

THE
WOMEN OF
BREWSTER
PLACE

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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For
Marcia, who gave me the dream
Lauren, who believed in it
Dick, who nurtured and shaped it
And George,
who applauded loudest in his heart

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore —
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

—Langston Hughes

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DAWN

Brewster Place was the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company. The latter needed to remove the police chief of the sixth district because he was too honest to take bribes and so had persisted in harassing the gambling houses the director owned. In turn, the alderman wanted the realty company to build their new shopping center on his cousin's property in the northern section of town. They came together, propositioned, bargained, and slowly worked out the consummation of their respective desires. As an afterthought, they agreed to erect four double-housing units on some worthless land in the badly crowded district. This would help to abate the expected protests from the Irish community over the police chief's dismissal; and since the city would underwrite the costs, and the alderman could use the construction to support his bid for mayor in the next election, it would importune neither man. And so in a damp, smoke-filled room, Brewster Place was conceived.

It was born three months later in the city legislature, and since its true parentage was hidden, half the community turned out for its baptism two years later. They applauded wildly as the smiling alderman smashed a bottle of champagne against the edge of one of the buildings. He could hardly be heard over the deafening cheers as he told them, with a tear in the corner of his eye, it was the least he could do to help make space for all their patriotic boys who were on the way home from the Great War.

The gray bricks of the buildings were the color of dull silver during Brewster Place's youth. Although the street was paved—after a heavy rain it was necessary to wade in ankle deep to get home—there was a sense of promise in the street and in the times. The city was growing and prospering; there were plans for a new boulevard just north of the street, and it seemed as if Brewster Place was to become part of the main artery of the town.

The boulevard became a major business district, but in order to control traffic some of the auxiliary streets had to be walled off. There was a fierce battle in the city legislature between the representatives of these small veins because they knew they were fighting for the lifeblood of their community but there was no one to fight for Brewster Place. The neighborhood was now filled with people who had no political influence; people who were dark haired and mellow-skinned—Mediterraneans—who spoke to each other in rounded guttural sounds and who brought strange foods to the neighborhood stores. The older residents were offended by the pungent smells of strong cheeses and smoked meats that now hung in the local shops. So the wall came up and Brewster Place became a dead-end street. There were no crowds at this baptism, which took place at three o'clock in the morning when Mrs. Colligan's son, stumbling home drunk and forgetting the wall was there, bloodied his nose and then leaned over and vomited against the new bricks.

Brewster Place had less to offer the second generation of children—those of its middle years—but it did what it could for them. The street was finally paved under the WPA program, and a new realty company picked up the mortgage on the buildings. Cut off from the central activities of the city, the street developed a personality of its own. The people had their own language and music and codes. They prided themselves on the fact that Mrs. Fuelli's store was the only one in the city that carried scungilli and spinach fettucine. But it

broke Mrs. Fuelli's heart when her son returned from the war and didn't settle on Brewster Place, and her cousin's son didn't either, or her second-floor neighbor's. And there were the sons who never returned at all. Brewster Place mourned with these mothers because it had lost children also—to the call of a more comfortable life and to the fear of these present children who were once strange but were now all it had. Brewster Place grew old with Mrs. Fuelli and the few others who either refused or were unable to leave.

A year before the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Topeka* Board of Education realigned the entire country, integration came to Brewster Place on the rounded shoulders of a short, brown-skinned man who had been hired as janitor and handyman for the buildings. He moved into the basement of 312, and when asked his name would reply, "Just call me Ben." And that's all he was to be known by until his death. There was little protest over his living in the block because it got around that he was a nice colored man who never bothered anybody. And when the landlord was a post-office box in another city, and the radiators leaked, or the sink backed up, or arthritis kept you from sweeping the front steps, it was convenient to have someone around to take care of those things, even this man with strange hair and skin and hints of stale liquor on his breath.

Ben and Brewster Place's Mediterraneans grew well acquainted from a distance. They learned that when they were awakened by the somber tones of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" he was on one of his early drunks, and there was no point in asking him to do anything that day—he would yessem you to distraction and just never show up. And he learned that no matter how great the quantities of homemade vegetable soup and honey nut loaves brought up to him by old ladies clucking softly about his womanless plight, he would be met with cold and suspicious eyes if he knocked on their doors without a wrench or broom in his hands. Conse-

quently, no one ever knew why Ben drank. The more observant could predict the return of the early drunks because they always occurred the morning after the mailman descended the basement steps of 312. And if anyone ventured close enough the next day, Ben could be heard mumbling about an unfaithful wife and a lame daughter, or was it a lame wife and an unfaithful daughter? They could never tell which. And if they cared to ask, he probably could have told them, but after a while the mailman stopped descending those steps; yet Ben still drank.

Ben and his drinking became a fixture on Brewster Place, just like the wall. It soon appeared foolish to question the existence of either—they just were. And they were the first sight encountered by Brewster Place's third generation of children, who drifted into the block and precipitated the exodus of the remaining Mediterraneans. Brewster Place rejoiced in these multi-colored "Afric" children of its old age. They worked as hard as the children of its youth, and were as passionate and different in their smells, foods, and codes from the rest of the town as the children of its middle years. They clung to the street with a desperate acceptance that whatever was here was better than the starving southern climates they had fled from. Brewster Place knew that unlike its other children, the few who would leave forever were to be the exception rather than the rule, since they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason.

Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home. Nutmeg arms leaned over windowsills, gnarled ebony legs carried groceries up double flights of steps, and saffron hands strung out wet laundry on back-yard lines. Their perspiration mingled with the steam from boiling pots of smoked pork and greens, and it curled on the edges of the aroma of vinegar douches and Evening in Paris cologne that drifted through the street where they stood together—hands on hips, straight-backed, round-bellied, high-behinded women who threw their heads back when they

laughed and exposed strong teeth and dark gums. They cursed, badgered, worshiped, and shared their men. Their love drove them to fling dishcloths in someone else's kitchen to help him make the rent, or to fling hot lye to help him forget that bitch behind the counter at the five-and-dime. They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place. They came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years. Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story.

MATTIE MICHAEL

I

The rattling moving van crept up Brewster like a huge green slug. It was flanked by a battered gypsy cab that also drove respectfully over the hidden patches of ice under the day-old snow. It began to snow again, just as the small caravan reached the last building on the block.

The moving men jumped out of the front of the van and began to unload the back. Mattie paid the driver and got out of the cab. The moist gray air was as heavy as the sigh that lay on her full bosom. The ashen buildings were beginning to fade against the gentle blanketing of the furry gray snow coming from the darkening sky. The sun's dying rays could be felt rather than seen behind the leaden evening sky, and snow began to cling to the cracks in the wall that stood only six feet from her building.

Mattie saw that the wall reached just above the second-floor apartments, which meant the northern light would be blocked from her plants. All the beautiful plants that once had an entire sun porch for themselves in the home she had exchanged thirty years of her life to pay for would now have to fight for light on a crowded windowsill. The sigh turned into a knot of pity for the ones that she knew would die. She pitied them because she refused to pity herself and to think that she, too, would have to die here on this dreary street because there just wasn't enough life left for her to do it all again.

Someone was cooking on the first floor, and the aroma seeped through the misted window and passed across her nose. For a moment it smelled like freshly cut sugar cane and she took in short, rapid breaths of air to try to capture the scent again. But it was gone. And it couldn't have been anyway. There was no sugar cane on Brewster. No, that had been in Tennessee, in a summer that lay under the grave of thirty-one years that could only be opened again in the mind.

Sugar cane and summer and Papa and Basil and Butch. And the beginning—the beginning of her long, winding journey to Brewster.

"Hey, gal."

A cinnamon-red man leaned over the Michaels' front fence and clucked softly to Mattie, who was in the yard feeding the young biddies. She purposely ignored him and ran her fingers around the pan to stir the mash and continued calling the chickens. He timed the clucking of his tongue with hers and called again, a little louder. "I say, hey, gal."

"I heard you the first time, Butch Fuller, but I got a name, you know," she said, without looking in his direction.

His long, upturned mouth, which always seemed ready to break into a smile, spread into a large grin, and he raced to the other edge of the fence and gave a deep exaggerated bow in front of her.

"Well, 'cuse us poor, ignorant niggers, Miz Mattie, mam, or shoulds I say, Miz Michael, mam, or shoulds I say Miz Mattie Michael, or shoulds I say Miz Mam, mam, or shoulds I . . ." And he threw her a look over his bowed shoulders that was a perfect imitation of the mock humility that they used on white people.

Mattie burst out laughing and Butch straightened up and laughed with her.

"Butch Fuller, you was born a fool and you'll die a fool."

"Well, least that'll give the preacher one good thing to say

at my funeral—this here man was consistent."

And they laughed again—Butch heartily and Mattie reluctantly—because she realized that she was being drawn into a conversation with a man her father had repeatedly warned her against. That Butch Fuller is a no-count ditch hound, and no decent woman would be seen talkin' to him. But Butch had a laugh like the edges of an April sunset—translucent and mystifying. You knew it couldn't last forever, but you'd stand for hours, hoping for the chance to experience just a glimmer of it once again.

"Now that I done gone through all that, I hope I can get what I came for," he said slowly, as he looked her straight in the eyes.

The blood rushed to Mattie's face, and just as her mouth dropped open to fling an insult at him, he slid his eyes evenly over to the barrel at the side of the house. "A cup of that cool rain water." And he smiled wickedly.

She snapped her mouth shut, and he looked down and kicked the dust off his shoes, pretending not to notice her embarrassment.

"Yup, a scorcher like today is enough to make a man's throat just curl up and die." And he looked up innocently.

Mattie threw her feed pan down and walked sulkily to the rain barrel. Butch intently watched the circular movements of her high round behind under the thin summer dress, and he followed her rising hemline over the large dark calves when she bent to dip the water. But when she turned around, he was closely inspecting a snap on his overalls.

"Here's your water." She almost threw it at him. "I couldn't even deny a dog a drink on a day like today, but when you done drunk it, you better be gettin' on to wherever you was gettin' before you stopped."

"Lord, you Michael women got the sharpest tongues in the county, but I guess a man could die in a lot worst ways than being cut to death by such a beautiful mouth." And he threw his head back and drank the water.

Mattie watched the movement of the water as it passed

down his long throat, and she reluctantly admired the strong brown contours in his neck and arms. His skin looked as if it had sparks of fire in it, and the sun played against the red highlights in his body. He had clean, good-natured lines in his movements which seemed to say to everyone—I'm here and ain't complaining about it, so why are you?

"Thank you, Miz Mattie, mam." He handed the cup back to her with a special smile that beckoned friendship on the basis of the secret joke they now shared between them.

Mattie understood, took the cup, and returned his smile.

"And since you inquired on my wheretos and whereabouts . . ."

"I did no such thing."

He continued as if she hadn't spoken, "I'm on my way to the low ground to pick me some wild herbs. And then I plans to stop by the Morgans' sugar cane field near the levee. They just made harvest, and there's some nice fat canes left around. So if you care to come along and pick you out a few, I'd be more than obliged to carry 'em back this way for you."

Mattie almost agreed. She loved cane molasses, and if she found some really good ones, she could cut them up and boil them down and probably clear at least a pint or two of molasses. But her father would kill her if he heard she had been seen walking with Butch Fuller.

"Of course, now, if a big woman like you is afraid of what her daddy might say?"

Mattie grew defiant, realizing that he had been reading her thoughts.

"I ain't afraid of nothing, Butch Fuller. And besides, Papa took Mama to town this afternoon."

"Why, well, just as I was saying . . . A big woman like you ain't got no cause to be scared of what her daddy might say. And as for them foul-minded old crows up on the hill who might run back to him with a pack of lies—why don't we just take the back road to the cane field? No point in letting them get sunstroke runnin' down the hill to tell something that really ain't nothin' to tell to somebody who

ain't even here—right?" His voice was as smooth and coaxing as his smile.

"Right," she said, and then looking straight into his eyes added slowly, "now, just let me go into the house and get Papa's machete." She waited for the flicker of surprise to widen his eyes slightly and then continued, "To cut the cane with—of course."

"Of course." And the April sun set in its full glory.

The back road to the levee was winding and dusty. And August in Rock Vale was a time of piercing, dry heat—"sneaky heat," as the people called it. The moisture-free air felt almost comfortable, but then slowly the perspiration would begin to crawl down your armpits and plaster the clothes to your back. And the hot air in your lungs would expand until you felt that they were going to burst, so to relieve them you panted through a slightly opened mouth.

Mattie didn't think about the heat as she walked beside Butch. They were almost perfect company because he loved to talk and she was an intelligent listener, knowing intuitively when to interrupt with her own observations about some person or place. He amused her with slightly laundered tales of the happenings in the town's juke joints—places that were as foreign to her as Istanbul or Paris. And he scandalized her with his firsthand knowledge of who was seeing whose spouse down by the railroad tracks, just hours before they showed up at her church Sunday morning. He told her this gossip without judging or sneering, but with the same good-natured acceptance that he held toward everything in life. And Mattie found herself being shown how to laugh at things that would have been considered too shamefully ugly even to mention aloud at home.

She was so engrossed with Butch that she didn't see the approaching team of mules and wagon until it was almost upon them.

"Oh, nò, it's Mr. Mike, the deacon of our church," she whispered to Butch, and stepped a full foot away from him and began to swing the machete as she walked.

The wagon and mules pulled up to them. "How do, Mattie. How do, Butch." And the old man spit a jawful of tobacco juice over the side of the wagon.

"Hey, Mr. Mike," Butch called out.

"Going to cut cane, Mr. Mike," Mattie chimed up loudly, and give the machete an extra swing to underscore her words.

Mr. Mike grinned. "Ain't figure you to be goin' catfishing with that knife, gal. Ain't you all taking the long way to the levee, though?" He sat watching them, chewing slowly off his tobacco.

Mattie could think of nothing to say and swung the machete as if the answer lay in the widening arc of the blade.

"Too much sun on the main road," Butch said easily. "And since black means poor in these parts—Lord knows, I couldn't stand to get no poorer."

Butch and Mr. Mike laughed, and Mattie tried not to look as miserable as she felt.

"Gal, stop swingin' that knife 'fore you chop off a leg," Mr. Mike said. "You plan on boiling up some cane molasses?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Mike."

"Good then, if you get enough, bring me a taste Sunday. I love fresh cane syrup with my biscuits."

"Sure will, Mr. Mike."

He hit the reins and the mules started moving. "Member me to your ma and daddy."

"Yes, sir."

"See you in church Sunday, Mattie." He called over his shoulder, "See you there doomsday, Butch."

"Or somewhere thereabouts, Mr. Mike."

The old man chuckled and spit over the side of the wagon again.

Mattie and Butch walked in silence for the next five minutes. He still had that crooked smile on his face, but there was something about the stiffness of his gait that told her that he was angry. He seemed to have closed off his spirit from her.

"My, Butch, you sure can think fast," she complimented,

in way of reconciliation. "I just didn't know what excuse to give him."

"Why give any!" The words exploded from his mouth. "'Going to cut cane, Mr. Mike,'" he mimicked in a falsetto. "Whyn't you just haul up your dress and show him that your drawers was still glued to your legs? That's what you meant, wasn't it?"

"Now, why you gotta go and get nasty? Ain't nobody thinkin' 'bout that."

"Quit lying, Mattie. Don't you think I know what them sanctimonious folks like your daddy say about me?"

Mattie rose to her father's defense. "Well, you do got a bad reputation."

"Why? 'Cause I live my life and 'low other folks to live theirs? 'Cause if I had a pretty black gal like you for a daughter, I wouldn't have her nigh on twenty-one years old and not keeping company so she's so dumb she don't know her ass from her elbow? What he savin' you up for—his self?"

Mattie stopped abruptly. "Papa was right after all. You is nothin' but a filthy, low-down ditch dog! And I musta been crazy to think I could spend a civil afternoon with you." And she turned back toward home.

Butch grabbed her arm. "Lord have mercy, I must be improving in his sight! He forgot to add no-count. You think that's sufficient encouragement for me to come callin' Sunday evening?" He said this with a mock innocence that was masterly devoid of any sarcasm.

In spite of herself, Mattie had to bite on her bottom lip to hold back a smile. "For your information, Mr. Fuller, I already keep company on Sunday afternoons."

"With who?"

"Fred Watson."

"Gal, that ain't keeping company. That's sitting up at a wake."

The stifled smile broke through her compressed lips as she thought of those boring evenings with the deadpan Fred Watson, but he was the only man in the church that her

father thought good enough for her.

"And here I was all set to get jealous or something, and you come talkin' about old dead Fred. Why, I could come in there and steal you away with two full suitcases 'fore Fred would be able to blink an eye. You notice it takes him twice as long to blink than most folks?"

"I ain't noticed no such thing," Mattie lied.

Butch looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Well, the next time you and Fred are sittin' on your daddy's front porch in one of them hot, passionate courtin' sessions—'fore you nod off to sleep—notice how he blinks."

I will not laugh, Mattie kept repeating to herself; I will not laugh even if I have to burst open and die.

They soon came to the edge of the cane field, and Butch took the machete from her and went through the tall grass, picking out the best stalks. She felt disquieting stirrings at the base of her stomach and in her fingertips as she watched his strong lean body bend and swing the wide-bladed knife against the green and brownish stalks.

Whenever he came upon one that was especially ripe, he would hold it over his head, his two muscled arms glistening with sweat, and call out, "This one's like you, Mattie—plump and sweet," or, "Lord, see how that beautiful gal is makin' me work."

She knew it was all in fun. Everything about Butch was like puffed air and cotton candy, but it thrilled her anyway whenever he straightened up to call to her through the tall grass.

When he had cut about a dozen canes, he gathered them up and brought them out to the edge of the field. He kneeled down, took some cord from his pocket, and bound the stalks into two bundles. When he got off his knees, he smelled like a mixture of clean sweat, raw syrup, and topsoil. He took a bundle of cane under each arm.

"Mattie, reach into my overall top and pull my kerchief. This sweat is blindin' me."

She was conscious of the hardness of his chest under her

probing fingers as she sought the handkerchief, and when she stood on her toes to wipe his wet brow, her nipples brushed the coarse denim of his overalls and began to strain against the thin dress. These new feelings confused Mattie, and she felt that she had somehow drifted too far into strange waters and if she didn't turn around soon, she would completely forget in which direction the shore lay—or worse, not even care.

"Well, we got our cane. Let's get home," she said abruptly.

"Now, ain't that just like a woman?" Butch shifted the heavy stalks. "Bring a man clear out of his way to cut three times as much cane as he needed for hisself and then want to double-time him back home before he gets a minute's rest or them wild herbs he really came all this way fo'."

"Aw right." Mattie sucked her teeth impatiently and picked up the machete. "Where's the herb patch?"

"Just by the clearing of them woods."

The temperature dropped at least ten degrees on the edge of the thick, tangled dogwood, and the deep green basil and wild thyme formed a fragrant blanket on the mossy earth. Butch dropped the cane and sank down on the ground with a sigh.

"Jesus, this is nice," he said, looking around and inhaling the cool air. He seemed puzzled that Mattie was still standing. "Lord, gal, ain't your feet tired after all that walking?"

Mattie cautiously sat down on the ground and put her father's machete between them. The refreshing dampness of the forest air did little to relieve the prickling heat beneath her skin.

"You blaspheme too much," she said irritably. "You ain't supposed to use the Lord's name in vain."

Butch shook his head. "You folks and your ain'ts. You ain't supposed to do this and you ain't supposed to do that. That's why I never been no Christian—to me it means you can't enjoy life and since we only here once, that seems a shame."

"Nobody said nothin' about not enjoying life, but I suppose runnin' after every woman that moves is your idea of

enjoyment?" Mattie was trying desperately to work up a righteous anger against Butch. She needed something to neutralize the lingering effect of his touch and smell.

"Mattie, I don't run after a lot of women, I just don't stay long enough to let the good times turn sour. Ya know, befo' the two of us get into a rut and we're cussing and fighting and just holding on because we done forgot how to let go. Ya see, all the women I've known can never remember no bad days with me. So when they stuck with them men who are ignorin' 'em or beatin' and cheatin' on 'em, they sit up on their back porches shelling peas and they thinks about old Butch, and they say, Yeah, that was one sweet, red nigger—all our days were sunlight; maybe it was a short time, but it sure felt good."

What he said made sense to Mattie, but there was something remiss in his reasoning and she couldn't quite figure out what it was.

"Now you think about it," he said, "how many women I ever went with ever had anything ornery to say about me? Maybe their mamas or papas had something to say," and he smiled slyly across the grass, "or their husbands—but never them. Think about it."

She searched her mind and, surprisingly, couldn't come up with one name.

Butch grinned triumphantly as he watched her face and could almost see the mental checklist she was running through.

"Well," Mattie threw at him, "there's probably a couple I just ain't met."

Butch laid his head back and his laughter lit up the dark trees.

"Lord, that's what I like about you Michael women—you hardly ever at a loss for words. Mattie, Mattie Michael," he chanted softly under his breath, his eyes caressing her face. "Where'd you get a sir name like Michael? Shouldn't it be Michaels?"

"Naw, Papa said that when the emancipation came, his daddy was just a little boy, and he had been hard of hearing so his master and everyone on the plantation had to call him twice to get his attention. So his name being Michael, they always called him Michael-Michael. And when the Union census taker came and was registering black folks, they asked what my granddaddy's name was, and they said Michael-Michael was all they knew. So the dumb Yankee put that down and we been Michael ever since."

Mattie's father loved telling her that story, and she in turn enjoyed repeating it to anyone who questioned her strange last name. As she talked, Butch was careful not to let his eyes wander below her neck. He knew she was sitting over there like a timid starling, poised for flight. And the slightest movement on his part would frighten her away for good.

So he listened to her with his eyes intently on her face while his mind slipped down the ebony neck that was just plump enough for a man to bury his nose into and suck up tiny bits of flesh that were almost as smooth as the skin on the top of her full round breasts that held nipples that were high, tilted, and unbelievably even darker than the breasts, so that when they touched the tongue there was the sensation of drinking rich, double cocoa. A man could spend half a lifetime there alone, but the soft mound of her belly whispered to him, and his mind reached down and kneaded it ever so gently until it was supple and waiting. And then the tip of his tongue played round and round the small cavern in the center of her stomach, while the hands tried to memorize every curve and texture of the inner thighs and lightly pressed outward to widen the legs so they could move through them and get lost in the eternity of softness on her behind. And she would wait and wait, getting fuller and fuller until finally pleading with him to do something—anything—to stop the expansion before she burst open her skin and lay in a million pieces among the roots of the trees and the leaves of the tiny basil.

When Mattie finished her story, Butch was looking down at the sugar cane and tracing the handle of his jackknife along the thick segmented ridges.

"You know how to eat sugar cane, Mattie?" he asked, still tracing the ridges. He avoided looking at her, afraid of what she would read in his eyes.

"You a crazy nigger, Butch Fuller. First you ask me 'bout my name and then come up with some out-the-way question like that. I been eating sugar cane all my life, fool!"

"Naw," Butch said, "some folks die and never learn how to eat cane the right way." He got on his knees, broke off one of the stalks, and began to peel it with his knife. He was speaking so softly Mattie had to lean closer to hear him.

"You see," he said, "eating cane is like living life. You gotta know when to stop chewing—when to stop trying to wrench every last bit of sweetness out of a wedge—or you find yourself with a jawful of coarse straw that irritates your gums and the roof of your mouth."

The thick blade of the knife slid under the heavy green covering on the stalk, and clear, beady juices sprang to the edges and glistened in the dying afternoon sun.

"The trick," he said, cutting off a slice of the stiff, yellow fiber, "is to spit it out while the wedge is still firm and that last bit of juice—the one that promises to be the sweetest of the whole mouthful—just escapes the tongue. It's hard, but you gotta spit it out right then, or you gonna find yourself chewing on nothin' but straw in that last round. Ya know what I mean, Mattie?"

He finally looked her straight in the face, and Mattie found herself floating far away in the brown sea of his irises, where the words, shoreline and anchor, became like gibberish in some foreign tongue.

"Here," he said, holding out a piece of the cane wedge to her, "try it the way I told you."

And she did.

II

Mattie's father had not spoken a word to either her or his wife in two days. The torturing silence in the house was far worse than the storm that Mattie had prepared herself to take when her mother had told him about her pregnancy. Samuel Michael had never been a talkative man, but his calm, steady habits had brought a sense of security and consistency to their home. Mattie had been the only child of his autumn years, and so for as long as she could remember, he had been an old man with set and exacting ways. Unlike her mother he never raised his voice, and when the two had a difference of opinion, her mother would charge around the house, mumbling and banging pans, while he would just sit on the porch rocker and read his Bible.

Once Mattie had wanted a pair of patent-leather pumps like the girls in town, and her mother had said they were too expensive and impractical for their dusty country roads. Sam refused to take sides in the battle over the shoes, which lasted for weeks, but he went and hired himself out in the sweet potato fields for a month of Saturdays, brought home the shoes, and dropped them in her lap—wear 'em only on Sundays were his first and last words on the matter.

His had been the first face Mattie had seen when she opened her eyes after a week of blinding scarlet fever. He had simply touched her forehead and went to call her mother to come and change her nightgown. It was her mother, and not him, who later told her that he had neglected his farm and insisted on sitting by her bed every day—all day—while the life was burning and sweating out of her pores. It became a legend in those parts, and even her mother never knew how he had gotten the white doctor from town to make that long trip to the house for her. Sam never mentioned it, and no one dared ask.

But this silence was different. It was compressed tightly

in a vacuum that was so vast that her spirit grew weary attempting to cross it, and so it would return to her to rest feverishly against her sorrowing heart.

"Mama, I can't stand much more of this," she whispered miserably to her mother, as they were washing the dinner dishes.

Her father had stonily finished his meal and gone out to his rocker, where he would sit reading his Bible until late in the night.

"Don't worry, baby," Fannie sighed, "he'll come round. This here thing done hurt him, that's all."

"Oh, Mama, I'm so ashamed."

"Ain't nothing to be shamed of. Havin' a baby is the most natural thing there is. The Good Book call children a gift from the Lord. And there ain't no place in that Bible of His that say babies is sinful. The sin is the fornicatin', and that's over and done with. God done forgave you of that a long time ago, and what's going on in your belly now ain't nothin' to hang your head about—you remember that."

"You didn't tell him it was Butch, did you?"

"Gal, you think I want to see my man in jail for killin' the likes of Butch Fuller? And besides, it ain't for me to tell."

They heard the screen door slam shut.

"Butt, come here," Sam called.

Mattie jumped at the unaccustomed sound of his voice. She was finally being summoned across that vacuum, and her spirit rose instinctively to obey, but she held it back in fear of what it might meet there. She looked pleadingly at her mother for help in this dilemma, and the older woman patted her shoulder and whispered in her ear, "Go on now. I told you he'd come round. That man lives and breathes for you."

She looked out the kitchen door and couldn't find the courage to move toward the stiff-backed old man, who was staring into the empty fireplace with a face as still and unreadable as a worn stone. So she moved toward the dying vibrations of the nickname, Butt. And it was the memory of

the man who used to roll her full cheeks between his fingers and chuckle—soft as a dish of butter—that got her across the room.

"Yes, Papa," she trembled.

Mattie knew to keep silent and wait. There would be nothing she could explain or plead or reason at that moment that would change the direction that his mind had locked into, like rusted iron clogs.

"I been thinkin' on this here thing," he began quietly, without looking around. There was a long pause. "I done always tried to do my best by you. I seen that you never had a hungry day or had to go askin' nobody for nothin', ain't it?"

"Yes, Papa."

He cleared his throat and continued slowly, "I know some say I put too much store in you, keepin' you too close to home, settin' you up to be better'n other folks. But I done what I saw fit at the time to do."

Mattie gradually began to realize what he had been struggling with the past two days. He couldn't bring himself to accept any fault within her, and since he needed someone to do retribution, he had laid the blame for this on his own shoulders. She saw with pity how stooped and faltering the proud man was carrying this burden. She rushed in vain to relieve him of it.

"Papa, you ain't done nothing wrong. This—"

He cut her off. "Could be, I should have let you marry that Harris boy you was sweet on once, but I wanted better for you than some wanderin' field hand and him wanting to drag you all the way to Arkansas, away from your family and all. Well, past is past. And I still think Fred Watson is a tolerable young man, in spite of what he done." He cleared his throat again and looked up at her. "I was young once, too. And done made many a mistake and ain't through makin' 'em."

Mattie was stunned that he would think it was Fred's baby. But then, that was the only man he had allowed her to see, and his mind had been so conditioned over the years to her

unquestioning obedience that there was just no space for doubt. She listened with horror as he continued.

"So I figure to go over to his place tomorrow after breakfast and clear this all up. I know he'll be willing to do right by you."

Mattie wanted to choke. She felt as if the entire universe had been formed into a ball and jammed into her throat—"Papa, it ain't Fred's baby"—sent it hurling out of her mouth and into a whirlwind that crumbled her father's face and exploded both of their hearts into uncountable pieces. She saw them both being spun around the room and sucked out of the windows along with everything that had ever passed between them. She felt the baby being drawn by the winds, but she held on tightly, trembling violently, because she realized that now this was all she would ever have.

"Whose is it?" came to her over the dying winds of the tempest, but her ears were still ringing and she couldn't quite make out the sounds.

"I say, whose is it?" And he came toward her, grabbed her by the back of the hair, and yanked her face upward to confront the blanket of rage in his eyes.

Instinctively her body cried out to obey—to tell him that it was Butch's so he would release her and grab his shotgun and go out and blow Butch into as many pieces as her world now lay in around her. She didn't care about Butch Fuller, and they had hardly spoken since that day, but this baby didn't really belong to him. It belonged to something out there in the heat of an August day and the smell of sugar cane and mossy herbs. Mattie knew there were no words for this, and even if there were, this disappointed and furious old man would never understand.

"I ain't saying, Papa." And she braced herself for the impact of the large callused hand that was coming toward her face. He still held her by the hair so she took the force of the two blows with her neck muscles, and her eyes went dim as the blood dripped down her chin from her split lip. The grip on her hair tightened, and she was forced even closer

to his face as she answered the silent question in his narrowing eyes.

"I ain't saying, Papa," she mumbled through her swollen lip.

"You'll say," he whispered hoarsely, as he yanked her to the ground by the hair.

She heard her mother rush from the kitchen. "That's enough, Sam."

"Stay out of this, Fannie." He picked up the broom that was leaning against the fireplace and held it threateningly in the air. "Now, you tell me or I'll beat it out of you."

Her silence stole the last sanctuary for his rage. He wanted to kill the man who had sneaked into his home and distorted the faith and trust he had in his child. But she had chosen this man's side against him, and in his fury, he tried to stamp out what had hurt him the most and was now brazenly taunting him—her disobedience.

Mattie's body contracted in a painful spasm each time the stick smashed down on her legs and back, and she curled into a tight knot, trying to protect her stomach. He would repeat his question with each blow from the stick, and her continued silence caused the blows to come faster and harder. He was sweating and breathing so hard he couldn't talk anymore, so he just pounded the whimpering girl on the floor.

Her mother screamed, "For the love of Jesus, Sam!" and jumped on his back and tried to wrestle the stick from him.

He flung her across the floor and her blouse tore to the waist as she went sliding into the opposite wall.

"Oh, God, oh, God," Fannie chanted feverishly, as she got up on her bruised knees.

The broom had broken, and he was now kneeling over Mattie and beating her with a jagged section of it that he had in his fist.

"Oh, God, oh, God," Fannie kept saying, as she searched blindly around the room. She finally found the shotgun pegged over the front door. She struggled with the heavy