation flower garden when Henry appeared from nowhere it seemed, “Now, Miss Maddie, it’ll be all right, don’t be so sad. There, there,” he said sitting down beside her. She instinctively leaned her head on his shoulder taking in the clean smell of his blue cotton shirt, his kind spirit. Maddie turned her face up to thank him for his comforting words and it just happened. Suddenly, they were rolling on the ground in wildflowers, his large dark hands on her tear-stained face, her bruised body.

Sally Benson, the midwife who delivered the baby didn’t take long to spread the news around the plantation and the small Georgia town where they lived. Sally had stared in horror at the wailing baby in her hands. Then Thomas roared into the room, took one look at the baby and burst into a tirade of threats. “Whose is it, whose is it? Damn it, tell me whose it is. I’ll kill him!” he bellowed slamming his fist down on the bedside table, a pan of water clashing to the floor as a second chorus of crying erupted from the newborn baby. Maddie’s body went into spasms from the

pain, the agony of it all.

The children were confused the next day when Maddie left with the baby she called Lucy. Thomas wouldn't let them see the infant. He ushered Maddie and the baby out of the house with only a large knapsack.

"Mama's going away," he stated without explanation. William, Mr. Masterson's driver, gently helped Maddie and the baby into the seat beside him in the wagon. Maddie huddled over the child, her heart torn between the baby and her sobbing children.

Ellie cried out, "but why Daddy, why? Why can't we see the baby? Where's Mama going? Why is she leaving?"

"Not for you to know," Thomas snarled, opening the cottage door. Eight-year-old John stared down at his feet and Tom Jr., the youngest, tried his best not cry but a tear escaped down his face. Maddie half turned in the wagon to catch a last glimpse of her tow-headed children being ushered inside. She cradled the sleeping baby, her blond curls touching the baby's frizzy hair and closed her eyes.

Maddie thought about Mama and Daddy. They lived up north, on a farm in Maryland. It would

kill them, they'd be ruined. How long would she and Lucy be held captive? She could just imagine the uproar in the small town after Sally's whispers turned to threats of lynching. Was this why the special meeting was called tonight by Sally's husband, Walter Benson? And where was Henry...

Maddie gathered Lucy from the cradle who was making soft sucking sounds. She held her up to her chest. Lucy's small fingers gingerly explored her mother's swollen breast as if she was unsure. "You have beautiful soft skin, your daddy's dark eyes, long eyelashes," Maddie whispered as tears ran down her face. "Go ahead, latch on, drink sweet baby."

They settled into the spindly rocking chair by the fireplace in the old wooden shack, once home to a family of slaves on the plantation. Slowly, they moved back and forth. The gentle rhythmic rocking seemed to soothe Maddie's troubled mind. She replayed the last few days over and over again in her mind until she finally felt at peace as the sun went down and sleep overcame her. Maggie knew what she would do.

Early the next morning before dawn, she bundled up the sleeping child and unlatched the heavy wooden door. The moon seemed to guide them down the dirt road. Still in her night dress, she cuddled Lucy and sang a soft lullaby her mother once sang to her. The early morning air was damp but she didn't notice. Finally, she found the gravel path leading to the deep pond where the

plantation families swam and fished in warm weather.

Maddie slowly inched out of her night dress and watched it puddle to the ground. Then she laid the baby down on the soft cotton fabric and sat down next to her as she removed her shoes, her wedding ring.

Lucy was awake when Maddie unwrapped the blanket, untied her cotton shirt and unpinned her diaper. She stared at her mother as the damp air caressed her tiny body. Maddie picked up the naked baby and held her close to her chest, then walked out on the small wooden dock. It was quiet and peaceful, the sun just coming when they slipped noiselessly into the water. The last sound Maddie heard was the baby's muffled cry.

