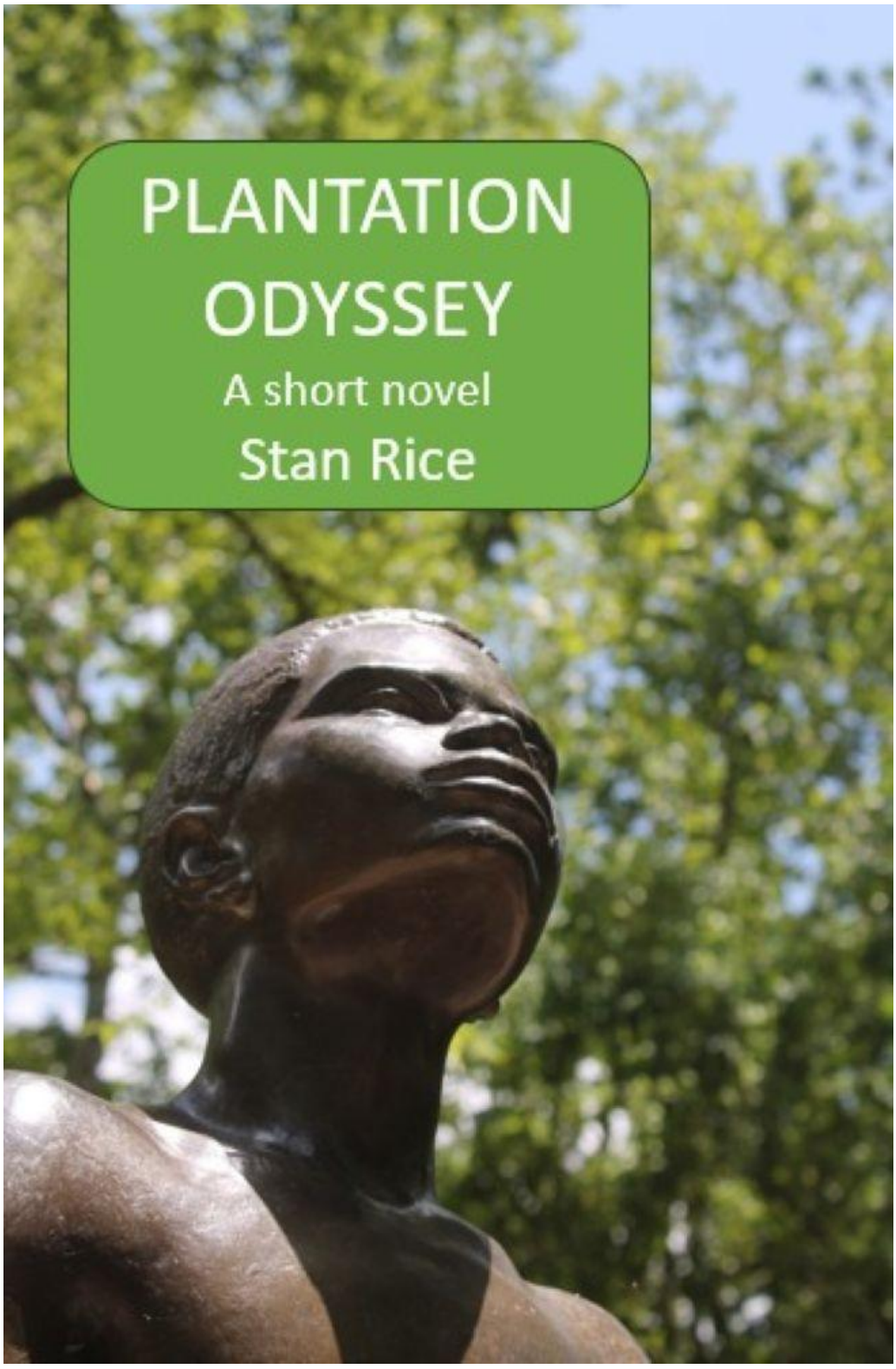

PLANTATION
ODYSSEY
A short novel
Stan Rice

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About the Author

This novel will make no sense whatsoever to anyone who has not read Homer's *The Odyssey;* all the events in this novel are parallel to Homer's epic poem. Do not confuse it with the James Joyce novel *Ulysses.* If you have not read the *Odyssey*, you need to do so to be culturally literate as well as to understand the present novel.

Summary of Plantation Odyssey

Ulysses is a little slave boy on a southern plantation. He has the mind and passion of a scientist, which the old lady who owns the plantation notices and decides to encourage. When he and the slave girl Penelope fall in love, the old lady decides to make them her heirs, since Penelope is her son's illegitimate daughter. The Heir Apparent is furious and plots to destroy the young slave couple in order to keep the plantation. The Prodigal Brother knows that war is coming and that the northerners will get the plantation anyway, so he arranges for Ulysses to escape to Boston. Ulysses becomes the assistant of Harvard botanist Asa Gray, who enables him to escape back into the south to find Penelope whom he believes is still waiting for him.

Ulysses goes on a Homeric odyssey, complete with counterparts of Polyphemus and Circe and a visit to hell. Even the sex goddess Calypso cannot dissuade Ulysses from seeking Penelope. Members of a forest cult take Ulysses to the old plantation, where Confederate soldiers are greedily waiting for Penelope, who still waits for Ulysses, to choose one of them so he can own the plantation. The cult leader changes Ulysses from a strong man into the comely maid Minerva who used to serve Penelope and whom she loves. Imagine Penelope's surprise when Minerva turns back into Ulysses and slays the soldiers.

The characters who tell the story of Ulysses are from the novel *Edd's Land*: Frank Hicks, his lover Bert (Alberta) Hicks, and her brother Bert (Bertrand).

Chapter 1

I had to take my education into my own hands. I grew up in rural Indian Territory, which became Oklahoma. I learned to read both English and Cherokee in our Cherokee schools. But beyond this I would have to educate myself. And that is exactly what I did. I have found that great literature helped me to think clearly, to set forth my case in words so plain and clear as to command their assent. I read somewhere that Thomas Jefferson said that. The books of pious literature that you find in parlors leave the mind without exercise. What a waste.

In this way, seeking the path of self-education, I am like my brothers. The eldest of the Hicks brothers, Edd, can speak fine sentences, and everyone around us is always remarking upon his Sir Walter Scott diction. He could out-talk the white American government officials who stole our land allotments. Not that it did any good; they took the land anyway, calling us ignorant savages. He is a tenant farmer, which to some people sounds like a life of ignorance. But to know how to raise a lot of different crops and livestock, and do it profitably, requires a lot of intelligence. Wherever he has lived, Edd has been on the school board, usually as its president. He is self-educated, and I wouldn't want to cross wits with him again. The few times I have done so, I was sorry for it. Edd is very religious, while I have no interest in religion. This is and will always be a source of friction between us—friction, but not hatred.

Another of my brothers, Lorenzo (who went by Lonnie), is plenty smart, but he has no interest in reading and writing. Or in formal mathematics. But he knows his numbers: he is a pretty good gambler. He is out in California somewhere, making a living. We are still waiting for him to pay back the money he stole from our store till.

My youngest brother, William, could write really fancy. Not just his words, but his handwriting. We will never know what he would have accomplished in his life, for he died of consumption years ago.

And then there's me, Frank. I think a lot but never say much. Everybody thinks I am some kind of pessimist, but that is just because my face has a permanent scowl. I smile only briefly before the muscles sink back into a comfortable frown. They also think I am not too bright, although they should know better. I am an assistant pharmacist.

But there are two big reasons that my wits must remain sharp. The first is that I am plotting a revenge against the rich Claremore banker who stole our land allotments. Edd seems to have resigned to the fate God gave him; Lonnie is making his own money, which he imagines will someday be a lot; and William died young. If anyone was to take revenge against Averd Hargrove, and to avenge this one small part of the white land grab against the Cherokees, it is going to have to be me. And for that, I need to have the kind of sharp mind that grappling with great literature can continue to give me.

The second reason is that I have chosen a path that alienates me from most of my family. While working at our rural store, with Edd and Lon, before I became a pharmacist, I met a very fat and very black woman, Alberta, who goes by Bert. We instantly fell in love, and have been living together for years. Aside from canning some vegetables and doing some artwork, Bert has no visible sources of income except what is provided by her brother Bertrand (also Bert), who lived and worked (in some mysterious way) in Tulsa. His money helped us through the Depression of the 1930s.

Chapter 2

When I had exhausted all the book resources available to me in rural Oklahoma, I took my car to the Tulsa library. I took Bert with me. She couldn't read, but she would visit Bert. I checked out the classical literature section. I found translations of the oldest and greatest literature of the ancient world, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, epic poems by Homer. They were about the war between the Greeks and the Trojans, long before the Roman empire. The translations were by some Englishman who tried his blamedest to be poetical, and used as many Sir Walter Scott words as he could. I didn't much like it.

I also found a used-book store in Tulsa. The books were mostly discards. I started bringing home piles of them in my car. Now I had books crammed two deep, and sideways too, in rickety shelves I built in the hallway. Bert's always brushing against them and knocking them down with her hips when she walks down the hall. We don't neither of us complain, though.

That's where I found a different translation of Homer's *Odyssey,* by a different Englishman, a clergyman named W. H. D. Rouse. This translation was just plain, rugged English taken straight as vodka from the plain, rugged Greek that Homer used. I became drunk with it. It was about a Greek hero-king from the war, Odysseus (Ulysses in Latin), who tried very, very hard to get back home when the war was over. But everything was going against him. The gods had something to do with it, wouldn't you know. He visited lands with monsters and islands ruled by irresistible women. But he overcame the monsters, and left the women, because he wanted to go home to his beloved Queen Penelope. Well, he finally got home, to the island of Ithaca, only to find that the rich men of the island had camped out in his castle. They spent all day eating his food. They said that Odysseus would never return and that Penelope would have to choose one of them as her husband, thus making that man the new king. But Penelope believed that Odysseus would come home. Odysseus came back in disguise and planned his revenge. Odysseus killed all the intruders in a massive bloodbath. He and Queen Penelope lived happily ever after. I could see why this was one of the greatest pieces of literature ever written. It had everything—love, death, hatred, anticipation, satisfaction. Nothing has surpassed it in the intervening two and a half millennia.

Chapter 3

One night in late winter, Bert asked me if I would be completely honest with her and tell her everything I had ever done. I thought about it awhile and said no. She smiled. “You’re an honest man,” she said. Then she up and said, “You ever kill a man?”

“No.” I didn’t say I’d started to murder, or at least scalp, a man, in my first attempt at revenge against Averd Hargrove.

“Me neither,” she said.

“How about Bert?” I asked her.

Her silence was hostile. “None of your blame business, nor mine neither,” she said. “But, Frankie, I want to tell you a story.”

“Mind if I write it down?” I asked.

“You better. Nobody knows it anymore but me and Bert. It’s an old family story.”

I wrote it down, usually the next day after she told me part of it. Of course, I fixed up the sentences a little from the way Bert told it to me.

Bert was a pillar of smoke by day and, even though we were ten years older than when we got married in the eyes of God, she was still a pillar of fire by night. She cooked stuff over her wood stove in the day, and had plenty of heat left over for the night. But we were starting to get that later-in-marriage camaraderie that was, at least to me, better than sex. As we lay in the darkness, and puffs of breeze stirred the opened curtains, Bert started her story.

“Is it a true story?” I asked.

“It was told for true,” she answered.

And when she began, I recognized that it was the story of The Odyssey. But it didn’t begin in the Trojan War; it began just before the American Civil War, on a southern plantation.

Chapter 4

Bert's ancestor was a little slave boy on a plantation in the South somewhere. The plantation owner was part Cherokee, so it must have been in Georgia or Tennessee. And it stands to reason that the little slave boy was part Cherokee, too.

The slave owners gave their slaves classical names, like Jupiter and Nebuchadnezzar. This boy was named Ulysses. He was set to work in the cotton fields like the other kids, not long after he was old enough to walk.

Only he wasn't a very good worker. He was always stopping to look at the leaves of the cotton plants when they first sprouted, and he looked closely at the weeds too. And when the cotton flowered, he studied the flowers. He pulled them apart and figured out which part of the flower would later turn into the boll. And as the bolls developed, he would pull them open and watch the cotton fibers start off as little strands growing out of the seed coats. At first everyone thought he was just being lazy, not the least the White Foreman, who called him Lazy Uly. Then all the other slaves started calling him that. All they knew was that, when the slaves were walking the cotton, Uly was as likely to study the weeds as to pull them. And when he wasn't in the fields, he was drawing things with charcoal on pieces of wood. The drawings were pretty good, the others thought, but not good enough that they could spare the wood, so all his early works got burned up. The fires, though, only produced more charcoal for him to draw with.

But come harvest time, Ulysses worked harder than any of them. The foreman told himself it was because of the threats he held over Uly's head and the deferred stripes intended for his little backside.

Trouble was bound to happen. You just couldn't keep him out of the Old Lady's formal garden. A widow, she was the owner of the estate. Her white son was the Heir Apparent. He had a Daughter.

Ulysses was pretty sneaky when he went into the garden, and had always been looking at leaves and flowers and buds for over an hour before one of the servants would find him and tell him to get his little self out of there if he knew what was good for him. What if one of the Old Lady's family caught him?

By the time he was about twelve, his reputation was a little different. Since he knew so much about the different kinds of weeds, he could pick them out faster than anyone else, and earlier in the season, so his rows were the cleanest on the plantation.

Then he started noticing things even more. He figured out the flowers on the cotton plants looked an awful lot like the flowers on the okra plants that grew in the slave gardens. One day he sneaked into the formal garden again and this time the Old Lady caught him. He had snapped a red hibiscus flower from a bush and was pulling it apart.

She looked at him, at first, with a gentle disapproval. He smiled at her and said, “You know what I done found out? These hibiscus flowers here, the little strands all stuck together in a column in the middle produce the yellow dust. Same as in the cotton and okra flowers, but completely different from roses and lilies and…” He looked into the Old Lady’s eyes. She had an amused curiosity on her face. “Your gardener told me the names of everything,” he said to her.

“You’re a smart boy,” said the Old Lady.

Uly never expected to hear a white person say that to him.

“And the peanut flowers,” continued Uly.

“What about them?” the Old Lady asked.

“They look just like bean flowers. Only once the petals fall off the stem, it starts to bend down to the ground, and, I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it myself. The stem pushes what’s left of the flower underground, and that’s what turns into a peanut.”

“So, you’re telling me that cotton and okra and hibiscus flowers look alike, but cotton and rose and lily flowers look different.”

“Yes, Ma’am, though I suppose you know that better than me.”

“I do,” said the Old Lady. “I read about botany whenever I have time. I have a book by a Swedish scientist. And you have, from your own observations, figured out the same thing he did about the plant family something or other, of which hibiscus and okra and cotton are all members.” (I later checked in the library and found that the scientist was Linnæus and the plant family was Malvaceæ.)

“Botany?” asked Uly.

“Scientists who study plants are botanists,” she said.

“Scientists?”

“Scientists look at the world,” said the Old Lady. “Only they don’t just glance at it. They look at it really closely and ask questions, just like what you do.”

“You mean, people get paid for doing that?”

“Some of them,” said the Old Lady. “The Swedish botanist did. Others, like Gilbert White, worked as clergymen and just did science in their spare time.”

Uly got scared. “I’m not supposed to be in this garden, am I, ma’am?”

“I believe that’s the rule,” said the Old Lady.

“Please don’t have me beat,” said Uly.

“I have no intention of doing that,” she answered.

“I won’t do it again, ma’am.”

Then the Old Lady smiled. “Actually, young Ulysses, you will do it again. I have an idea. You’re a smart boy. Too smart to spend your life just picking cotton.”

“Ma’am?”

“Boy, how would you like to learn to read and write?”

“Why, I’d love to, ma’am, but that ain’t no place for a nigger.”

"I'll decide whether it is your place," she said. She was, after all, the owner of the whole plantation. So it was, in fact, her decision. "Your place is to decide whether you want to learn to read and write and, even more, if you are willing to work hard at it."

"Oh, yes, ma'am, very much. They call me Lazy Uly, but that's because they don't have no idea that I'm not just goofing around when I look at flowers and such. Say, Ma'am, if you don't mind, I have a question."

"Yes, Ulysses?"

"That book and pencil. You don't just write in it. You draw pictures in it."

"I do, Ulysses."

"Could I, do you think, try drawing something?"

The Old Lady took her own notebook and her own pencil and handed them to Ulysses. He picked up the pencil, the first pencil he had ever touched, and held it like a spear. The Old Lady showed him over and over how to hold the pencil right. He finally got the hang of it, and continued his drawing. He held the book at an angle so the Old Lady couldn't see what he was doing. The Old Lady relaxed and looked around at the trees. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes before she looked back down and saw that Ulysses was showing her a drawing of her face. It was, as far as she could see, perfect. She gasped and told him so.

"You've got a talent for art, also," said the Old Lady.

"What's a talent?"

"That means you can do something really well, but you don't exactly know why. It comes from a Bible story that Jesus told about the man who had a treasure."

"Oh, that," said Ulysses. "You want to teach me to draw too, not just to read and write?"

"Oh," she said, "I don't need to teach you to draw. As a matter of fact, I can't. I draw a sketch now and again, but you're the one with the talent. You just need to practice to develop yours."

"Ma'am, there's something I'm wondering about," said Ulysses.

"Yes, Ulysses?"

"Why you doin' this? I mean, I'm having a hard time thinking that you just up and decided to help a poor nigger boy just to be nice. Wait, that's not what I meant, ma'am. Of course, you're nice..."

The Old Lady smiled. "I'm glad you asked, Ulysses. You see, I want you to grow up to be sort of a home-grown scientist, so you can help figure out how to grow the plants better on our land here. Maybe breed some better plants? Figure out how to make the soil better? That will boost our harvest, and bring in more money. You think you can figure all that out?"

Lights flashed in the boy's head. "Ma'am, I can hardly wait to start."

Chapter 5

The next night, at the kitchen table, Bert resumed her story.

Ulysses wasn't surprised that the White Foreman was annoyed with the attention that the Old Lady was showing him. But he was surprised that the other slaves didn't like it either. He shouldn't have been surprised, should he, Frankie? I mean, they must have figured there was only a certain amount of goodwill to go around, and if Lazy Uly was getting more, they would be getting less.

When the White Foreman saw the little wooden box that the Old Lady had given Ulysses, a little box he kept beside his cot out in one of the cabins, he said, "What you got in there?"

"Yeah, what is it?" said one of the other slaves.

"Prolly a blade, to stick the foreman with," said another.

"Hush your mouth," said the first. "Nobody'd be stupid enough to keep something like that in a box right out where anyone can find it. No, I bet it's some kind of sweet treats from the Old Lady. He's her little pet. Like that bird she keeps in the house, only not as pretty."

"Well," said the White Foreman, "there's one way to find out." And he opened Ulysses's box. Inside he found a rock with crystals in it, some dried plants, a dried mushroom, and a bird's nest. Uly's notebook, with words and sentences and drawings, was not there. He kept that hidden in his mattress.

"It's my nature collection," said Ulysses.

The White Foreman took the box over to the fireplace and threw it on the flames. "Seems to me powerful clear that this laziness of your'n is getting out of hand."

When Ulysses showed up for his first reading lesson with the Old Lady, she asked him where his box was. When he told her, she said, "Mackenzie is a mean man to do that to you. But he wouldn't listen to me if I told him to not do things like that. Not worth getting him riled up. What do you say, I'll get you a new box, and you can keep it in the kitchen? I'll tell Bede to make a place for you to keep it." The Venerable Bede was the head cook.

At that first lesson, Ulysses and the Old Lady just went over the vowels and how to write them. The boy put the vowels in all combinations, each one sounding more like the braying of a mule than the last one. And he wrote them all down. Oh, he was a creative little boy. He figured out how to draw the capital A so that it looked like it was smiling and had little eyes.

"I thought you didn't know how to write," I said to Bert.

"I don't," she said. "That's one reason I'm not going to get any gigs in Tulsa. I can't read music, even the lyrics." She had a beautiful voice and I had urged her to try singing, at least in black churches.

"Then how do you know what a smiling A is supposed to look like?"

"I don't. I done told you, I'm just repeating the story."

I got out my tablet and pencil and drew a capital A on it. Then I extended the crossbar out past the angled sides, and curved them up. It looked like a little smile. When I put dimples on the tips of the crossbar, it looked even more like a smile. I stuck two little dots inside the triangle, so they looked like eyes. Bert gasped and smiled.

*

Bert continued her story as we sat on the couch the next night. This was getting to be a very enjoyable routine, sort of like the *Thousand and One Nights,* only without the part about the sultan threatening to kill Scheherazade after the story was over. I wasn't expecting it to last that many nights, but what was the hurry?

The time came when Ulysses was pretty good at reading and writing at what would be considered a first-grade level, even though he was almost fifteen by that time.

I pointed out to Bert that in our one-room schoolhouses it wasn't always easy to tell one grade from the next.

Bert continued. The boy's drawings got better and better too, and when he filled one notebook the Old Lady gave him another.

But one day the boy threw down the book he was reading to the Old Lady. Not enough to tear the book up, but just enough to let her know he was frustrated.

"What's wrong?" the Old Lady asked.

"This makes no sense," Ulysses said. "Right here is a word spelled t-o-n-g-u-e, and you say its tongue. But it looks like *ton-gew* to me. I've gotten used to silent e's and such, but this is finally getting to be a bit much for me. Who invented this?"

"Maybe nobody invented it," the Old Lady said. "It just kind of gradually built up. Sometimes it makes sense, and sometimes it doesn't."

"Like the stuff I hear in church," he said.

The Old Lady, of course, did not know what was said in slave churches, but she figured the stuff they said was about the same as in the white churches, where they taught that Adam and Eve were white and that God made Cain black—the Mark of Cain. And that God was love but right happy to have slavery, both in ancient Israel and today in America. "Well," she said. "Same thing, I guess. Nobody sat down and figured out what God was supposed to be like, just like nobody figured out a logical language. Both religion and language sort of developed on their own. And now we're stuck with them."

This seemed to satisfy the boy, so he went back to his studies and in a couple of years was reading better than the white family's children.

Chapter 6

About that time, Ulysses had his sexual awakening. He had started to get curious about women's bodies. He didn't dare watch the slave girls bathing in the river, since their mammies watched over them like eagles.

But one night, he was walking around in the garden. And he noticed that the window of the Heir Apparent's Daughter, who was about his age, was lit and open. He also remembered from an earlier visit to the garden that a large tree branch came close to a ledge on the side of the house. The thought grabbed him by the balls, so to speak. Half of it was his balls, but the other half was the curiosity of his mind. He knew he was taking a big risk, but at that age, boys feel like nothing can happen to them. You remember that age, Frankie? Well, anyway, he knew all about climbing trees, he'd been up so many trees to get bird nests and leaves for his collection. And he was nimble. He figured he could climb up that tree, and no sooner than he had planned it, he was standing on the ledge. He walked silently and lightly up to the window and looked in.

The first person he saw was one of the house slaves. Her name was Penny, short for Penelope. Wait till I tell you about *her.* She was also the Heir Apparent's daughter. Neither the Old Lady nor the Heir Apparent's Wife could do much about it. It was pretty common on plantations for the Big Man to have a white wife and a black wife. What was that, Frankie? The whites did it to the Cherokees too? Now, who was that? Nancy Ward's daughter was the squaw wife of a white man who also had a white wife? And then who else? Your great grandmother too? She was a squaw wife? Isn't she the one you told me sued her husband for bigamy in the Cherokee court and won? Thought so. Well, nobody was suing nobody down there on the plantation. Penny was a slave because her mother was a slave. But get this. Her mother was a quadroon named Ariadne, which means Penny was only one-eighth black, an octaroon. Ariadne was the daughter of the former plantation owner, the Old Lady's late husband. Ariadne's mother was a half-white half-black slave. You following me? Anyway, Penny was an octaroon—a slave but seven-eighths white. She looked just like most white women. Some people say she had blonde hair, but I don't believe it.

And that was the moment that Ulysses realized he loved Penny. He'd seen her before, of course, but hadn't thought much about her. Now the colors swam in front of his eyes. She stood in her crisp dress and watched something off to the side of the field of view. She was standing beside a metal tub of water. Ulysses was watching her so closely, drinking in the beauty of every one of the few square inches of skin that were exposed on her hands and face that, at first, he did not notice the Heir Apparent's Daughter, who was Penelope's half-sister. The Daughter was naked as she walked across the floor and stepped into the bathwater. Her light brown hair was short and matted; she usually wore a wig. Freckles covered her skin, even the parts that were always away from the sun, though not as much. Her breasts were small but pendulous. Her

crotch was invisible behind light brown hairs. Even though the girl was not beautiful, she was naked and this was enough to make Ulysses almost lose his footing.

"The water is too cold," said the Daughter, still standing, with her arms crossed in front of her miserable bosom.

"You asked for it cold," said Penny.

"Well, I didn't mean this cold," said the Daughter, turning on Penny like a cornered opossum. Her teeth were none too beautiful, especially when exposed in a snarl.

"I got some warm water I will bring directly," said Penny, turning to a low fire in the fireplace. It was the first windy moist night of the summer. The branches waved and the leaves hissed. Penny brought back a little pan of hot water.

"If you could step out of the tub, ma'am, I'll pour this in. I don't want to hurt your skin with the hot water."

The Daughter stepped out as if it were the supreme imposition.

Then the Daughter walked toward the window. Ulysses was almost sure she must have seen him, though the light in the room was hardly bright enough to reveal anything in the darkness outside. Ulysses stepped to the side, unable to see anything inside but able to hear.

"You should have had it right the first time," said the Daughter. "You slaves live like animals, so you don't know about refinement, I guess. Animals! There are probably some animals in that tree outside, watching me right now. Well, let them see me! Let them see what beauty is like!" She stood right at the window, with her hands behind her head, thrusting whatever she could outward. Even from off to the side, Ulysses could see her outline. His heart was beating wildly.

When the Daughter stepped back into the bath and sat down, she said, "This will do. Now, rub my back." Ulysses crept back to keep watching.

"Yes, ma'am," said Penny, who got out a sponge and soap. She stood behind the Daughter and began scrubbing her shoulders, then her neck and behind her ears. Then Penny washed her hair. Ulysses saw that the Daughter's skin had little pimples all over it, some of them with pus. The daughter then held up her arms and let Penny scrub away the smell of the armpits and brush around the breasts without disturbing them. Then the Daughter stood up in the water so Penny could scrub her legs. The Daughter then sat back down in the bath and took the sponge to clean out her crotch. She seemed to enjoy this very much; Ulysses did not yet understand why. Then the Daughter stood up and bent over. "Scrub my butt," she ordered Penny.

All that Penny said was, "Yes, ma'am," and took the sponge to the daughter's anus.

"More," said the Daughter.

Penny obeyed.

"Get closer and make sure there isn't any shit left around," said the Daughter.

When Penny crouched and got her face closer, the daughter farted and started laughing.

"Take that!" the Daughter said.

"I was expecting it, ma'am," said Penny, unruffled.

"So, you think now I'm nice and clean for my young Mr. Harding to visit tomorrow?" asked the Daughter.

"I suppose so," said Penny. She brought a towel to the Daughter, who was standing on a mat beside the tub.

"Young Mr. Harding isn't going to get that close to me," said the Daughter as Penny dried her body. "Not until we're married, anyway. I don't know what kinds of animal things you slaves do down in your quarters…"

"We are very moral," said Penny. "Us women sleep up here in the rooms off the kitchen. The young men are…"

"Animals," said the Daughter summarily as she draped a gauzy gown over her body.

Then there was a movement down in the flower garden. Ulysses was angry at himself for not anticipating this, but, after all, he was going through his sexual awakening, a time when boys are not noted for thinking ahead. It was the Heir Apparent's big dog, which stayed inside during the daytime. It started barking.

"Speaking of animals," said the Daughter. "Joab must have seen a coon up in the tree."

Obviously, it was impossible for Ulysses to go back down the tree to the waiting dog. The dog snarled and licked his bared teeth.

There was nothing for Ulysses to do but to climb over the roof, scampering as silently as possible. He would have been very obvious had anyone seen him, but he got to the other side of the house without being noticed. The problem was that there was no tree to climb down. Fortunately, it was the side of the house with only one window, a dark one. The dog could have followed him around, were it not for the fence that blocked him in the garden. Ulysses knew there was only one thing to do and only one time to do it. He leapt toward the ground. He landed on his feet, legs straight, then tried to collapse his legs to absorb the shock. This was only partly successful and he was in great pain as he scrambled away.

All that night he lay awake, thinking of two things: the pain in his legs, which he would have to hide from everyone for the days or weeks it would take for them to heal; and of the beautiful Penelope.

Chapter 7

"So," said Bert, "that was what Uly's sexual awakening was like. Tell me, what was your sexual awakening like?"

I smiled and said, "Well, I woke up one morning and I thought I'd done something in bed that I hadn't done since I was a baby."

"Who was the girl?" asked Bert.

"Oh, there was this girl named Brunnie at school. I fell really hard for her. I don't know why. She wasn't even that pretty. She was quiet, like me."

"Brunnie?"

"Brunnhilde," I said. "Maybe that was why she was quiet. She didn't want anyone calling her name."

"And, so, you stalked right up to her and talked to her like you were some knight," said Bert. "Sort of like the way you latched onto me the first day we met."

"Oh, no, Bert, I was way too shy back then. And I didn't get a chance. Brunnie's family moved away."

"Oh, sorry to hear that."

"Don't be, Bert. I might have been married to her, with no chance to stumble on to you."

"Oh, shut your mouth, Frankie."

"No, I mean it, Bert. You are the best thing that could ever have happened to me."

Bert continued her story.

The Old Lady's son, the Heir Apparent, who had never liked the idea of Ulysses getting any special treatment, now lost his temper. He saw Ulysses reading a book with a title that even he could not understand. I never heard which book it was. All I know is that it wasn't *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* That this little nigger boy could read better than the Heir Apparent's own wife and his beautiful delicate Daughter was more than he could stand.

So, when Ulysses came to the kitchen to put a new specimen, some kind of bug, in his box, he found the box was missing.

"Hey, Venereal Bede," he said.

"That's Venerable Bede," the cook said. "There ain't no such word as Venereal."

"Sorry," Ulysses said. "You're right. I never heard of such a word either."

I asked Bert, "Was he trying to pull a prank, with that educated brain of his?"

"I'm just telling the story the way I heard it," she said, and continued.

"So, Bede. Where's my box?" asked Ulysses.

"The Man took it." The Man was, of course, the Heir Apparent.

"Why would he do that?" asked Ulysses.

"He thought you were gathering some kind of pizenous plants or mushrooms," said Bede. "And then he looked at me and I got really scared. See, Ulysses, he must've thought I might use some herb or mushroom to poison him, and that you had taught me how."

"That would be easy enough to do." Ulysses flashed a smile. He was in his cocky early teen years, after all. He could finally stand up and walk fine, having recovered a little from jumping off the roof, even though his legs still hurt like hell. He started to think himself invincible.

"Were you cocky when you were a teen, Frankie?"

"Actually," I answered honestly, "I wasn't. Neither was Edd or William. Lon had enough for all four of us."

"I see," said Bert. "Now back to the story."

Ulysses, he wasn't too upset, he said, even though his notebook had been in the box. "I got all the knowledge up here in my head," is what he said. And it was true. By this time, Ulysses already had part of the fields staked out for experiments. He was trying out different amounts of fertilizer—pig shit, cow patties, chicken droppings; not human manure, far as I remember—and different numbers of plants spread out or crowded together. This was all cotton, but he was making plans to try it out with indigo, too. That was another crop that was big in the South before the War. Chicken droppings were the best, but they didn't have enough of it for whole fields. Besides, the chicken droppings made the cotton plants grow bigger but not necessarily make more cotton. Cotton yield was the result he reported back to the Old Lady.

But as the Old Lady got more frail, and finally couldn't go outside anymore, she turned the day to day operation of the plantation over to the Heir Apparent and his family. She had a slave named Minerva—or Minnie—who took care of her. She was pretty black, not light-skinned like Penny. But the Heir Apparent made the most of his role as manager of his sick mother's plantation. Most of all, he made a big show of doing exactly the opposite of what Ulysses suggested to him regarding fertilizer and how many plants to put in the fields.

"No nigger gonna tell me what to do."

"Sir, I'm not telling you what to do. I'm just reporting what is best for you to do."

"You think you're my mammy or something?"

"No sir, I do not. But consider that I want this plantation to prosper just as much as you want it to. When the fields are fresh with verdure…"

"Don't you go using those fancy words on me!"

"Sorry, sir. I'm just talking about making the plants grow well. There's something in it for me, too."

"Oh, is that so? Well, I think that you slaves have it in for us owners."

"Sir? I respectfully disagree. We want to do good work. Hard times on the farm aren't good for us any more than for you."

"You respectfully disagree? How does a slave respectfully disagree?"

"Same way your wife does, sir, because she believes it's best for both of you…"

"Oh, so now you're thinking of yourself as being like my wife, are you?"

"No, sir, I just meant…"

"You ought to have your bare bee-hind spanked in front of everybody. Ah, so you don't have anything to say in response to that? You slaves have to be beat into submission, otherwise you will revolt. Like Nat Turner…"

"I don't know who that is, sir."

"Was. You're a liar. Ah, so you don't have anything to say in response to that, either. Smart mouth like your'n, I should have you sold down the river."

"Did he sell Ulysses down the river?" I asked Bert.

"I'll tell you tomorrow night, lover boy."

Chapter 8

I couldn't even wait for the dishes to be washed for Bert to continue her story. She resumed her story while we had our hands in the frothy water of the basin where she's just made soap that afternoon.

"So, did the Heir Apparent sell Ulysses down the river?"

"No. He couldn't. He ran the place but the Old Lady still made the financial decisions."

Time would come, soon enough, when the Heir Apparent would be making all the decisions. Or so he assumed. But what should happen one day except The Prodigal Brother should appear at the door—the brother of the Heir Apparent, who had squandered half the inheritance and now came back expecting, quite unlike the prodigal son in Jesus' story, to be welcomed upon his return. What's that? Sounds like your brother Lorenzo? I guess that means you'd better think about what you gonna do just in case Lorenzo shows up at our door sometime. What's that? You got a letter from him, Frankie? You didn't answer it? No, I guess there's no need to now, been too long. Besides, there's nothing for him to inherit. I guess that takes care of that. Lorenzo shows up, just hand him a broom. I'll hand him a hoe for the okra patch, get them cockleburs out. He would have to do whatever we told him, if he comes back.

Now the Heir Apparent was ready to give his Prodigal Brother this big speech about how he was unwelcome and he should just be getting back on the road. But the Prodigal Brother had other things to talk about. He brought news that the Southern states were talking about seceding from the Union and, if they did so, the Northern states would declare war, and that this would not be a pretty sight. The Heir Apparent just laughed and said that they had the North over a barrel. The South produced commodities that England and other countries bought, so let the North go to hell for all he cared. Besides, the whole United States had laws against the protection of fugitive slaves. Fugitive slaves had to be returned to their masters, even if they escaped into non-slave states. So, our human property, he said, would be returned to us even by the people who thought we should not have them. And not only that, but a lot of Northern corporations made plenty of money from slavery. Oh, no, they didn't own slaves, but they were perfectly happy to make money off of them. Let the abolitionists scream all they want. Follow the money and you'll see where the future lies. The Prodigal Brother continued in his insistence that neither he nor his brother would be the heirs of the plantation, that it would become the property of some Northerner after the inevitable war.

Now Ulysses and Penelope had known each other since they were kids. Whenever the slaves would get together to have their dances, one old slave would get out his dobro, sort of like a banjo, and a young slave would get out his tin-whistle, and they would really go at it. The kind of music that would later become ragtime.

Well, the adult slaves would dance. Some animals *they* were; the men and women didn't even touch, not like those racy waltzes that the refined white folks had where the elegant men and women could get their hands all over each other and brush their legs together. And the little slave kids would just jump around and pretend they were dancing.

Those dances were about the only place Ulysses ever saw Penny, until that night at the window. But right at that moment, when Ulysses saw Penelope in the window, he knew what he had to do. He knew the Heir Apparent hated him and the Old Lady was getting older, so he knew he had to make some arrangements for the future. After the Heir Apparent gave him that talking-to in the kitchen, he knew it even better. So, he went back to The Venerable Bede and asked him to bring out Penny to see him. All this time, Ulysses was standing up straight and tall.

Ulysses had it all planned out. He would have a pleasant chat with Penny and tell her how much he liked her, without revealing the desperation of his feelings. No need to scare her away, you know. He stood and waited, then leaned against the flour barrel and waited, then squatted on the floor and waited, then walked around and waited. Every house slave except Penny came out and said hello to him.

Ulysses had overestimated how much he had recovered from jumping off the roof. By the time that Penny came out, he could hardly stand up. And, of course, he was nervous too. He planned to stand tall, but when he walked up to her, his legs collapsed and he was on his knees. Then he started pouring out his heart to her. He reached for her hand and kissed it.

"I've been watching you," said Penny. "We are all so proud of you. If any slave is to have a bright future, it will be you, Ulysses. There's not a one of us house women who would not immediately accept your hand in marriage. I am just honored that it is I."

Right then Bert and I looked into one another's eyes. The soap bubbles were quietly popping right next to us. I started slipping Bert's dress off of her, and she helped me unbutton my shirt and pants. The soap for the dishes was the same soap that we used for bathing, and we soaped each other down, then poured water over one another's bodies. We made a mess, but a clean one, on the kitchen floor. Bert swept it out the back door. We were still wet when we went into the bedroom.

Later, as we lay in one another's arms, Bert continued her story.

Right then, just after Penny accepted Ulysses's offer of marriage, who should come into the kitchen but the Old Lady. She saw Ulysses crouching and holding Penny's hand. Right then, she saw Penny nod her head. The Old Lady strode up to the couple and said, "My mind is made up. Penny, my late husband's blood flows in your veins. You have the moral right to be my heir. And if you will marry this fine young man, who has an intelligent mind and a graceful spirit, then the two of you can be the master and mistress of this plantation." And right then, she went up to her room and wrote out her will, one in which the Heir Apparent was not even apparent. Nor, of course, the Prodigal Brother. The heir was her husband's daughter Penelope and whichever man she would choose to marry. She also freed both of them. She wrote out three copies. One she gave to Penelope, and one to Ulysses. Each of them hid their documents in their clothes.

The other copy of the will the Old Lady read the next night to her white family.

"No judge in the land would consider her to be, as she claimed in the will, *of sound mind and body.* Mother's crazy, is all. Don't worry about it," the Prodigal said afterwards to his seething brother. "Besides, she doesn't have the legal right to free them just by writing it down."

The Seething Brother said, "I wouldn't count on it. She is their owner, and by giving Penelope the inheritance she has met the legal obligation of assuring that nigger's financial independence. And once that is done, *whoever* that slave woman marries, even if it isn't that fancy black boy, it will mean the loss of our inheritance. Don't let Penelope's fair complexion fool you. She is contaminated with niggerness! There is only one thing we can do. We must get rid of her, and of that black boy who begged for her hand in marriage."

"I say just let the whole thing blow over," said the Prodigal Brother. He liked hearing his brother say *our inheritance.*

"I say, in addition to that, we get certain parties out of the way," said the Seething Brother. "Now, we have had enough excitement for one day. We can handle all of this tomorrow."

The Prodigal Brother took this as a sign that he should retreat to his room. And he started to do this, but decided to hang around the drawing-room just a little bit longer, just outside the door. This was when he heard that the Seething Brother, while talking with his wife, was including *him* in the list of *certain parties* to be gotten out of the way. The Prodigal told himself he should have known that this would happen; his brother would never have referred to *our inheritance* unless there was no chance of him receiving any of it.

When the Prodigal saw Ulysses standing just outside the kitchen door, he took pity on him. In the short time he had been visiting, he had been impressed with the intelligence and fine character of the young slave. He walked up to Ulysses and spoke his mind.

"My young man," said the Prodigal Brother, "you must get out of here. Your life is in danger. And your beautiful fiancée also."

"You mean, he would actually kill us?" asked Ulysses, referring to the Heir Apparent. "The law looks away at keeping his half-sister a slave, but would surely not permit him to kill her. And me? I'm done for, that's all. Death might be preferable to whatever the law might do to me. And besides, who could possibly rescue us from our dire predicament?"

"Let me tell you something, boy," said the Prodigal Brother. "I happen to know that he hates me almost as much as he hates you. Which means that it is in my interest to get the hell out of here, and I would be right pleased to take you and your beautiful fiancée with me."

"Where would we go? Into town? What good would that do?"

"I'll get you up into the North."

"But what good would that do? Fugitive slave laws, you know."

"What you don't seem to understand," said the Prodigal Brother, "is that war is about to break out. The North is going to have a lot more to think about than tracking the two of you down. Besides, I have friends up there, friends whom I can pay to keep their silence. See, everyone around here thinks I squandered my money on high living when I was up north. That's true. But I spent the money in such a way as to get me some friends up there. Friends that will come in handy right about now. Now, all we have to do after we get up north is to pretend that Miss Penelope is white and that you are her slave."

"That's pretty much the truth anyway," said Ulysses.

"And we have to pretend that she is my niece," said the Prodigal.

"That's the truth. You *are* her uncle."

It was late that night that the Prodigal Brother's wagon left, with Penelope in the seat behind the Prodigal, and Ulysses clinging to the undercarriage. Remember, his legs still hurt like hell. Penelope and Ulysses had promised each other that, if necessary, they would part, so that one of them might, however slight the chance, obtain the freedom of the other.

They didn't get very far. The Heir Apparent caught up with them before they reached town.

"Brother," said the Seething Brother, "where do you think you are going with my slave?"

"You mean, the new mistress of the plantation?" said the Prodigal.

"No. She is my slave. Turn around and come back." As the Seething Brother spoke, some other gentlemen from surrounding plantations, whom he had quickly roused, galloped up on their horses. They were armed. "You know," the Seething Brother said, "we could arrest you right now."

"You'd have to kill me," said the Prodigal, trying his last card.

"Fortunately for you," said the Heir, "you are much, much too inconsequential for me to undertake such a bloody effort. You just take your wagon and continue off into whatever obscurity you so richly deserve. But before you do, you will return my slave to me."

"You mean, your daughter," said the Prodigal.

The Heir just spat. His companions readied their pistols.

Slowly, Penelope climbed down from the carriage. She held out her hands. Her father climbed down from his horse and slipped the handcuffs around her wrists. He then helped her onto the horse. In silence, the Prodigal handed Penelope's small traveling-bag up to the Heir after he had gotten onto the horse behind Penny. And soon they all rode back into the darkness from which they had come, leaving the Prodigal alone with Ulysses, who still clung to the undercarriage. Wishing one last glance at his beloved Penelope, he let himself down onto the ground, turned over, and looked down the dark road. But the darkness had consumed the men and his beloved.

Ulysses was now in the seat beside the Prodigal. He was weeping openly and loudly. "I am such a coward. I let them capture my beloved and lead her back into slavery, while I kept silence so that I could escape."

"That's what you agreed with her to do," said the Prodigal. "Where I'm taking you, you may be in a position to influence the course of events in a way that you could not if you remained a slave on your plantation, not to mention if you were dead. You will return. I do not know how you will do so, but you will return."

"Did he return?" I asked Bert.

But Bert just rolled over on me, encompassing me in the sweet fragrance of her freshly-bathed body.

Chapter 9

"Did Ulysses ever return home?" I asked Bert again as we both stood outside the store on a warm spring day. I smoked my pipe, and Bert leaned against the railing. People walking down the street had all heard about me and Bert a long time ago and had gotten used to us being a couple. In answer to my question, Bert said, "Did he get home? Why, Frankie, that's what most of the story is *about.*" And she continued her story that evening.

It turned out the Prodigal Son had lots of connections up North. His money, and his jovial personality, had done him well in this regard. He took Ulysses with him all the way up to Boston. And they had gotten back into the Northern states right about the moment that the War began.

One evening in Boston, at a little restaurant, a man in a nice suit joined them.

"Dr. Gray, meet Ulysses," the Prodigal said to the man. And to Ulysses he said, "This is Dr. Asa Gray, a botanist at Harvard University, in Cambridge, just down the road a piece."

Ulysses's eyes brightened. "Sir!" he exclaimed as he shook the hand proffered to him by the great professor. Ulysses was wearing a suit also, though not as nice as those of the two white men.

The Prodigal continued. "Ulysses, let me tell you something about Dr. Gray. He is a fine Christian gentleman. I mean that he, unlike my brother, is a real Christian. He teaches Sunday School for black boys. And Dr. Gray, let me tell you something about Ulysses. Down in the South, he is considered a slave. But according to a certain document in his possession, he will be the owner of a plantation, as soon as he marries the heir, to whom he is betrothed."

Gray and Ulysses looked at one another in mutual admiration. Gray said, "My friend here tells me that you wish to study botany and that, in addition, you are a superlative artist."

I had to explain to Bert what superlative meant, even though she had used the word. Then she continued.

Ulysses looked straight into his eyes and said, "I wish to return to my fiancée."

Gray smiled uncomfortably. "That will not be possible for a while."

"I know," said Ulysses. "But I will return to her at the earliest possible moment. Meanwhile, I would be honored to be your student, or even just your servant," he said.

"He has little formal education," the Prodigal said regarding Ulysses. "I mean, in the technical matters of botany. He wouldn't know a stipule from a stamen. Well, he wouldn't know the terms. He knows how plants grow, and what's in a flower and a fruit, and he has even done some agricultural research down on the plantation. And, I had him do a few drawings for you. I showed him the Franklinia shrub in the Bartram garden and he drew it." Ulysses showed Gray the beautiful sketch of a camellia-like flower.

"I am impressed," said Gray. "He has the important skill and knowledge. We can worry about the details later."

Bert continued her story as we ate supper that night.

Ulysses intended to leave Harvard as soon as possible. But days turned to weeks, weeks to months, and months to two years. He pressed and classified Gray's specimens, and made drawings of them that would later show up in books. You might even find some of them in that library in Tulsa. But with each passing week, Ulysses despaired that the War might never end, or that the North might lose. After the first two years of the war, a Confederate victory seemed quite possible, not that the North would have been harmed, but that the path back home to Penelope would be closed forever. Of course, if he had known when the war would end, he could have finished his degree right in time, in four years. He could have been Harvard Class of 1865 magnum cum lowdey, whatever that means. You know what that means, Frank? Neither do I. But it must mean like a magnum shotgun full of intelligence. But he set his mind to go back South. After two years, he was frantic, and ready to start walking south on the highway. Dr. Gray tried to dissuade him, as did Prodigal.

Ulysses did not have enough money to even begin his trip. But Dr. Gray called him into his office. "Listen, young man," he said. Gray was only about forty years old himself. "You've been working for me as an assistant."

"I appreciate it, Dr. Gray, but I just can't keep my mind on pressing wildflowers while I am wondering if my beloved is alive or dead, or something worse than dead."

"You can't afford to go," Dr. Gray said.

"I'll walk. I'll eat wild plants that you showed me up here in the North, and I already know some in the South."

"Like, which ones?"

"Hickory nuts," smiled Ulysses. "Hickories, they grow all over the eastern part of the continent."

"You ever tried eating hickory nuts, young man?"

"Lots of times, out in the woods."

"How did you do it?"

"I whacked them open with a hammer, and pulled out the little slivers of nut."

"I imagine you made a good meal out of them?"

Ulysses was stumped. Finally, he said, "No, sir. Actually, it took a lot of work just to get the nut meat out of each one."

"And you think you're going to live off of them? You'd have to spend all day every day cracking open the nuts just to get enough food to survive. And do this while you are traveling a thousand miles? This is not realistic. I suppose you are going to chase squirrels up trees and try to cook them on a spit over a fire of little twigs."

"Very well, sir, I guess I need a better plan for how to travel. I need money. But I'm not going to beg. And I don't want to receive charity."

"You don't have to," said Gray. "You agree to continue being my assistant when you get back, and I'll give you an advance on your pay."

Chapter 10

Bert continued her story when we were sitting in bed with the lights off, watching the stars twinkling through the window.

Ulysses headed south, toward the border between two warring countries. He had the money to hire a horse and buy some saddlebags. He did try to eat as many wild foods as he could, but was right happy to supplement this meager if healthy fare with food from taverns. He wasn't welcome to stay in the taverns, although one owner offered him a loft in the stable. You ever slept in a stable loft, Frankie? Sleeping on the hay? Not so bad, actually. But Ulysses often slept out in the forest, taking his chances with wild animals or outlaw humans. He figured that, as he had no food with him, no bear would be interested in attacking him. If he had been white, even just as white as his beloved Penelope, who could pass for white, he could have stayed in people's houses. Instead he stayed out with the coons.

He could see the mountains along the Ohio River to the south, the border of the Confederacy. He figured that his trials and tribulations would begin as soon as he crossed the river. But he was wrong.

He usually kept himself hidden from army battalions, which became increasingly common as he approached the border. He found little forest paths more or less parallel to the road. One of these paths took him to a large pond filled with cattails. The cattails were just beginning their spring bloom. The leaves were tall like long green swords, and the flower stalks rose up even taller. Each one of the flowering stalks looked like a sausage on a stick, with a little bit of yellow froth near the tip. The sausage was a cluster of thousands of baby seeds, and the yellow froth was the pollen.

The path led right up to a shack.

"Hello?" Ulysses asked at the doorless front opening of the shack. There was no answer, so he looked inside. When he stepped in, he almost trampled a man lying on the floor. "Sorry, sir," he stammered. "I'm just a wanderer and I saw this little house and…"

The man started to get up, moving as slowly as a sloth. (Bert explained that she'd never seen one but had heard about them being in the big zoo in St. Louis.) Ulysses wondered if the man was drunk, but he saw no jugs and smelled no liquor.

"Come on in," said the man, very slowly. "Want something to eat?"

"I'd be much obliged," said Ulysses.

"Well," said the man, waving his arm as slowly as a vine might grow, "go get you some."

"Some what?"

"You blind? Some cattails, that's what. Here, I'll show you."

The man got out a very sharp knife made of stone. The reason that the knife was stone and not iron was evident when he finally dragged himself out to the edge of the marsh. The man

was even hairy like a sloth, and even seemed, like a sloth, to have algae growing on his fur. The man plunged his knife under the water and started cutting entire cattail clumps from their underwater creepers. This appeared to be the only thing the man ever did with the knife. An iron knife would have rusted.

When the man had a half dozen cattail stalks, he dragged them back to his cabin. He stripped away the outer leaves from the white succulent base of one of the cattail clumps. He cut the white mass in two and handed one to Ulysses, who imitated him in eating it. Ulysses was surprised.

"This tastes like cucumbers," said Ulysses.

"Or, cucumbers tastes like this," droned the man. "I never eat anything else but these plants."

Then the man started a fire from some coals in his shack, and put a pot of water over it. Then he shaved the outside off of the cattail stems that had been growing under the water, the stems that connected one cattail plant to another. He threw these into the bowl of water. The starch came out of the stems. The man threw the stems away, leaving a thick gruel of cattail starch. Then he stripped the male flowers off of the tip of the stalk, and dropped them in the bowl. He did the same for the other stalks. He poured in a little oil from a bottle beside a flour sack, which must have been cattail flour, and put a little of the oil in a skillet, and a pinch of salt. When the water began to boil, he removed the pot, and put the skillet over the fire. Then he cut off the six sausage-clusters and dropped them into the water. He poured the yellow gruel onto the skillet and cooked it into dense golden pancakes. Meanwhile, he and Ulysses ate the rest of the cucumber-scented leaf bases. This was the salad course. The main course was female cattail flowers, eaten like corn on the cob, and male cattail flower pancakes.

"Is this all you eat?" Ulysses asked when they had finished.

"Perty much," the man said. "Except beetle grubs and maggots, once in a while."

The man was fragrantly filthy enough that Ulysses believed him.

"Is this all you do, just sit here and eat cattails?"

"What else do you think I should be doing?"

"What do you do when the cattails turn brown?"

"What's that?"

"The cattails. In a couple of weeks the pollen will be all gone and the seeds will get brown and dry."

"No, they don't. It's always springtime here."

Ulysses ignored this statement and asked, "Ever had any problem from the war?"

"What war?"

Ulysses had to think about that one. He realized that this man had almost no grasp on reality. Then Ulysses felt like his mind had started to become fuzzy. He was no longer sure where he had come from, or where he was going, or why. Or even what the war was all about, or whether there was one. He looked at his horse, not comprehending that he had ridden it along the trail. He had a feeling of deep contentment. All around him, the trees in the lowering shafts of

sunlight had started to take on strange colors. He thought he heard little forest people talking to him. The man was snoring beside him, and in a few minutes Ulysses had fallen asleep.

The next day there wasn't much to do except to crawl out to the swamp, Ulysses as slowly as the sloth man, to get more cattails, and cook the same meal again. The next day was the same. But on the third day, Ulysses had just enough conscious thought to ask himself what was going on. It must be something in the cattails, something that packs more of a punch than alcohol. He strove mightily, like a warrior in battle, to focus his mind. He looked at the bottle of oil. Day after day the man had been using the flour and the oil to make cattail pollen pancakes, and yet the bottle was still full. This is when he knew his mind was playing tricks on him. So, when the man fell asleep, in the early afternoon, Ulysses forced himself to get up and stumble over to where his horse was grazing. He had not even removed the saddlebags. He heaved himself up on the horse, and tried to remember how to use the reins. The horse started ambling forward along the little trail.

Just before Bert and I fell asleep, I lay on my back and smiled in the invisible darkness. Bert had just told me the story of Odysseus and the Lotus-Eaters.

Chapter 11

Bert continued her story as we sat in bed. This time we were interested only in the story.

As the horse slowly galloped along the trail off to the side of the road, Ulysses noticed a little lamb following them. The lamb capered around, once in a while nipping a wildflower to eat. Then the lamb pranced beside them. Finally, the lamb took the lead, and the horse followed. Ulysses still wasn't thinking clearly, except that he knew he had to go south; the late afternoon sun was on his right, was all he knew.

The lamb led them to a clearing with a wooden corral full of sheep. They were fine sheep, sheep without a blemish, sheep like what Jacob would have let Laban keep in that old Bible story. There was a barn, but no house. Ulysses slipped off the horse and tied it behind the barn. He followed the lamb into the barn.

Until that moment, Ulysses did not realize how hungry he was. All around him were shelves of cheeses made from the milk of the sheep, and ceramic jars of milk curing into cheese. He grabbed one of the cheeses and started gnawing on it like he was a wolf and the cheese was a sheep. He even growled a little. Then he realized how thirsty he was, and almost plunged his head into the milk to drink it. Sated, he fell down behind some of the shelves, but not before he had stuffed enough cheeses into his coat pockets to make him look fat.

Ulysses woke up when he heard two men talking. One was a really large older man, in clothes even shabbier than the ones worn by Mr. Cattail, and with hair even rattier. A smell of his own ripening cheese body formed a sphere around him. His eyes were big, and one of them had been blinded and was swollen shut. The other man, a well-dressed man apparently from a nearby town, kept his distance and talked with the big man, whom he addressed as Mr. Phemus, about purchasing some cheeses. The transaction complete, the city man left, and Mr. Phemus closed the barn door. Phemus lit a small torch and placed it in a sconce, the flame tilted well away from the wooden walls as if the whole barn was crooked.

Ulysses knew he was trapped in a most dangerous situation. And wouldn't this be just the time for his guts to start acting up. It must have been the unprecedented amount of milk and cheese. Phemus was counting his cheeses, and seemed to notice that some were missing. *Hmm,* he said, as he noticed one of the ceramic lids was ajar.

Phemus burped and farted, adding new scents to the little ring of odor around him. But then he sniffed the air and could tell that someone else was in the barn adding a new scent. He sniffed some more, and said, "Be he alive or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread."

"He did not," I interrupted Bert. "You're just pulling my leg with that one."

"I'm just telling the story the way I heard it," said Bert, affecting a little offense.

So Phemus started looking around for an intruder. Ulysses was pretty good at hiding, and found what he thought was a perfect little niche. And it worked. Phemus's one eye didn't work

that well, and he couldn't find Ulysses. He did, however, sniff around at the spot where Ulysses had been crouching in the dancing shadows of the torchlight.

Ulysses saw Phemus reach into a wooden casket and pull out some jerky to eat. Then he heard Phemus say to himself, "This here's good eatin'. That boy, he was a damned good-for-nothin', but in the end he turns out to be pretty good." Ulysses assumed the "boy" was a sheep. He slipped back into his little niche and fell asleep after Phemus blew out the torch and settled down into a pile of hay on the floor of the barn.

Ulysses awoke the next morning when Phemus opened the barn door and let in a shaft of strong sunlight. Ulysses must have gasped or made some other noise because immediately Phemus looked around. Now that there was plenty of light, he was going to look through every nook and cranny to find the intruder who, he knew, must still have been in the barn. Phemus looked back in the little niche where Ulysses had been hiding. Ulysses was underneath a table heaped with cheeses. Phemus stood before the table, legs spread in a strong stance. Ulysses scampered out from under the table, right between those big legs, and headed for the open door. Phemus was pretty quick and almost grabbed him. But soon Ulysses was out among the sheep in the corral which surrounded the barn door, hiding behind sheep as Phemus strode around looking for him.

Then Phemus had an idea. He sat himself on the fence right beside the corral gate, and opened the gate so that the sheep could go out. Ulysses knew that the sheep would depart one by one, eventually leaving him alone in the corral. But one of the sheep was a ram that was really big, probably the one that serviced all of the ewes. Ulysses grabbed hold of the ram and held onto the ram's belly fur as tight as a tick, tighter than he even had held onto the undercarriage of the wagon two years earlier.

The ram started to leave through the gate when Phemus stopped it.

"Where is that intruder, Remus?" asked Phemus. "Maybe he was just a coon. But he smelled like a man. He had kind of a sweet smell, would go good with barbecue sauce, don't you think?" Phemus ruffled Remus's wool. "Gotta shear you sometime, get some money for that fine wool of your'n. Why not now?" Ulysses froze up. But Phemus continued, "Well, maybe later. Right now, you need to go out and visit the ewes and give me some more lambs." Phemus flicked the ram on the butt, and the ram ran off toward the pastures.

Once the ram was around a bend in the trail, Ulysses let go and rolled into a little wet ditch. He looked around and picked his way back to the trail on which he had come in. Keeping the morning sun to his left, he started on the trail, totally despondent about what to do without his horse or money. All he had was some mighty fine cheese, but the way his guts felt, he would have to not depend on that cheese to be his only food. Maybe he could supplement it with wild ramps or even some half-rotten hickory nuts from last year moldering on the ground.

Then along behind him came prancing the lamb and with it his horse. He got on the horse and resumed his journey.

"How did the horse get untied?" I asked Bert.

"I'm just telling the story the way I heard it," she answered.

She had just told me the story of Odysseus and Polyphemus the Cyclops.

Chapter 12

On a Sunday in early spring, Bert and I took a walk out along the country roads. She had quite a mass to carry around but she was as strong as a cow, as I had learned. We stopped at a little woodlot with a few remnant post and blackjack oaks, the kinds that Edd never stopped trying to chop away from his land. There were elms and bois-d'arc trees too, and even a redbud, its pink flowers shriveled and its little beans beginning to fill.

We didn't say anything. We just watched the birds hopping around and chasing each other away: robins, sparrows, cardinals. We saw a blue jay screeching as it attacked a robin nest and knocked the light blue eggs, as delicate as a queen's porcelain, onto the ground. A raccoon was watching us. There was as much drama among the birds and animals out in the forest as there was among humans in a city, or even in a Sir Walter Scott novel. We'd been sitting there more than an hour before Bert resumed her story.

Ulysses got closer and closer to the Ohio River. Pretty soon there was only one more ridge to pass before he got to it. But part of this ridge was a high hill, not quite a mountain. It was thickly grown with trees and vines. He looked closely to figure out what was different about this forest from others he'd seen. Then he realized it was because of the big trees. Most of the forests around the country had been cut down back in the early colonial years. The forests grew back, with lots of trees, but all of them small. The trees in the forest Ulysses saw, though, were big, and looked like they had been big even when Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

Ulysses stopped to eat a little cheese—not much, just a little. That's when he noticed that the birds and the animals started creeping up close to him. And they seemed to be talking to him. Not in words, of course, but kind of shining their messages to him. Ulysses ignored this at first, then began to reconsider. All the animals and birds seemed to be telling him the same thing. Since when have all the birds and animals ever been able to agree with each other? Maybe there was something to the message. The animals and birds were warning him of danger. Beautiful danger, but danger nevertheless. The squirrels in particular kept chattering the same thing over and over, not realizing that if he did not understand their words the first time, he wouldn't understand them no matter how many times they repeated themselves.

A moment later a woman was standing in front of him. He smiled because he was sure that it was a dream. She was tall and lissome. Frankie, what does lissome mean? You don't know either? Well, whatever it means, that is what she was. I think it means she was skinny. Write that word down on your Sir Walter Scott list. She wore green clothes: green pants, a green vest, and a green blouse. It looked like green deerskin, if there could be such a thing. Her arms were strong and bare. Her feet were bare too, but had leathery skin that no sharp stones could scratch. And her hair was a totally unbelievable comber of bright red.

"You're tired," she said in a voice like honey.

Ulysses said, “A man’s always tired when he’s on a journey.”

“You’re hungry,” she said.

“I got plenty of cheese,” he answered.

“You smell like it,” the woman smiled.

Ulysses knew he should be offended, but he found himself smiling at her. The animals and birds, who a moment earlier had been warning him of danger, were now peeping and chirping about how wonderful this woman was. The gentle waves of sound totally broke down his cares and carried his caution away like flotsam from a logjam.

“Come with me, rest and be refreshed,” she said, extending her hand. Ulysses suffered but a touch of her fingers and he was on his feet, following her, and his horse following him.

Within a minute or two, Ulysses could hear the roaring of great cataracts. Within another minute or two, he could see them. The frothing water of the creek was perfectly white and the pool of still water off to the side was perfectly clean. The rocks at the bottom were, Ulysses knew, several feet from the surface, but looked like they were only an inch away. The woman sat Ulysses down by this pool and started removing his boots. Soon his feet, like hers, were in the soothing water. From somewhere she had gotten a leather pouch, from which she unwrapped some brown hunks of food. Ulysses did not even ask what it was, but began to eat.

He was astonished at its goodness. “What is this?” he asked.

“It’s kanuchi,” she said. “The Cherokees who used to live just over on the other side of the river used to make it. It is ground-up nuts mixed with enough corn meal to keep it from being sticky.”

I mentioned to Bert that my Dad had told me about kanuchi, but had never made any.

Ulysses kept eating it until he felt the wind blowing the woman’s hair against his face. He looked into her face, now very close to his. Her eyes were green. I mean, *green,* as soothing a green as her hair was fiery red. Everything was green, except the water, which was clear.

“Welcome to Wolverton Mountain,” she whispered. “My name’s Sissy. I am the daughter of the Sun. Of course, the Sun keeps the Earth alive, so all of its creatures are the children of the Sun.”

“Well, pleased to meet you, Sissy. I’m Ulysses.”

He somehow could tell that she knew this already.

“Come, sleep with me on my bed,” she said.

Now Ulysses knew he was having a vision of some kind. Maybe this is what happens right when you are dying? But Sissy’s flesh was firm enough, and seemed very real, when he touched it after she had slipped out of her vest and blouse. Her breasts and hair floated as if in water. He could feel helpless power arising within him, as she made his clothes slip away. He was afraid to look at the rest of her body. But a touch of her fingers, and he was with her up on a soft ledge of springy soil over which grew a solid velvety layer of moss, spattered with little pearls of water thrown up by the rapids. Her flesh smelled fresh, and she made Ulysses’s flesh smell the same, despite his long journey. As she lay on her back, all of the mosses started exuding a kind of whitish fluid, a kind of milk, or perhaps it was uncounted numbers of tiny

microscopic moss sperm looking for uncounted numbers of tiny moss eggs. Ulysses melted into her. He had never felt such power escape from him.

They awoke just as the sun was setting. A beam of red sunlight shot past her red hair and reflected in a little gem of water on the moss. Her hair no longer floated as Ulysses looked down upon her when he pushed himself up from the sucking intimacy of the mosses.

He looked around at the birds and the animals arrayed around them, staring motionlessly. He saw his own nakedness and was not ashamed. He glanced again at the birds and the animals. Now they looked, just a little bit, like men.

"We're so glad you chose to join us," said Sissy as she lifted her naked body from the bed, pushing sweaty hair away from her forehead.

With a great effort, Ulysses answered, "I am on a journey. I cannot join you."

"All of you men are always on journeys," said Sissy, now sitting up and hugging her knees. "On journeys to get to places where you will be no happier than here."

Ulysses looked around at the animal men who had watched them make love. "You expect me to be one of them?"

"Can you think of a better life?" she said, throwing him a wise glance. "Maybe living in a dirty city or working like a slave on a farm, whether you are a slave or not, or fighting in that war?"

"What war?" asked Ulysses, then he added, "Oh, that one.

"No," continued Ulysses. "I am on a journey of love."

"Well then, you have arrived at your destiny." She looked up at the animals and birds, who nodded with her. "This is the heart of love in the world. I am the heart of love. I am the goddess of love, or as close to it as you are going to find anywhere. You'll have to wait your turn next time, plenty of men in line ahead of you, but it's worth the wait. Isn't it?" she asked the animals and the birds, who nodded.

"You have given me pleasure, but not love," said Ulysses, struggling against himself.

"Look, young man. You don't know what love is. But I know a thing or two about it."

Ulysses looked into her eyes, realizing that she might not be the young woman she appeared to be, but as old as the ghosts of the trees.

"I see," said Ulysses, "that you are indeed a goddess. A goddess of love, perhaps *the* goddess of love. I might have spoken too soon; you are not just pleasure. But what I seek is not just love in general but a particular love of a particular woman, a woman who will grow old and maybe even grow ugly first, but the woman to whom I have tied my fate. I must find her."

"You will not find her," said Sissy.

"How do you know? Are you an all-knowing as well as an all-embracing goddess? If so, tell me her name, the name of my beloved."

Sissy was silent.

"Well, then, I must demand that you let me go," said Ulysses.

"No, I cannot do that," answered Sissy.

Suddenly Ulysses had an insight. He had a lot of those, you know. He said, “I think I understand. You cannot release me, because you have never in fact confined me.”

Sissy was silent. Then she spoke with a voice that seemed old and wretched, “Well, then, go. Go and get yourself killed as you search for a love that cannot possibly still be waiting for you. But you cannot get there unless I tell you the way.”

“Well, then you had better do so,” said Ulysses, starting to reach for his clothes which were strewn about.

“You must go to the Mountain of Death,” said the goddess in her old-woman voice. She was starting to become transparent. “You can’t miss it. Go down to the river, and you will find a canoe. In the canoe you will find a jug of moonshine. Float downstream until you see the mountain on the other side of the river, far in the distance. Then cross the river and follow the trail. Stay on the trail, no matter what else you do. When you get to the mountain, climb it and find the cave. In the cave are the spirits of the dead and they will tell you how to get home, since that must be where you are going.”

Then Sissy started to wrinkle up until she was very old and bony.

Ulysses spoke. “Thank you, Sissy. You have blessed me by telling me how to go, even more than by blessing my carnal dreams as you did before. By sending me on my way with your blessing, you have shown yourself to indeed be a goddess of love.”

Immediately, there was a gust of wind, after which the animals, and Sissy, were gone. All that was left was a few chunks of kanuchi on a little cloth on a bank of dried-up moss.

“Well,” I said to Bert, “that was the best part yet.” I recognized the story of Odysseus and Circe.

“It gets better,” Bert told me.

“You had me pretty horny there for a few minutes, until Sissy turned out to be the spirit of an old woman.”

Bert settled down into the bed and drew me into it with her. She snapped out the candle with her fingers. “You going to love me when I’m old, even older than now, as old as Sissy? When you’re too old to get horny?”

Chapter 13

Ulysses left his horse by the river, since he knew he could take it no further. Then he walked along the river. It was wide and allowed a view of a big sky. Some stretches of water were smooth, some with little eddies, some with shallow white water. He looked across into Confederate territory, further away than a bullet could travel. The trees on the far side looked just like the ones on the near side, though to a black man it was a different world. Or not so different. There were free blacks in the north and in the south, too. But if someone kidnapped you, and claimed that you were their runaway slave, how could you prove them wrong?

And then, just as Sissy promised, there was a canoe. The oars had handles of green deerskin. They had to belong to Sissy. The jug was there, too. He got into the canoe and shoved off into the current. The Ohio would take him to the Mississippi, which would take him south to his destination.

At first the canoe moved along at the same pace as Ulysses had seen the water move. But then the air glistened, the water sang, and the canoe slipped downstream at a rapid pace. The forests on either side of the river glowed in an unnatural green, more like a rusty penny than a forest. The land to the south rose into ever more precipitous bluffs until finally there appeared before him a tall mountain with a summit swathed in mists and only occasionally visible from the river. Ulysses was fairly certain there was no such mountain on the maps he looked at as a student in a geography class at Harvard.

The canoe slipped toward the south bank, the left bank, the rebel bank, the dangerous bank, and moved like an arrow right into a green slough filled with cattails he dared not eat. It came to rest on a bank of low sedges and almost tossed him out. The saddlebags he brought were inconvenient as baggage, but they were all he had. And why did he even need them? He took no notes; memories were seared on this mind. He took no food, other than the last of the cheese. But he needed to keep the little cask of moonshine intact for the people he knew he was going to meet very, very soon.

The mountain loomed before him. The trees at its base were stunted because they grew in poor gravel. They appeared to be scrubby oaks and elms. A trail led up steeply around cliffs and boulders. Ulysses started climbing the trail. Soon he was into the fog. He caught occasional glimpses of the summit, gray and spare and stark against a misty sky. The gray limestone had fish skeletons in it that seemed to swim without actually moving. He was soon in a forest of little pines with twisted branches and short needles and cones that could only be opened by giant jaybirds that circled about and landed on them. Now the rocks were slick and frequently covered with moss. The gravel of the trail crunched under his feet as it became steeper and steeper. Stringy light green plants hung from the short branches. The intense colors kept changing, first a vivid green, then a burnished brass, then a sick blue.

Then there appeared before him a small cavern entrance, from which issued a large sound. It was a slippery sound of groaning and moaning, with little titters of bat-like laughter. Ulysses knew this was the cavern he was supposed to enter. When he was inside, he stood on a ledge and looked into a vastness of space.

Below him was an ocean of flesh. At least, it was the color of white man's flesh, though flecked with an occasional black or red scab. Each bit of flesh started to form into a person, then dissolved again. The eyes on these people, when they briefly took form, were big and lidless. The waves were usually low and undulating. But sometimes a cluster of humanlike forms would gather together and start to climb over each other, each one trying to push the other down, resulting in a large crested wave. The ones that reached the top would wrestle with one another until one of them was triumphant. This person would then hold up a drippy arm in victory, before the whole wave would sag back down into uniformity.

Ulysses realized he was looking at hell. Forever and forever and forever and forever these souls would scramble over each other, fighting to reach a position of domination, before immediately falling into oblivion. What they wanted to do in life, they now had the privilege of doing forever in death. Brief cries of exultation would dissolve into the general moaning.

The cavern was breathing. Ulysses forced himself in against the outbreathing, then found himself drawn inexorably toward the cliff edge as the cavern breathed in. He could find no jutting rock to hold onto. He dropped to the ground to at least hide from the wind that was now getting strong.

When the wind died down briefly, Ulysses knew he had to act quickly. He got out the jug and pulled out the stopper. In moments, the sweet alcohol fumes seemed to fill the space. Little shafts of light came and went about him. He knew they were spirits. One of them stopped briefly before him and held out what must have been arms. Ulysses let the being grasp the jug and jam it toward what must have been a mouth. Once the spirit had drunk, it took form before Ulysses' eyes. It was a white, semi-transparent form of the Heir Apparent.

"Great corn!" said the spirit. "You can smell the feet of the boy that plowed it. So, Ulysses, what are you doing here? You're not dead yet." It was the same voice that Ulysses remembered and hated. Only the time for hatred was long past.

"I didn't know that you had died," said the former slave.

"I was in charge of Confederate forces in one of the battles," said the spirit. "I got shot through the heart. War is hell, my boy, even more than hell is. Let me guess, boy. You are heading back to the plantation to claim what you think is yours."

"To claim what I know is mine," Ulysses answered.

"No hard feelings, boy," said the spirit. "Ain't no niggers and whites down here in hell. Once we get all the humanity steeped out of us, there's no more color, except that sick amber color you can see down there in the pit. A few people cling to their old colors, but there's no point in it. I imagine you'll be wanting to talk to Mother."

The next spirit that fluttered around and grabbed the jug turned out to be the Old Lady.

"Why, ma'am!" exclaimed Ulysses. "You're dead! I'm so sorry, ma'am. I loved you so."

"And I loved you too, Ulysses, though not as much as I do now, bringing that whiskey. *Woo-oow!* I don't have much time to tell you what I got to tell you." She slurped and burped.

"Please, ma'am. I don't want to miss a single word."

"Good. You still got the copy of the will I wrote for you?"

"It has not left my side, ma'am."

"Good. My idiot son here burned the one I left for the family."

"Sorry, Mom," said the first spirit. "I really thought it was the right thing to do."

"Well," said the spirit of the Old Lady. "Makes no difference now. The family would have destroyed Penelope's copy of the will, too…"

"Does she yet live, O Spirit?" Ulysses could barely speak.

"You don't see her here, do you? Yes, she's still down at the plantation. Only it's been destroyed, pretty much. The house is a bombed-out shell from the battle that took place there. The Union won that one. As soon as they did, Penelope came running out demanding to see the Union general. She showed him the will. He just assumed that she was a white woman and that the land was hers. When someone told him she was a slave and that the will was not valid, he just looked at her and looked some more. Then he smiled really big, and said, *This will is valid. A slave? Well, she is the new owner, by God. That'll show those rebs.*

"Now the will, as I wrote it, said that she was the heir, and whomsoever she chose to marry. Sorry, Ulysses, but I had to leave it to her, who carries my husband's blood in her veins. And then what happened next was hard to believe. All the local landowners and their sons, who just lost their plantations, as well as all of the cousins of the family, heard about it, and immediately trotted themselves over to the estate where Penelope lived, and they camped all around. Formed a solid ring. And one spoke for all when he told Penelope, *You ain't gonna leave this here place until you marries one of us.* Nothing to be done about it, since the Union troops up and left. They left one officer behind to act as magistrate, but he couldn't do much other than offer advice. And, if necessary, validate a marriage.

"Now some of the men, they were ready to move right in and give the woman a try. Calm down, young man. They didn't get very far. The magistrate said that it was possible that forcing the heiress into carnal relations might invalidate any possibility of a legitimate marriage. So, they backed off.

"We had a pretty good herd and a lot of food stored away, and kegs of brandy, some of which the Union troops took, but much of which they left. So, these suitors are all camped around the old manse, spending their days eating and drinking while they wait for Penelope to choose one of them. She put them off as long as she could. She said she'd choose one of them as soon as she finished making the wedding quilt. She was always stalling. She kept changing her mind about what the design would be. Angels, she decided, then she changed her mind and wanted to sew images of trees. She kept starting over and over. Finally, some of the men stalked into her room, which is to say, stepped through a big hole in the wall, and told her she had to quit

her dilly-dallying in shimmy-shammying and make up her mind. And that they were going to plan a little thee-ater for her, where they could show off their talent to her so she could choose."

"They had a southern planter's talent show?" Ulysses asked, terribly confused.

"I don't know," said the Old Lady. "I died right about then. But you better get yourself down there right quick in a hurry or you will find yourself be-reft of all you have desired. To get there—my time grows short—just follow the trail. No matter what. No matter what. Oh, and thanks for the whiskey." Then she and her son vanished into the air.

Ulysses called out into the dank air of the cave. "But I don't know where I am. How am I supposed to get home?"

He was answered by deafening silence. Even the fungus-colored spirits were sloshing around in utter silence. Ulysses stood and found himself blown out of the cave. He protected his face with his arms as he clambered through the little entrance. Once outside, he looked back in the direction he had come. Then he looked forward. The trail forward led down the mountain on the other side and out into a vast forest. The trail was slick with mist, and sometimes he had to hold onto the branches of the stubby pines in order to descend, but when he stepped off the mountain he was suddenly in hot, still, dry air and full sunshine.

Bert had just told me the story of Odysseus visiting hell, and then heading back to his palace.

Chapter 14

A few nights later, I brought a nice steak home from work for Bert. It was a fresh shipment that Judson got from a local farmer who'd just butchered a calf that injured its leg, and there was a line of people to buy the meat. But Judson gave me first choice. He even told me to have a good time. I could tell in his eyes that, even though he hated Bert because she was black, he was softening a little, and maybe wasn't such a bad son of a bitch after all. Soon I had the meat on a spit over an open fire in Bert's yard.

"This is a lot of meat," said Bert. For such a fat woman she didn't eat much. I think her body was just storing up fat for a famine that never came.

As if on cue, Bert came driving up in a new Model T.

"Well, looky here," said Bert.

"Just don't ask me where I got it," said Bert.

"I never ask you where you get anything," I said.

As we were eating steak and potatoes and collard greens, Bert asked Bert, "So, how's skeeter bug treating you?" He couldn't have been too worried about his sister, or else he wouldn't have asked her when I was present.

"I've been telling him The Story," she answered.

"How far you got?"

"We just finished Ulysses visiting Hell."

"Oh," said Bert. "The good part's coming up. Mind if I listen?"

"Well, why don't you tell it?" Bert asked her brother. "Your story too."

"Sounds like fun," I said. Soon we were all in the living room with one candle on the little coffee table as Bert began his version of the story.

Ulysses was all by himself in the Confederacy at War. Can't get much worse for a black man than that. Jeez.

Then coming on the south wind, he smelled a terrible stench. He had never smelled rotting human flesh before but he knew this must be what it was. And he found a battlefield strewn with corpses. He could hear soldiers over a little hill, and he peeked at them. It was Union soldiers. They were hauling away rebel corpses from the main part of the battlefield. They hadn't gotten to this little bit over the rise, or maybe they didn't know it was there. Battle couldn't have been more than a day or so earlier, but it was hot. Anyway, Ulysses, he thought he could go ask the soldiers for help. But he looked around. Those gears started cranking away in his mind, just like my Model T out there, and he told himself there wasn't anything they could give him that he couldn't get for himself. He found a dead soldier and took his pistol, his rifle, and his ammunition pack. Didn't take any confederate dollars; useless, you know. Ulysses, he grabbed more ammunition from another dead soldier to go with it. And he found a horse standing off in

the woods. Union horse? Confederate horse? Horse don't care. It even had a saddle. Finally, a suitable place for the saddlebags he still had with him. He even had a little moonshine left that the two spirits didn't drink.

Ulysses rode south. He knew he had to follow the trail. And wouldn't you know it, the trail opened right up before him. He knew he had to follow the trail no matter what. Off to his left there was what looked like a mud flat, but which looked solid enough. To the right, the trail continued through the forest undergrowth. Then the horse stood stock-still at the edge of a pit. The pit was filled with rattlesnakes. These rattlesnakes seethed and writhed all over each other, their rattles creating a deafening sound. All the snakes turned their beady eyes on Ulysses and the horse. They stuck their tongues out to taste the air. Pretty soon the random lines of their bodies lined up.

"Like along magnetic field lines," I said. Bert looked at me blankly, so I said, "That was something I read about in the library."

Bert continued. It looked to Ulysses like the mud flat would be better. But he knew his instructions were to not leave the trail no matter what. And the trail led right down through the snakes. He finally decided to go through the snake pit. This sounds crazy, I know, but remember he's just visited Hell, so things that seem strange to us didn't seem so strange to him. The horse wouldn't move until finally Ulysses got down from the horse and led him on the trail. The moment the horse took the first step, the mud flat started to burble up with big bubbles of mud, and a hot mist came out. As dangerous as the snakes were, the mud flat would have been certain death.

I asked Bert, "Why were all those snakes in the pit? I mean, what made them want to all crawl into that pit? Nothin' for them to eat there."

"I'm just telling the story the way I heard it," he answered.

And she was. It was the story of Odysseus sailing between Scylla and Charybdis.

Ulysses led the horse down into the snake pit. The snakes didn't strike at the horse's legs. They only attacked Ulysses's boots. But they were weak and couldn't bite through. As Ulysses started up out of the pit on the other side, snakes started falling on him from the trees. But as fast as one would fall, he would grab it and sling it away. One snake bit its own tail and formed a ring that hovered in the air for a while after Ulysses slung it.

Ulysses got back on the horse and continued down the trail. He was getting hungry. The trail led through an undergrowth of little trees. They were pawpaw trees, and just loaded with fruit. Ulysses ate to his heart's content, and there was grass for the horse. Eating that much fruit can do something to your gut, but the good outweighed the bad, and Ulysses was mighty happy as his horse trotted down the trail. After a while the trail joined a road.

Ulysses thought he was being careful, avoiding human contact and all, but who should ride out in the road in front of him but a rebel soldier. Ulysses could think pretty fast, but not quite this fast. He kicked his horse and it started off at full speed. Then another soldier come out after him. And another. He kept changing direction, trying to get away. He wished he'd stayed back with Sissy. Then there was another soldier ahead of him. He was surrounded on three sides.

The fourth side was a big river. I don't know which one. But he kicked his horse again, and the horse jumped into the river and started swimming. It was a wide, wide river, maybe the Mississippi, and the horse kept swimming for hours.

"Horse can't swim that long," I said.

"I'm just telling it the way I heard it," said Bert, who stopped to light a cigar.

"Who knows where that horse come from?" Bert added helpfully while her brother puffed. "Maybe it was Sissy's horse. Maybe it was a man that Sissy changed into a horse."

"I like that," I said. "Let's go with that one."

"Anyway," said Bert, resuming his story.

The horse came to an island. It was covered with tall trees, tupelos and southern red oaks and water oaks and birches, I mean big birches, not like the little ones you usually see.

"And some cypresses," added Bert.

"I was getting to that," said Bert.

When the horse got to the muddy shore, he immediately took Ulysses into a realm of very deep shade. Only this shade wasn't like Sissy's shade. This was dark and gloomy shade. But it was a place to hide so Ulysses loved it. The horse knelt down to rest. Ulysses got off and walked around. Almost right away he saw a gingerbread house.

"Dag nabbit, you can't expect me to believe that," I told him. "That's from Grimm's Fairy Tales. Mother told us that one when we were kids. The old witch and the little boy and little girl."

"I'm just telling the story," said Bert.

"Maybe it just looked like a gingerbread house," said Bert. "Cedar shakes with fungus instead of gingerbread with icing."

"Who knows?" said Bert. "I'll just get on with the story."

Ulysses couldn't believe his eyes. Since nothing made sense anyway, he figured he would just knock on the door. And who should answer…

"Let me guess," I interrupted. "A beautiful woman."

"Oh, there's no describing her," said Bert.

The woman's flouncy dress was as bright as sunlight and her skin was as dark as night. And did she have it. You know what I mean? She had it up front, and she had it in back. Not as good as Bertie here, but she was pretty good. And she smelled wonderful, one moment like jasmine, the next like rose petals, the next like orange blossoms, the next like hucklesunny. And her eyes. You look into those eyes, and you see the center of the universe. They took in everything and give out nothing, those eyes. Skin as smooth as velvet. Not a wrinkle, not a scar, nothing wrong. And her hair, a lot of it, was like snakes, only they were really beautiful snakes. Lots of tiny snakes, all different colors, all dancing to a rhythm. It was all lots of tiny curls and looked like a big cushion sitting on top of her head. Her name was Calypso. (This was, in fact, the original name from Homer's story.)

No words were exchanged. Ulysses knew that once he crossed that threshold he wasn't coming back out for a while, not at least until Calypso had him in her web for a while. Her bed

was one of those hammocks, and no matter how much she and Ulysses swung around in it, it never let them hit the floor. It was like being weightless. Every place was every possible place when they made love. Once Ulysses found himself kissing her toes. Normally not such a pleasant thing, but with Calypso, even her toes smelled like fine milled soap, not like that tallow stuff we make around here, but really fine soap, and the finest perfume. Until you've seen one of Calypso's toes, you don't know what God intended a toe to be like.

"You're about to wear me out," Ulysses said to Calypso about the fourth time they started going on a swing. "You a goddess or something?"

"Every woman's a goddess," said Calypso.

Ulysses thought about the Heir Apparent's Daughter—about whom he'd forgotten to ask when he was in the cave—and disagreed with Calypso, but didn't feel like talking about it.

"What, you need a rest?" asked Calypso.

"Please. Just let me sit outside in your beautiful forest awhile."

Calypso arose and stood like a magnificent statue while Ulysses, drinking in the sight of her, stumbled to his feet and out the door. The horse was still kneeling.

Ulysses gathered his thoughts. He was overwhelmed with the experience of Calypso. A little too overwhelmed. He felt that he wouldn't be able to stand much more of this rapture. If the experience had maybe been just a little less overwhelming, he might have thought of nothing but staying with Calypso. But he was so tired he began to think of getting away. And he'd only been there, how long? He didn't know which direction he was looking so he didn't know whether it was morning or afternoon. The water of the river seemed to be flowing both directions, so he couldn't figure it out by knowing that the rivers mostly flowed south. He couldn't have been there too long, because he had not eaten but was not hungry.

"Want more ambrosia?" Calypso called out.

More? He couldn't remember having had any.

"I'm going to go get more ambrosia," said the goddess, who came out of the house and walked down the trail to a gigantic birch tree. Its bark peeled off in pinkish-tan sheets as thin and strong as paper. And there was a spigot drilled into the sapwood. Calypso had two mugs and she filled both of them with water from the tap.

"I've actually tapped birch trees," I told Bert and Bert. "Gotta boil it down a lot for syrup, but if you just drink it as it is, it's like the best water you ever had."

Bert continued.

The ambrosia revived Ulysses, and they went at it again. But each time they went at it, Ulysses took longer and longer to recover. Finally, he just sat outside all morning thinking about nothing at all. It wasn't like those cattails—you tell him about those, Bert?—because he *could* think, but he was just too tired. But after the midday meal, which was some nice grilled fish that Calypso said she had speared from the river, with pecans and hot pepper on them, Ulysses decided he wanted to think about what was going on. Calypso even made a little notebook for him out of birch bark so he could write in it with charcoal. And that was the written record of his journey. Drawings too, of course. For reasons I am about to explain, these notes and drawings

have been lost. Maybe Ulysses later drew and wrote all over again, but if they still exist, nobody has found them.

Finally, Ulysses reminded himself of the purpose of his journey: to find Penelope. And there was some urgency, since one of those men might force her to marry him. Of course, that wasn't likely to happen right away, because each man wanted to be the man, and wouldn't let any of the others slip in ahead of him. I imagined that the men were like a bunch of Myrmidons—the warriors of Achilles in the *Iliad*, who had originally been ants—perfectly balanced against one another while Penelope looked down on them.

Bert continued. Ulysses looked out from the island in every direction. Both shores were distant. And he could hear the clamor of war from the distant shores. Calypso confirmed his fears by telling him that war was constantly raging and there was no place for him to go. He would be dead if he left this sanctuary of love.

One morning, after a few months, Ulysses awoke with a powerful desire to see Penelope again. He packed his guns, ammunition, some little pastries Calypso made, and his notebook and went out to his horse, who walked gracefully around the island. He saddled the horse, and gave it a kick, expecting it to dive out into the water. It just bent its neck over and browsed on something.

"Horse knows where it's good," called Calypso. "And he doesn't even have me. But you do. Come on back in."

"No, I don't believe I shall," said Ulysses. "I love Penelope, and that's all there is to it."

"If you come back in this house, my man, you sleep with me."

"Well, then, I guess I won't be coming back in your house."

"Suit yourself. I'll see you in a little bit."

But she didn't. The weather had been perfect all the time Ulysses had been on the island, but how it started raining heavily and was very cold. Ulysses dug a hole for himself in the leaf litter to try to stay warm. He was miserable but persisted. Then came a hot dry wind, and all the leaves curled up. The birch tree's flow of ambrosia stopped. Ulysses tried to drink from the river, but its waters had turned to blood, the way they did in the Bible story. At least they were red. He meditated himself into a trance and persisted. Finally, after a month, Calypso opened the door and a gentle warm rain instantly brought the trees back to life and cleared away the bloody water, and the birch tree started dripping again. And for the first time, the clamor of warfare from the distant shore had ended.

"Very well, I see that you mean business," Calypso said to him. "I'll let you go. I can see that you are going to pine away and die if you don't get back to your precious Penelope. But you're going to have to build a raft. I don't have any tools here, so you're going to have to piece something together using logs and vines."

Ulysses ate ravenously of the food that Calypso brought out to him, and bathed in the river. And he started to work right away on the raft. The thing he built could hardly be called a raft, but he was in a hurry.

"So," he asked Calypso over a meal together, at which she wore her most stimulating outfit, "the war is over? I don't hear anything."

"There never were any battles on the shore," said Calypso. "Except for that one the day you got the horse."

"Then what was I hearing?" His fork, made of river cane, held a piece of fish in the air.

"I made those noises," Calypso said. "So that you would stay with me. But it looks like nothing is going to work. So why should I keep up the pretense? Let me tell you what to do. When the raft gets you to shore, you will see the path. The one you were supposed to be on anyway."

"But how will I find the path? I have no idea where I will end up on the shore. You can't steer a raft very well."

"I'll do what I can," said Calypso. "Now, it's almost night, so you'll be heading out in the morning, I suppose. And you'll never see me again. Think about that. Never again. Say it to me."

"I'll never see you again," said Ulysses.

"Then what do you say that we have just one more night together, you know, for the memories? Then you can leave."

She stood and moved in such a way that everything that her clothes concealed was visible. She clasped her hands to her heart. Ulysses stood up. Calypso whirled around to embrace him. They stumbled off to the hammock and had the kind of love you can only have if you've been saving up for it through storm and drought.

Come morning, Ulysses said, "Well, maybe I can stay one more day."

And the day after that.

And days turned to weeks. Each day, Calypso said, "Just one more time, then you can go see your Penelope." But this did not go on for too many weeks. The day came when Ulysses was again ready to go, and this time, Calypso was ready to let him. The raft was soggy and barely held Ulysses above the water—the horse did not want to go and was left behind—but he felt it moving rapidly in the current. When he looked back at Calypso's island, it wasn't there.

Bert and I were tired, almost like we were Ulysses. And, I had to admit, there had been a time or two when I had found that Bert, as Odysseus found Calypso, was more than I could handle, and I was perfectly content to save up my energy for some other night.

Chapter 15

The next day was Sunday and Bert took Bert and me on a drive in the Model T. We stopped at a little restaurant that would only allow me to enter. I brought food out and we ate under a scruffy elm tree. That was where Bert continued his story.

The raft was moving along, faster and faster, in the current, and it must have taken him clear down south to right near the old plantation. And at just the right place, it started steering itself toward the shore, to a nice sandy beach, just about the only sandy beach around. Then the strangest thing happened, though those of us living in Oklahoma might not think it so strange. From out of nowhere come this storm. Huge wind, thrashing up the river waves higher than Ulysses's head, breaking up the raft. Ulysses grabbed hold of one of the tree trunks. It started ramming toward the shore and was headed right toward a big rock and would have impaled Ulysses, only he let go at the last minute. A wave threw him into a swamp, under cypresses. With the last of his strength, he dragged himself onto solid, or almost solid, land, and fell asleep.

Who knows how long he slept, but he awoke to the sound of the laughter of women. He pulled himself up from the ground and looked toward the source of the sound. It came from clean rapids in the river. He half-walked, half-crawled over to where the young women were doing their laundry, pounding clothes on the rocks and washing away the lye soap. They were as nekked as the morning and their bodies were so beautiful…"

"Bert's just making that part up," said Bert. "They wasn't nekked and you know it. They'd have to be stupid to be out nekked where anyone could see them."

"Very well, I made that part up," said Bert. "But wait till you hear this, and you'll see why it wasn't impossible. They were from a cult that had its little village in the woods."

Ulysses stumbled into their presence. They screamed. *It's an alligator! No, it's a rabid mangy dog! It's a wolf!* Each of these girls had her own opinion. Even after Ulysses spoke, some of the girls would not believe he was human. You see, what was left of his clothes were in tatters and caked with mud.

"But he's as ugly as an animal, if he's a man," said one of the girls.

"No, I don't think so," said the tallest of the girls. "Let's give him a wash and see what he looks like then. We shall avert our eyes while this man cleanses himself. And we just happen to have some pants and a shirt here in the laundry, and he can put them on." They gave Ulysses soap, scented with the fragrance of magnolia, and a washcloth. Once he had bathed, Ulysses felt invigorated, even more than he had with Calypso. With Calypso, he had felt enchanted, which is a different feeling from invigorated. The pant legs and the shirt sleeves were too short for him, and he could not button the shirt across his strong chest. But he did find a pocket for the will, which he still carried with him.

"You are coming home with us," said the tallest.

"And whom might I be addressing?" asked Ulysses.

"They call me Nautica," she said. "I don't know what my name was before I joined The Family." I knew that, in Homer's epic, her name was Nausicaä.

When Ulysses said where he was going, the girls looked at each other.

"You're almost home," said Nautica.

Ulysses started jumping for joy and could not understand why the girls were just staring at him silently. He yelled, "I am going to see my beloved Penelope. I know she still lives, and is waiting for me. You see, I have been to Hell and back, and when I was in Hell they told me that Penelope was still there waiting for me. You don't believe me?"

"Oh, we believe you, all right," said Nautica. "But first you have to come with us."

And the girls gathered their laundry, most of it dried at least enough to not be dripping anymore, and loaded it onto a wagon. Ulysses sat beside Nautica as she held the reins and led the mules along a little path through some water oaks and willow oaks up to a little clearing at the base of a rock. It was a big rock but was the only rock in the entire place. The buildings were made of wood poles with river cane thatch. It was their summer houses, with open eaves. There was a big round house in the center of the town.

"What color were the people?" I asked.

Bert said, "They weren't black, but otherwise, I don't know. You know, Bert?"

"No," said Bert.

"They were Cherokees," I said. "Or maybe Choctaws or Chickasaws."

"I'll bet you're right," said Bert. "Maybe that's where our Cherokee blood comes from."

"I don't think so," said Bert. "The story says that Ulysses went back to Penelope. I guess I can't be sure he didn't have any kids in that Indian village, if that's what it was, but I'm pretty certain Ulysses was impatient to get back to Penelope. Well, they built this big fire, and all the men and women and children gathered around, sitting on benches under a large roof. There was no front platform or anything. All the benches on all sides were equal."

"Sounds like a Cherokee council house," I said, but Bert and Bert ignored me.

"Everybody looked equal, but there was this man who, when he stood up, was obviously a little more equal than the others."

"Sounds like a Cherokee council meeting," I said.

Bert continued. "He wore the same clothes, but he just had a look in his eyes that showed he knew which direction the village was to take.

"Oh, father," said Nautica, rising after the man had stood. "We found this man down in the mud. Could it be the man who was prophesied to come to us?"

The man was the leader of The Family, also known as the Commune of the Elect. The brethren of the commune modeled themselves after the early Christians in the second chapter of Acts. They all lived together and had no private property or possessions, but shared everything. What's that, Bert? Even sharing spouses? I wouldn't know, but probably not. That would have led to a mess of trouble, and the story doesn't say anything about any trouble in the commune.

Ulysses answered her. “I do not believe that I am, for I am destined to return to my plantation and reclaim it.”

“Present your evidence,” said the leader. “The prophecy says that a man is to come who will wed my daughter Nautica. If you are that man, then you must do so. Nautica believes that you are. But we will listen to your evidence.”

“I am destined to wed Penelope,” said Ulysses. “The Old Lady who owned the plantation left it to Penelope, to whom I was engaged. I have on my person, though it has suffered considerable damage from water and mud, the document that affirms the part about Penelope.

“And I *will* return to her,” continued Ulysses. “I survived an encounter with the Cattail-Eater and the Cyclops. I have been past the cauldron and through the snakepit. I have been sent on my way by Sissy…”

“You met Sissy?” the girls all squealed.

“She regaled me on her mossy bank,” he answered. The girls swooned. “And I have been sent on my way by Calypso…”

“You met Calypso?”

“I swung with her in her webby bed,” continued Ulysses. The girls swooned again. “I turned from both, and chose the path to Penelope, with the blessings of both Sissy and Calypso.”

“Well,” said Nautica, “the man who has slept with Sissy and Calypso—both of them, can you believe it?—would not have time to even look at *me.*”

Ulysses turned to her with emotion beaming from his face. “Nautica,” he said, “you are supremely beautiful, but you are not Penelope. Your prophet will yet come. But all the gods of heaven are sending me back to Penelope, and they are doing so now. That means they want you to take me to her, if you know where she is.”

The leader looked into Ulysses’s eyes and said, “You have not yet had a fair chance to choose whether to stay with us or to continue on your journey.”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said Ulysses, “but the matter is already decided by forces far stronger than me: by Sissy, Calypso, the spirits of Hell…” But the people of the commune were not listening to him. About a dozen of the women gathered in the central area of the council chamber, beside the fire. They were dressed in beautiful robes…”

“I’ll bet the robes had feathers, beads, and porcupine quills,” I said. “Cherokees, sure enough.”

“I don’t know,” said Bert, who continued the story.

Nautica stood before the assembled women. Her dress was the most resplendent of all. Is that a real word? I’ve only heard it in this story. Anyway, she lifted her arms. Such delicate but strong arms! And she began to direct the choir. And that music!

“You’ve heard four-part harmony, haven’t you, Frank?” asked Bert.

“I sure enough have,” I said.

“Well, try to imagine this.” He described the choir. They were all sopranos and altos. But there were at least three soprano and three alto lines, forming complex harmonies that sounded like heaven itself. Ulysses stood and stumbled toward the choir. The women continued singing as

Nautica turned to face him with a big inviting smile. Her father stood and held out some handcuffs. Ulysses started to hold up his hands to be bound. For he could not imagine any greater bliss than to hear these voices. Some older women stood up in the seats surrounding the council fire, and joined them. These were the women who were too old to be in the choir but who still remembered the harmonic lines interweaving in a tapestry in which sound was color and color was sound and all was ambrosia. Little girls stood up and started singing, not quite in tune, but before long they would be in the choir also. Clearly, this was a choir that would never end. Ulysses was willing to lie, chained, before them and listen to them until he died. I recognized that this was the story of Odysseus hearing the Song of the Sirens.

Just before the leader would have clasped the cuffs around his wrists, Ulysses gave out a great cry, which caused the choir to stop abruptly. The silence was pain. Ulysses's cry was pain. The world was pain. And Ulysses said, "I need to find Penelope."

"Very well," said the leader, as everyone let out a disappointed sigh. The women of the choir joined the people on the benches and sat down in silence. "We know where Penelope is. But you are not going to just walk in to her house and have everything go back to normal."

"I am aware," said Ulysses, "that there is a bit of difficulty. But…"

"A bit of difficulty," the man said, looking around at his parishioners. His expression barely changed, but when the first person could tell that he was smiling just a little, that person started an eruption of laughter. The leader continued. "You, the man who has slept with both Sissy and Calypso, could fight ten men. But it so happens there are twenty."

"Twenty men?" asked Ulysses. "Twenty men doing what?"

"Sitting around and eating and drinking. But they won't let Penelope out, and they won't let you in."

"I heard about that from the Old Lady in Hell," said Ulysses.

"Should you and Penelope join together," continued the man, "and should a competent official pronounce you wed, you could then order those men to leave posthaste. But those men are a thick, smelly, prickly, rude barrier that will prevent any of the above things from happening. If you walk in there and they know who you are, well, your chances are not as good as those of any of the cows and sheep that they are slaughtering and barbecuing every night."

"Can you help me?" Ulysses blubbered.

"Only if you trust me and let me do what I must to you," said the leader.

The leader took Ulysses into a little hut. The story is not very clear about what happened inside that hut. But Ulysses and the leader entered, and two people walked out a few minutes later: the leader, and a frail young black woman named Minerva.

Chapter 16

By now, it was early summer, and the okra plants had grown. Bert and I were harvesting the first okra pods. We had to harvest them when they were just the right size: not so small as to be hardly worth eating, but not large enough to be hard and stringy. The ones that got too large, we just left them on the plant, stuck out forever like the organ of Priapetus, to let them mature and produce seeds for next year. And after supper, Bert resumed her story.

Ulysses was in disguise just as Odysseus was when he returned home in Homer's original story. He now looked like a frail young black woman named Minerva, who had been Penelope's servant. He approached the plantation on which he grew up, he was astonished by the devastation. Trees had been shattered and their bark blistered by cannon fire and gunshot. The walls of the manor house had big holes in them. But what most amazed Ulysses as he approached was the raucous rioting of the local white men, the former owners of small plantations, who entertained themselves with whiskey and barbecue and out-of-tune songs and stories about the good old days when slaves did all of the work. Ulysses approached the back door he knew so well.

"Now where the hell do you think you're going?" said one of the men, who grasped Ulysses's frail womanly arms and whisked her into the midst of the throng.

"My name is Minerva," said Ulysses. "I have returned. I understand that my master—that is, my former master—is dead, but that his slave—that is, his former slave, now the heiress—lives still and that she is here."

"I am," called out the strong voice of Penelope. She stood tall and was more queenly than any of those pimply pin-headed European queens. Her dress was tattered, but her brown hair shone with a shining cleanliness. Ulysses almost collapsed at the sight of her. "Why, Minnie! You have returned! How wonderful to see you! You know that your former master is dead, of course."

"I done been told that," muttered Ulysses in the broken English slaves had been taught to use to prove to their masters that they were stupid.

"You are welcome here, as my companion." Penelope extended her hand to Ulysses.

Ulysses looked down at his tattered clothes, and at his weirdly voluptuous form. He stepped into Penelope's magic circle, past the rude barrier of defeated southern males, as quickly as he could.

"Lord above," Penelope said to the person she thought was Minnie, after they had stepped inside the shattered walls. "No other women for me to talk to! You cannot imagine how I need a woman to talk with. Men are swine."

"Not all men, Miss Penelope, if I may say," said Minnie.

"Well, all the ones you can see around here," said Penelope. "Maybe they're not a fair sample, I'll warrant. But they are apparently what I have to choose from. Oh, Minnie, have you known any good men?"

"In the Biblical sense, Ma'am?" asked Minnie.

"In whatever sense you wish to tell me," said Penelope. "The old days are gone; call me Penny. Behold how white I am; yet I am ashamed of my whiteness, if whiteness means being like the men outside."

"Not all white men are like them, if I may say," said Minnie.

"You have known good white men?" asked Penny.

"Not in the Biblical sense, Ma'am," said Minnie.

Penny stared at her, then started laughing. When she finished, she wiped away a tear and said, "Minnie! Minnie! I can see we are going to have a great time together. God knows how I need a friend. Well, let's start by sharing a meal together. To make it look proper, I suppose you should serve me. Just in case any of those swine are watching. I've been fixing my own potatoes and vegetables and onions. Each of those men out there try to outdo one another with making barbecue for me, hoping that I will choose one of them as a husband, as if barbecue is a sufficient indicator of a good husband. Oh God, Minnie, this is all so crazy."

"I'll be right pleased to peel and bawl you some potatoes and onions, Miss Penny," said Minnie.

"And those men," said Penny. "When one of them brings a plate of meat in, he just eats me up with his gaze. See, it is purely a matter of who gets the estate. One of them has to marry me to get the estate. They'd marry me no matter what I looked like. But I happen to be beautiful."

"Oh, you are, Penny, you are. I done forgot how beautiful you was until I comes back."

"But now, when the man brings the meat—I think it is the turn of that swaggering fart-butted Tarleton boy tonight—he will be met by you, not by me. But, of course, Minnie, you are pretty good looking yourself."

"Thank you, Penny. I'm not used to thinking of myself as beautiful in the way of women."

"Don't let your black skin make you think they won't be leering at you, Minnie. Now, I must warn you. They won't make any moves toward me, but you are not similarly protected. Just be assured that they will know that any one of them who touches you is immediately withdrawn from consideration for marriage."

"Miss Penny, do you really need to choose one of them men as a husband?"

"Well, Minnie, they think I do. The will, the one recognized by the Union authorities, identifies the heirs as me and whoever I choose to marry. I don't suppose it has to be one of them, but they have me pretty much confined here. They have kept me fed and kept my other necessities—but nothing more—provided, but they could at any moment decide to begin starving me, in order to make my decision come a bit sooner.

"You see, Minnie, I told them that I would announce my decision as soon as I finished sewing all the things necessary for a proper household. They agreed to this, fools. They have no blame idea what things are necessary for a proper household. There is always one more sheet, one more swag, one more curtain, one more towel, to make. Not only that, but on some nights when I can't sleep, I sneak in and unravel the work I did the previous day. It sounds desperate, doesn't it, Minnie? You can imagine what I must be feeling.

"You ask if I must marry one of them. I suppose so. My heart is with a young black man, a slave like myself only he actually looked like one, named Ulysses. Now there is a man! He was, there is no other way to say it, beautiful. Not unlike you, Minnie, only in a masculine way. Fine features. Fine face. Most of all, his mind. His mind! He knew so much, and yet was always ready to share his knowledge in a way to help other people. He was working on how to improve our plantation before he left…"

Penny sniffled, and lifted her apron hem to dab at tears welling in her eyes. Minnie put her arm around Penny's shoulders, and looked into the darkness of memory that gathered outside along with the first shadows of sunset.

Penny could not resume speaking, so Minnie said, "I heard that part, Penny. About how the two of you was going to get married, but The Man, he went and took you back. All the while, he didn't know your Ulysses was underneath the carriage."

Penny looked up from her tears. "How did you know that part?" she asked.

"Word gets around," said Minnie. "All us other slaves, we knew all about Mr. Ulysses."

"Well," said Penny. "He will return. He will return! Do you believe that, Minnie?"

"Miss Penny, I cannot tell you how I know, but let me assure you that the forces of hell could not keep him away."

"But why would he come back? Off up north, wherever he went, he must have met many beautiful women, women he must have loved, and some of them must have loved him. How could he resist them, and come back to me, here, when he could not even know whether I am still alive?"

"I imagine that all you say must be true, about the other women and all. But the word that got around was that Mr. Ulysses loved you so much that he would come back no matter what. And if you was dead, Miss Penny, or had been married off to some white spook of a man—not that there aren't good white men, mind you, Miss Penny—he might just go off and die. Like I said, Miss Penny, he'll be back."

"Oh, Minnie, I wish I had your kind of faith. Oh, well. Tomorrow is another day. Meanwhile, dinner time is soon. The cicadas are already screeching. God, I wish there was something other than barbecue and potatoes and onions to eat."

"I can get you some wild herbs, Penny."

"How do you know about herbs?"

"I knows lots of things you don't know that I know. Shall I go gather us some herbs?"

"Why, that would be wonderful, Minnie. You are such a blessing!"

Minnie was just coming back with a basket of herbs when she met one of the men who was bringing a plate of meat to the house. Penny came out to meet both of them.

"If you value my love, you will bring a serving of meat for Miss Minnie also," said Penelope. "And you didn't wash this plate very well. It still has grease and juice on it from yesterday."

"As you wish, Ma'am," said the man, who left the plate and went back out to his comrades for a little more meat.

"Thank you, Minnie," said Penny. "I went ahead and peeled the potatoes…"

"Oh, I woulda done that, Miss Penny."

"Of course, you would have. But why? We are both just former slaves trapped, even yet, by our former rulers. If I ever get this plantation…"

"Oh, you will, Ma'am. Ulysses, he's coming back."

Penny's silence indicated that she did not want to pursue this discussion. She said, "Well, what herbs did you find?"

"Not much, this time of year, Ma'am. What with the greenbriars all finished up. But I did find you some wild carrots. And I got a few hickory nuts from last year. Not enough to fill you up, but they'll taste good in the carrots, so long as they aren't too molded or nothing. Now these wild carrots, the plants look pretty similar to wild parsnips and poison hemlock and such like. But I knows the difference…"

"You're the next best thing to having Ulysses here," said Penny. "I'll get the carrots washed and started in the pot. The fire is in the kitchen, under the open sky, in a nice little hole left by a Union cannonball."

Penny went inside the hulk of the house just as the man returned with a plate of food for Minnie. He handed it to her sullenly. Minnie sniffed it and knew something was wrong. The meat smelled faintly of feces. The white man must have thought Minnie was too stupid to know the difference.

Ulysses smiled. "Why, thank you, sir. This meat is even better than what you done brought to Miss Penny. I think I'll give her this meat instead of her'n. I am so flattered that you gave me the better portion…"

"I wouldn't do that, nigger," the man said.

Ulysses smiled and handed the plate back to the man. When he returned, with fresh meat, Ulysses asked him, "What did you say your name was?"

"Penelope knows right well what my name is."

"Well, your head looks like a gourd, so I'll just tell her that Gourd Head brought me some really fine meat. Unless you don't want me to tell her who brought me this fine meat."

"Name's Mackenzie," said the man.

Ulysses remembered the name. Oh, did he remember the name.

The next afternoon, Penny and Minnie had the potatoes and carrots already cooked by the time the man brought the meat. Minnie met him at the door.

"Thank you, Mister…what did you say your name was?"

"Name's Armbruster. Soon as Miss Penelope marries me, you're not worth squat," said the man.

Ulysses remembered the name. Oh, did he remember the name.

This time Ulysses had found some wild mustard greens. A little late in the year, but the young leaves at the top of the tough stems were still good. And the flowers. You can eat the flowers, you know.

The next afternoon, Minnie had already brought some sunflowers along with the wild carrots. It was too early for sunflower seeds, but this species had edible roots, and you can eat the flowers, you know.

When the man brought the meat, Ulysses said, "Thank you, Mister…"

"Rankin," the man said. "Make sure you mention it to Miss Penelope, you stupid nigger."

Ulysses remembered the name. Oh, did he remember the name.

And so it went, each day. Ulysses brought in new wild foods each day. Penny was frankly puzzled by the pile of wild nettles that Minnie brought, but loved them as soon as they were lightly boiled, which took all of the sting out of them. Another day he brought her honey locust pods, which were tough but sweet; another day, clover leaves; another day, chicory roots; another time, sorrel. It was already too late in the year for pokeweed. And the fruits that he brought to her were always special and always surprising: blackberries and wild plums in early summer; elderberries a little later. He never brought her any persimmons, because this whole story came to an end before they were ripe, and you don't want any unripe persimmons, let me tell you. And he brought spices from the forest, like bergamot and spicebush. You don't want to eat too much of them, but they made the meat and vegetables taste really nice. They made tea from wild sumac berries, but they had to use the old berries, and it didn't taste very good.

And each day, when a man brought meat, Ulysses remembered the name.

That included one day when the man who brought the meat actually seemed polite. He didn't seem to want to leave right away. Ulysses asked him, "Would you like some of our wild fruits? We can at least ask you to share dessert with us."

"Oh, no, Miss Minnie."

"You know my name?"

"I do, and that's a fact," he said. "Miss Minnie, please forgive the rudeness of my neighbors down there. We all know, but they will not admit, that the future is with you-all, not just Miss Penelope but with you too. All of you black people. The future, ma'am, is both black and white. I would be honored to eat with you but I can't. The others, they'd whup me for sure, thinking I was trying to sneak in past them. I'm sort of trapped, you know."

"You're trapped! What about us?" asked Ulysses.

"Just remember me, Miss Minnie. I'm Chateaubriand."

"French name?"

"Yes. My ancestors were Huguenots in France. We came here to America to keep from being killed. Which is why I don't believe anybody else should be killed. Not the blacks, and not

the Indians. And nobody should be enslaved. I can say it now that it's the law of the new land. But I believed it before, let me tell you."

Ulysses remembered the name. Oh, did he remember the name.

"You can't stop now!" I said when Bert stopped.

"Frankie, it's late. You gotta work tomorrow."

"Well, just set that alarm clock Bert brought for us."

"But you're Judson's druggist now. Don't want you pizening nobody by makin' mistakes when you're half asleep."

"But I can't sleep until I hear what happened to Minnie, I mean, Ulysses!"

"I'll get you to sleep, skeeter bug. And tomorrow *is* another day."

And there's not much in this world better than Bert's backrubs.

Chapter 17

The days were getting long, and after work, Bert and I wandered around in the lanes and fields and woods and tried to find edible plants like the ones in the story. We didn't find any, of course, except shriveled-up sumac berries. I, despite my perusal of botany books at the library, still didn't trust my ability to tell wild carrots from poison hemlock. And, truth be told, I didn't go to the library as much; I wanted to hear the end of Bert's story.

Which she continued.

One night, Penny and Minnie had a particularly good talk. About the good new days that just wouldn't come, days of light and freedom. About rumors they had heard of lynchings by whites who hated the fact that blacks had freedom in the cities, where the Union armies were still stationed. Lynchings by men who wore sheets and burned crosses as if they wanted to burn the very person of Jesus Christ Himself, so furious they were.

"My muscles are all tied up in knots," said Penelope. "I am in pain, Minnie. You probably are too. The weight of the world is on our shoulders."

"Like Atlas," said Minnie.

Penelope looked around at Minnie. "Who is that?"

"Why, that's from Greek mythology, Miss Penny."

"Quit calling me that. I'm just Penny. Now, where did you learn about Greek mythology?"

Ulysses had learned about it at Harvard, of course. But he couldn't tell her this. Or could he? He gave it a try. "I learned it up at Harvard, I did, Miss Penny."

Penny looked at Minnie dumbfounded. Then she smiled and they both started laughing. Minnie said, "Mr. Ulysses, he told us about it one time, in the kitchen it was. He learned it from a book the Old Lady let him read. It's this Greek God who held up the world."

"Ulysses," said Penelope. "Oh, Minnie, I wish I'd been there to hear him talk about it. I missed that time. Oh, Minnie, if he would just come back, how I would love him."

"I think he knows that, Penny. That's why he's coming back. Sure enough."

"Well, Minnie, my shoulder muscles hurt. Bet yours do too. What do you say we give each other massages? I don't mean little pats. I mean some real powerful man-like massages. You do me, then I'll do you. Why didn't we think of that before?"

Ulysses did not dare to say that, if he once touched his beloved, he might no longer keep his secret from her. But he knew he had to. He quivered in ecstasy at the thought that he might be touching his beloved, but was resentful at whatever gods had led him to this situation. Maybe Sissy and Calypso are laughing after all. Or was this the work of Nautica and her father? At least, he did not have to worry about having an erection, since the transformation Nautica's father had worked on him had been outwardly complete. His nipples tingled as he thought about this.

Penelope got up and walked to the one part of the house where there was a little measure of privacy. It was not complete—there was still a hole someone could look in—but none of the men would have allowed any of the other men to look in. They could have organized a schedule, especially when Penelope (and now her black companion) bathed at the little basin, but the men did not have enough comradeship to have organized any such thing. No man wanted any other man to have the privilege of watching the women.

"Here," said Penelope. "I will lie down on the ground, since my bed is out in the room that is missing half of its wall. Please, crouch beside me, and rub my shoulders. Then I will do the same for you." Not waiting for Minnie's response, Penny crouched down and lay on the ground. What Ulysses was not expecting was for Penelope to pull her blouse up over her head and clutch it to her breasts, leaving a bare back shining with sweat and grease in the light of a half-moon.

Colors flashed before Ulysses' eyes as he touched Penelope's shoulder blades. His breathing became spasmodic, and his heart beat erratically, but he could not let her know. He kneaded her shoulder blades strongly, then her spine, in an attempt to focus on the art and craft of massage instead of his powerful desire for her.

"Thank you, Minnie," said Penny after a few minutes. She sat up, still holding her blouse to her breast, but not moving to put it back on. "Now it is your turn. The floorboards are splintered, but if you don't rub against them, they won't poke you."

Ulysses threw his blouse above his head, just as Penelope had done, and clung his blouse to his ripe breasts. He slowly lowered himself to the floor and was in agonized bliss when he felt Penelope's fingers kneading into his back. He opened his eyes, looking at the ground to his right, and he saw what might have been Penelope's blouse lying there.

And he nearly fainted when her fingers started massaging his buttocks.

Relax, Penelope said. *Relax. We're just being friends here. I'm not some man who might want to rape you or something.*

When Ulysses sat up and turned around, he saw Penelope naked to the waist, but in the moonlight he saw only the merest outline of her bosom. As he dropped away his blouse, she could, however, see his.

You are a beautiful woman, Minerva, said Penny. *You are as beautiful as any white woman.*

Then Penelope broke the spell. "I brought up some fresh water. The men went with me to make sure I didn't run away—as if I could survive out in the woods! I'll bet you could, Minerva, you have the kind of knowledge of the woods that my beloved Ulysses had, oh if I could only believe you when you say he will return. There's enough for us to bathe. I always struggle to get my back clean. Could you bathe me, Minerva? I'll bathe you also. I used to do that for the Daughter. She's probably bathing herself out of a bucket now, at whatever is left of the estate she fled to, one of the men who didn't want to marry her anymore since she was no longer rich. Come, Minerva. Let's do it."

Penelope stood up and slipped out of the rest of her clothes. The moonlight caught her bosom as she turned to hand the sponge and soap, from a stand unstable on three legs, to Ulysses, who was still clasping his blouse to his breasts.

They bathed one another, starting with Penelope's back. There was no part of the body of either woman that kept its human scent away from the cleansing soap. Ulysses was in a trance. Afterwards, two wet naked bodies clasped one another tightly. Then they pulled apart with a loud sucking sound of sticky water.

"I think you needed that even more than I did," said Penny. "I didn't quite have this much contact in mind, my friend."

"Oh, Miss Penny, I'm sorry. I just couldn't stop myself from...from what I did."

"Well, Minnie, I don't think we did anything wrong. Who knows what is right and wrong anymore? The world has been turned topsy-turvy. I just have to say, my dear friend Minnie, that I much prefer your love to that of any of those hogs outside. I prefer it to that of any man, or any person, with the exception of Ulysses, should God grant that he return."

"Penny, did you say *love?"*

"I did, Minnie. And don't apologize. While you were massaging me, you made me feel like a queen. Previously, I had started feeling like maybe, just maybe, I will actually be the owner of this plantation, or what is left of it. But you—*you* made me feel like a queen!"

Chapter 18

I had Bert tell me that part over again the next night. Then we bathed each other again. We were a little bit more careful this time, and didn't get as much water on the floor.

"We're getting close to the end," said Bert.

I wasn't sure that I wanted these Thousand and One Nights to end, but I knew I could not resist knowing the rest of the story. I knew I could have Bert retell it, so I could write it down, but it would never be the same again. I mistrusted the world enough that I knew she had better finish soon, for who knew whether our little nest of love would remain undisturbed? By this time, our house was the only one left inhabited in Ruby. The other black folks moved over to Langston, near Cushing. Most of them worked for the oil fields there. The Cushing Pool has turned out to be the biggest explosion of black gold in the history of the world. I knew that whatever God there might be was allowing us this wonderful time of spiritual intimacy and we had better grab it while we could.

One evening, Ulysses brought a particularly large basket of herbs. Or so it seemed. Penelope did not recognize what kind of food the leaves and twigs on top of the basket were.

"Of course, you don't," said Minnie. "That's just some twigs off of some stubby oak trees. We aren't going to eat those. What I wanted to bring you is the big pile of mushrooms that are underneath. Only we aren't going to eat those either. Tonight, it's back to just meat and potatoes."

"Then," asked Penny, "what are the mushrooms for?"

"They not mushrooms, Penny. They pizen toadstools."

"Are you absolutely sure they are pizen? And how did you find so many?" asked Penny.

"I am absolutely sure," Minnie answered. "And when you find one, you usually find a bunch, and they all sprout at once. You see, a mushroom is where two different fungus strands grow through the mulchy soil and meet each other. And then it's love. They twine their little selves together and make mushrooms. It pretty much all happens at once."

"So, a mushroom," said Penny, "is a fungus sex organ."

"That's pretty much it, Penny. Only I'd call it a fungus *orgy*."

Penelope asked, "Why are so many toadstools pizenous?"

"Well," said Minerva. "What do they smell like?"

"You want my honest answer?"

"Let me put it this way. What kind of *food* do they smell like?"

"Oh, in that case, I'd have to say they smell like meat."

"That's right, Penny. They smell like meat that can't run away."

"I guess that makes sense, Minnie. That's why they have to be pizenous. Say, where did you learn this?"

"I'll tell you sometime. Meanwhile, we got work to do. That is, if you're ready."

Penny looked quietly at her hands. "I assume we are going to boil up the mushrooms and make some kind of pizen to use against the men who are imprisoning us. Yes, I see now. The pizen will knock them out, and then we escape."

"No," said Ulysses. "That's not what is going to happen."

"You don't mean..." began Penelope.

"I do," said Ulysses. "We have to go through with this, Penny. We have to kill them. Only then can Ulysses come back to us. Please don't ask me how I know this. I just do."

Bert had a way of reading my face. She knew that I was becoming uncomfortable with the story. She stopped.

"Please, go on," I begged, not looking into her eyes.

"Look into my eyes, Frankie. Now." When I did, she continued. "Now, Frankie, I don't know what it is you're thinking about, and I don't think I'm supposed to. I can see it in your face, Frankie. I know that there is something you need to do. There is some story in your life that you need to resolve. Something unfinished. Something you need to finish before you die."

"Well, then I got time," I said.

"Or not," said Bert. "None of us knows how much time we got."

"Well, in that case, while I'm thinking about what to do, please finish your story."

She did.

Penelope looked long and straight at Minerva. She looked at every detail of Minerva's face, and pushed a few locks of hair around. She touched Minerva's chin and turned her face from side to side. "As God is my witness," said Penelope, "you look just like him. If you weren't a woman, I would swear that you were Ulysses. Even your mind! You know so much about plants and toadstools and all. You are the perfect gentleman."

"Exceptin' last night," said Ulysses.

Penelope smiled. "Yes, 'xceptin' that. When you were cleansing me, every little part of me. Though that is exactly what I fantasize that Ulysses may do with me someday. What these white men want to do is to throw me on the bed and jab their okra pods full of seeds into me. Domination, not love. Ulysses would always love me gently and sweetly. Minnie, you remind me so much of him. I ache for him when I look at you. Please know that I do not think of you as merely a shadow of him; I admire you for yourself. But, can you understand what I am feeling?"

"If I could only tell you how much I understand," Ulysses answered.

Now it was very important that, when the mushroom poison was ready, and when the women gave it to the men, that *all* the men be present. They would *all* have to die. If even one escaped, he would alert everyone in the county. And nearly every night, one or two of the men would be absent, slipping back to whatever was left of their homes to check up on things and maybe take a bath, or not. No man was gone for very long, for none of them knew when Penelope might, just might, emerge from her chamber and announce that the time had come for

her to either choose one of them, or announce something they would have to do to win her choice.

But on this night, all of the men were present. They had gotten hold of a copper kettle and a copper coil and had set up a still. The fermenting potatoes were slowly bubbling, and the alcohol condensed on the coil through which the men poured cool water. A man would taste each cup of moonshine, and when it started to taste bad, they would bring in a new vat of fermenting potatoes. And this is why the men, focusing their spirited minds on the kettle and coil, did not notice that the two women poured a dark liquid into the big vat of barbecue sauce that McNair had made up.

The next evening, the men began to eat their barbecue. Penelope and Ulysses sat quietly, not eating the meat that Chateaubriand brought.

But Ulysses did stop Chateaubriand before he left.

"Yes, Miss Minerva?" he said.

Ulysses smiled. "I like that, Mister. Let me get to the point. You know very well that Penny and I hate all of you men out there, and that most of you do not care what we think of you, so long as you can poke your peckers into Miss Penelope here and get her plantation."

"I think I have indicated before, Miss Minerva, that I am not like the others."

Penelope joined them, and listened.

"But here you are, still with them," continued Ulysses. "If you are so different from them, why are you still camping out with them?"

"Because I dare to hope that you might choose me for being a gentleman and for treating a lady with respect," he said to Penelope.

"Well, let me tell you something, Mister," said Ulysses. "I believe you. I do. But the rest of the men are our enemies. We will not tolerate them any longer. Now, you must choose. Are you with us, or are you with them?"

"Why, Miss Minerva, if I joined with you, they would kill me."

"The moment, Mr. Chateaubriand, has come for a decision. Whose side are you on?"

Chateubriand looked down into the steaming dark meat. "Please forgive me, ladies. I cannot stop hoping that some reconciliation will be possible. I don't know what you are planning, but whatever it is, I would have to refuse to join you. But please don't do this thing, whatever it is! I will help you, perhaps, to negotiate…"

"No time for that now," said Penelope.

"Well, then, ladies, I remain with the men. But rest assured that there is one man out there who respects you."

"Very well, Mr. Chateaubriand. Enjoy your dinner," said Penelope.

The man turned and left.

"I feel so bad about killing him," said Penelope.

"You're talking like a woman, Penny."

"I *am* a woman, and so are you. Have you no feeling of pity in your breast?"

"I let him make his own choice, Penny. The time will come when you will have to trust my judgment. I will disagree with you many times, but will always respect you. Just remember that."

"Minnie, listen to you! You talk as if you have something all planned out for us. But we don't really have a clear plan about what to do *now*. I mean, it's not like they're all going to drop dead at once. Some will start dying before the others, and they will realize that we have done something to them and they will turn on us. Even if they are reeling from the effects of pizen mushrooms, how can two women stand against this crowd?"

Right then, a dozen gowned women walked in. A huge musical chord filled the air. At the head of the group was Nautica.

"How did you get in here?" exclaimed Penelope.

"The men weren't watching the back entrance very well," said Nautica. "Your question is good. But I and my little army of the Lord will join you, making a baker's dozen army of women to help you and your companion. We will have no trouble subduing these men."

"Where did you come from?"

"They have a commune not far from here," said Ulysses.

"You know them? And another thing. A baker's dozen? No. There are fourteen of us."

"There are thirteen women," said Nautica, savoring her moment. "Your friend here, to whom your soul has cleaved, is not the person you think."

"She's Minerva. We were slaves together. I would know her anywhere!"

"Behold," said Nautica. She raised her arms, and the women with her began humming another chord, stirring but not really beautiful, thick with notes and covering at least two octaves. The notes shimmered like waves of heat over a desert plain, interlocked, shifted. Slowly the notes resolved into perfect unison. From outside came the sound of men groaning and retching. And slowly, Ulysses changed form. His breasts shrank and his muscles grew. And his face metamorphosed, just slightly, into the one of which Penelope had tried so hard to remember every detail.

Ulysses looked down at his body. "I look pretty silly in this dress," he said.

Penelope gasped. "I knew it. I *knew* it!" She ran to Ulysses and clasped him tightly, thrusting her legs against his and kissing him hungrily. He pushed her away.

"I have come so far, my beloved Penelope, but I must finish the work to which I have been called. Tonight, we will be lovers. But right now, we must be comrades."

Each of Nautica's women had a dagger, and they brought a rifle with a bayonet to Ulysses. Ulysses, still in the dress, led them outside. About half of the men were groaning and writhing. The other half stumbled and rushed the crowd of women. Ulysses watched as man after man tripped over the women's legs and as the women slit their throats with their daggers. Ulysses remembered the name of each one, but it made no difference. He did, however, make sure that all twenty of them were accounted for.

One man, Gourd Head, had not yet eaten. He was reaching for his rifle. He was the man who most deserved to die, but he was very much alive. Ulysses moved swiftly and grasped him

from behind before he got the rifle. Gourd Head was a strong man, and the struggle was long. The women all had their daggers drawn and were ready to help. But it was not necessary. Ulysses finally threw him down, grabbed his rifle, and ran the bayonet through his throat.

Soon all the men were silent. Penelope stood beside Ulysses. She looked at the bodies and the blood that glistened black in the faint moonlight. She steadied herself against Ulysses.

Then one of the men began to groan again. It was Chateaubriand. Ulysses, holding his rifle loosely, walked over to the man and stood over him.

"Somebody kill me," he said. "This pain is unbearable, and I know I am going to die anyway."

"You made your choice," said Ulysses. "I offered you, and you alone, a chance to escape."

Right then Penelope grabbed the rifle from Ulysses. She spoke to Chateaubriand. "I hereby grant your request for relief." And she jabbed the bayonet into the man's neck so that the life and the pain could flow out of him.

The women carried the bodies away toward the swamp near their commune while Penelope and Ulysses clung to one another and wept. The women must have had some kind of magic touch, because they carried those meaty men like the sheets of laundry they had been washing the day Ulysses had washed ashore. When they got to the swamp, the trees blocked out the faint light from the moon, but over the water the mists were glowing. By the light of the will-o'-the-wisp, they dropped the bodies into the murky water, which already stank. Then a horde of alligators and snapping turtles slid into the water and ate every bit of flesh, sinew, and bone. Meanwhile, back at the plantation house, as the half-moon turned yellow and set, the men of the commune hoed up the ground all around, blending the blood into the rich and purifying earth.

I couldn't sleep after that, even while the continent of Bert rose and fell beside me. I looked out the window and saw a yellow half-moon setting in the middle of the night.

Chapter 19

"And they lived happily ever after," Bert told me the next morning while she hung the laundry out on the line. I usually helped her but this time I was just sitting.

"Nobody ever wondered where the white men went? Wouldn't somebody have been suspicious when none of the men ever came home?" I asked.

"I'm just…"

"I know."

"Well, the Union Army came back through, and validated the will, giving Ulysses and Penelope the deed all fair and square. And then they lived happily ever after."

"Just raising cotton on their plantation?" I asked.

"No, actually not," said Bert. "They rented it out and went to live in town. Ulysses went back to Harvard and finished his big degree. What do they call it? Doctor. Not a medical doctor, but all about plants. Being black, he couldn't work in a big university anywhere, but there was a little black college that hired him. And Ulysses had a student who became even more famous than he was. The student's name was George Washington Carver."

"I heard of him!" I exclaimed.

"And he—that is, Ulysses—got famous for his drawings and paintings, too. Of course, he painted all the plants in the South. Line drawings too. Landscapes too. And he painted the things he had seen on his journey. He painted them just like he saw them, only everyone thought it was just his fanciful imagination. Especially when he painted Calypso. People told him that such large breasts couldn't be floating like that. Of course, they said his paintings were dirty, so they kept them locked away, which is where they still are, I guess. And that painting he did of Hell, with all the spirits crawling over each other in a big vat. People said his painting of Hell was like the paintings of some crazy Dutch guy. Nobody knows, because those paintings are locked up somewhere too."

"Whatever happened to Nautica and the commune?"

"When the leader died, the commune discovered that they really had no reason to stay together. They disbanded. The swamp had been part of Penelope's estate, so she let a few of them stay around as sharecroppers. Nautica, she married some lawyer from up north and went to live in New York or someplace. And if, as you say, they were Cherokees, maybe some of them went and joined the little eastern band of Cherokees hiding in the mountains of North Carolina, the ones that hid out from the Trail of Tears."

"You don't mean Dragging Canoe and his Chickamaugas? That was a half century earlier."

"No, I mean the eastern Cherokees. They're still there. I doubt the swamp is still there, but it would be fun to visit it. Course, like I said, we don't even know where this plantation was."

"And the choir?" I asked.

"The story goes that you can still hear the angelic chords sometimes coming from the swamp on warm nights."

Author's notes and references to *Plantation Odyssey*

I had the slaves talking in intelligent English. In *James*, a 2024 novel by Percival Everett, the slaves talked in cant only when whites were listening.

I mixed together the Odyssey story of Circe with the country song Wolverton Mountain *(Her tender lips are sweeter than honey, and Wolverton Mountain protects her there).*

In the Odyssey, Ulysses was disguised as an old man when he first returned home. So why not disguise him as a woman?

In the Odyssey, Ulysses offered blood when he entered hell. Why not whiskey instead?

In this story, Calypso offered birch sap water. In France, you can actually buy birch sap *(sève de bouleau),* which is so expensive that I've never had any, but it is reputed to taste like water—very good and clean water. It is water that has been filtered through the endodermis of birch roots.

There are some very good books to read as background to this story:

- Any biography of George Washington Carver
- *Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron
- *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* by William Loren Katz (Simon and Schuster, 1986).

About the Author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.