# SHORT STORY NIGHT

David Wright Faladé is the author of the novel, *Black Cloud Rising*, a New York Times' Critics Pick and one of the New Yorker's Best Books of 2022. His first book, the narrative history Fire on the Beach: Recovering the Lost Story of Richard Etheridge and the Pea Island Lifesavers, was one of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch's Best Books of 2001.

## Virtual Interview!!!

# David Wright Faladé

## "The Sand Banks, 1861"

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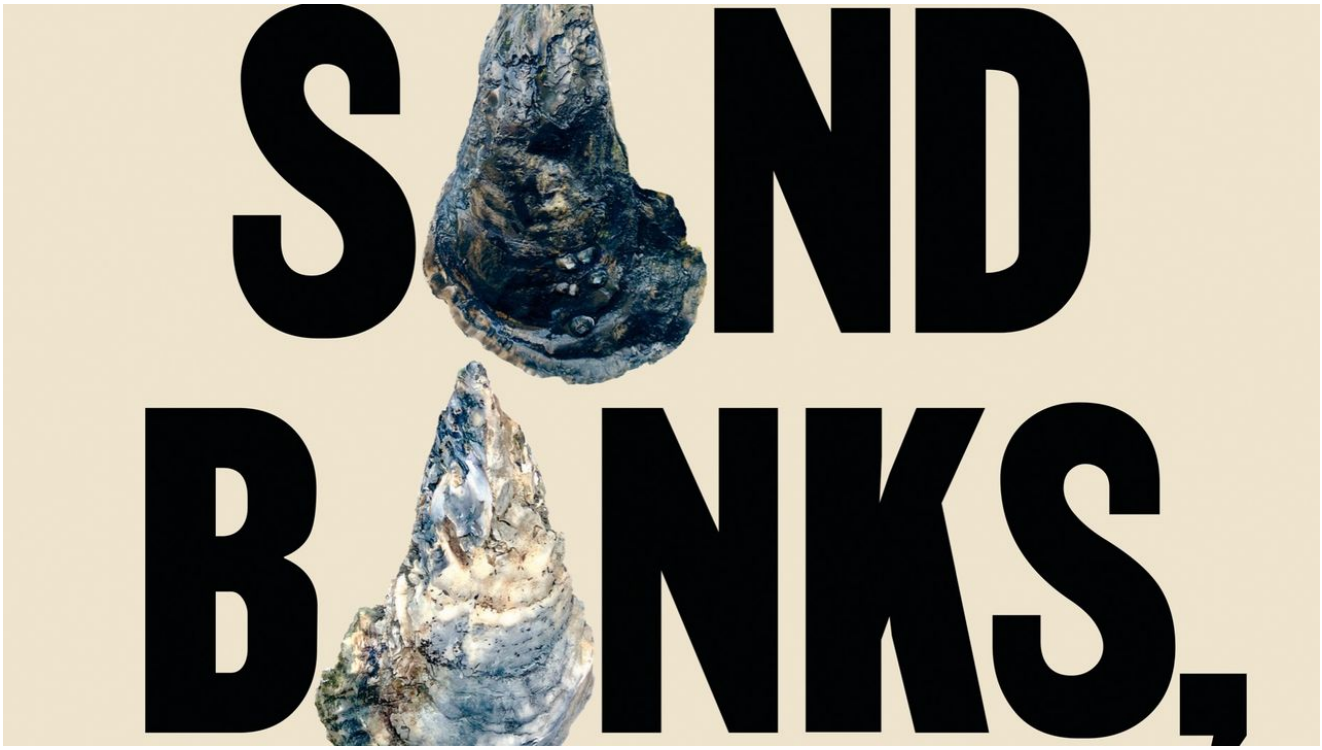
**21 and older.**

# The Sand Banks, 1861

www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/31/the-sand-banks-1861

By David Wright Faladé August 19, 2020




We were just boys, ten-, eleven-, and twelve-year-olds, five colored and one white. But for our smallclothes, each of us was most-all naked. We stood on the rickety reach of pier, its planks care-laid but well used, us colored boys' black glistening in the noontime bright, the white one not yet leathered like the sunbeat beefs that free-ranged the island. Our britches and coveralls and burlap shirts lay pell-mell near the spot on the shore where Ebo Joe Meekins knelt, inspecting the line of the skiff he was refitting. The old Negro was either fifty or a thousand, the one age as imponderable to us as the other, and he paid us no more mind than we did him. On the water, cleat-hitched to the pier, rocked the dugout full of oysters that we were supposed to be ferrying over to Ashbee's Harbor. Up and down it rolled with each leap or dive, as we plunged into the water one at a time or in twos and sometimes all six at once.

I was young, square-shouldered but elseways long of limb, with knots for knees and elbows, and I climbed from the Croatan Sound up onto the dugout. Straddling it, a foot on each gunwale, I began walking its edge. The wood's rough grain dug into the pads of my feet with each shuffle-step forward. The other boys waded nearby, wondering at my balancing act.

"You look like one of Uncle John's barn cats," Patrick, the white one, shouted up, and he splashed water to challenge my progress.

I halted my walk so as to keep my balance and taunted back at him, “That the best you got? You can do better than that, Paddy-boy.” Then I started rocking the dugout in place—down and up each gunwale, down and up—pushing out waves and making the others work to stay aloft.

“I’ll fix your arse,” said Patrick.

He swam forward, grabbed a gunwale, and yanked down hard. But I sprang overtop of him and stretched a splashless dive into the briny water beyond. The others swarmed, wrestling to keep me below the surface, all but Patrick, who had pulled himself onto the pier.

“Youall hungry?” he called.

He went to his trousers, retrieved a penknife, and returned with one of the larger oysters from the floor of the dugout. He pried at it until it cracked open.

I climbed up after him. “Smokes, Paddy, that’s as nice a knife as I’ve seen.”

The mother-of-pearl handle, the spey blade.

“Uncle John gave it to me.” Patrick held it out for the others to see. “Said I was becoming a man and deserved such a thing.” He threw his head back and slurped down the oyster, then opened another and extended it toward me.

I just stood there looking down at it. “Mass John B. told us to plant those out past the second duck blind,” I said, “not to eat them.”

The other boys gathered up behind me.

“Half the Sand Banks are laughing at his fool notion of planting oyster beds,” said Patrick, slurping down the one I’d refused. “Hellfire, there will always be oysters.”

Fields Midgett, protectful of me, told Patrick, “Richard don’t need none of that. Besides, Easterns taste like snot.”

“Naw, they good,” said Bill Charles. “But fried and on day-old bread.”

The rest chimed in then, proffering the ways and hows of oyster-eating—this, without any of us noting the sombre white man who had emerged from the thicket of pitch pine.

John B. Etheridge walked up the shore, smoking a pipe. He wore bibbed dungarees over a white work shirt, closed at the collar by a string tie, his everyday duck-cloth coat over that. A slouch hat shaded his face. John B. owned the dugout and the oysters, much of the island, in fact, including me and two of the others. He stopped a short distance from us.

“Patrick! Those oysters are for my oysterage!”

The others scrambled to gather up their clothes, all but me. I remained aside Patrick. We both stood stock still on the pier, heads hanging.

John B. stormed up. “What are you thinking?”

“Me and Dick were just letting the boys have a break is all,” said Patrick.

John B. glared at this boy whom he had taken in as a son upon a dear older brother’s death. “How many times do I have to tell you? When I leave you in charge, you have to *take* charge.” His voice evened, though the hard look in his eyes did not soften. “Not Dick, *you*.”

He didn’t look at me at all.

“Yes, sir, Uncle John,” said Patrick.

John B. often punctuated a point by the length of tense silence that followed.

“You can’t be pals with every nigger on the island,” he said. “Dick is no exception.”

Though it was Patrick who’d been scolded, I felt that it was me who had disappointed my father.

Turning, John B. said, “Make sure those beds are planted before I see any of you around the house. You two, with me.” And, though he was already headed up the shore, each of us knew to whom which orders had been addressed. Patrick and I scooped up our clothes and followed after, the others unhitching the dugout and pushing off.

John B. spoke briefly to Ebo Joe, who immediately stopped what he was doing and removed his hat, then John B. continued on. Patrick carried his boots over a shoulder, tied together by the laces. In short pants and a burlap shirt, I had no shoes to carry. With John B.’s back now to us, Patrick aped his posture and gait, but I ignored him. I rushed after John B. as he disappeared into the trees.

We made the mile-long march across the island in silence, Patrick aping, me ignoring. At Shallowbag Bay, where most Roanoke Islanders lived, we joined up with John B.’s younger brother Tart, and our party of four took the sloop Margery & Sarah and sailed across the sound to Nags Head. We landed south of Jockey’s Ridge and trekked over the stark dunes, through patches of dwarf pine and thorny scrub toward the sea. Topping the last rise, we saw a wrecked schooner, pitched on her side near shore. A three-master, though only two remained. A party had already set upon the carcass, six or seven men rummaging through the hull and the debris scattered nearby for whatever might prove of value. They made piles high up on the beach, gulls wheeling overhead.

The wind ripped steady and strong, whipping up sand, a stinging reminder of the recent storm that had blown through, this wreck a vestige of it. William Creef, clearly in charge of the other party, started up the dune as John B. led us down it. “I was wondering when the Roanoke Island Etheridges would come inquiring.”

“What do we have?” asked John B.

“Near sunup I seen her lurching in the surf, all torn apart and her sails blown to hell,” Creef said. “There ain’t much to prog for. A few salvageable barrels of salt is all, most of them shattered before coming ashore.”

That was very likely prevarication, it seemed to me. I looked over toward Patrick and found mirrored in his face a like skepticism.

“And there is three dead,” Creef added, pointing up the dune.

Patrick and I stared in the direction his finger had indicated, at the bloated corpses of three mariners. It appeared to be two men, each one the pale blue of death, and a woman, her skull crushed and half torn away. She was recognizable as female only by the tattered remains of a muslin dress that clung defiantly to her body. I knew to drop my eyes.

John B. didn’t react to the news of the loss of life any more than he had to Creef’s claims of a want of bounty. He and Creef moved off down the beach, discussing the particular apportionments of this shared find. Tart joined the other Creefs, working the wreck. Patrick and I followed after. Two Creefs had stacked the larger pieces of planking into a single pile and begun to burn off the wood to salvage the iron. Giant fingers of smoke stretched skyward. Tart picked his way through the scattered timber. He lifted what remained of the arch board, the name Molly McNeal inscribed thereon, then tossed it aside. Patrick, walking along the wrack line of the beach, knelt and retrieved a pair of bent spectacles and put them on.

Before I could join him, Creef’s youngest, Colie, a year or so my junior, tossed a pick and shovel at my feet. “Go on up there and bury them dead,” he said.

A punishing, arduous task—and grisly, even for me, a boy who had seen death before, for what Sand Banker had not? Our stretch of coast was called the “Graveyard of the Atlantic” and known the world over for just this reason: numberless ships and likewise many men had not survived it. But these ones here, these three dead? I found them hard to stomach.

Turning toward Patrick, I asked, “You coming, Paddy?” It was more plea than query.

And even as I uttered it, I asked myself why I had done this. Why had I lowered myself to begging? And what did I expect of Patrick? That my blood cousin who sometimes professed me “nigh on a brother” might assist in the dire undertaking? Or, better still, that he might call

on the advantage of our shared name, and the rank that it implied, and remove me from the grim chore altogether? The solidarity of family, that fool and infantile notion?

Patrick stood only a few feet past Colie, the wire-rimmed frames sitting skew-whiff across his face. “Hellfire, no! Why would I?” His anger was sudden, his bravado clearly a show for the Creef boy. He turned and sauntered down the beach.

“Go on, Dick!” The boom of John B.’s voice startled me, his towering figure staring over, face stern. “Do what you were told to.”

So I had at it, dragging one sagging corpse at a time up to firmer ground. Their wrists where I grabbed hold felt of pickled pork knuckle, firm yet giving, but the bodies were dead weight so it was impossible hard, even with the woman, whom I could not bear to lay eyes upon, particularly when what was left of her dress fell away. I worked out my anger with the spade, gashed at my hurt with the pick, digging a pit deep enough to guard against the sea’s overwash and to keep off gulls and gnawers—and likewise deep enough to topple Patrick over into, had I had the chance.

I caught sight of John B. staring at me when it was clear he thought me not looking. The set of his eyes betrayed an aspect that always surprised—something akin to pride.

Later, the salvaging done, the two parties stared down the dune as the last of the Molly McNeal burned, while nearby I continued with the burials. The men spoke among themselves as though I possessed no more hearing than did the spade that I wielded. Tart and the younger Creefs joshed that one of the dead sailors looked a Brazilian nigger, and they wondered lewdly at the role of the lone woman in such a piebald crew. Patrick lingered among them.

Old man Creef wryly cadged John B: “I expect you could take all seventeen barrels and sell them up to Norfolk or thereabouts, if you had a mind to. Or down to Hatteras.” He glanced my way and lowered his register a notch. “There is Army men down there. One camp or the other will surely take them.”

He seemed to imagine us colored unknowing of such things.

“Armies?” John B. inquired. And I was surprised, for how could he not know of the new war’s encroachment upon the Banks? But by his face I recognized him to be playing ’possum, hoping to learn some particulars he might not yet be aware of.

Creef nodded, conspiratorially. “The Northern lot is taking it to them mainland boys, it is said.”

This information was general.

“Right,” said John B. He went into his pocket and brought forth paper tender and a few silver coins, then pushed them into the old man’s outstretched palm. “You must be a religious man, Creef. Fortune just washes up at your door.”

“The Lord giveth, and He taketh,” said the other. “Who am I to question?”

As the Creefs gathered to leave, John B. waved Tart and Patrick toward him. I overheard him instructing: “You see, that there is *his* place. *This* is yours.”

I didn’t have the heart to look over. I knew my father to be talking to my cousin about me.

“When he’s done,” I heard, “have Dick load those barrels into our boat. If it appears he’ll not be able to finish alone, you may lend a hand.”

“Yes, sir,” I heard Patrick say, though the helping hand never did arrive.

Among an isolated people, increasing your slave stock was as difficult as finding new blood for brides. Mulattoes were the result, open secrets. I stood as a model illustration, a “scion” of the Etheridge House and broadly known as such, though a branch inscribed with my name would nowhere be found on the family tree.

Though few, some Sand Bankers were not so guarded about publicly acknowledging the kinships. Millie Evans (white) and Abiah Owens (colored), over at Whalebone Junction, and Vicy Bowser (colored) and Ben Dough (white), down to Kinnakeet, were openly coupled, with children and all, though in neither case were they legally married, as the laws of the state disallowed it. I would see Ben Dough on Roanoke with his tawny sons, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, regular if not often; he and John B. would barter fresh catch for whatever naval stores Dough might need from John B.’s supplies. White Bankers made no more fuss of the Doughs’ presence than they might of wild Corolla ponies found pasturing in their yard of a morning.

Likewise for colored Bankers. We knew what we knew and so, amongst us, mixed blood was drylongso, just ordinary. Not for my mother, though. Ma’am had been born a Dough slave, was bought in her teen years from Ben’s brother Warren, and there was no love lost for anybody of that family, any more than there was for the Etheridges. She forbade me to interact with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. One time, I asked why.

“Vicy think having some tiny-small say in things with Ben be worth the price it cost to get it,” Ma’am said.

Ma’am was a lean woman, angled and taut. She could spark tinder with a shuddersome look and wasn’t one to explain herself. But given that she’d started in I asked more—the thing a mixblood slave boy knows yet still doubts the full truth of.

“With John B., was the price he offered too high?”

“Offered!” was all she said.

Her silences spoke louder than her words, and the one that followed merely reprised what I already knew without providing any connecting bits to help me make a song of the scattered verses. The worst of what I knew could wake me from sleep and seemed like an accusation against me, of what a man should do or had not done.

My birthday fell on a Sunday that autumn. Thirteen. Early, well before sunrise, I slipped lightly into the chattel house behind Midgett Manor and stirred awake first Fields Midgett, then Bill Charles, and bid them join me. Neither much appreciated my creeping up on their pallets at that hour, yet both followed after, with little goading or much need of convincing. We were friends true.

It was our free day, made for sacking out for as long as was tolerated before whatever chores would be compelled by ma’ams and paps, then the weekly camp-meeting after that. The three of us hauled one of John B.’s fifteen-yard seine nets over to the Croatan Sound. With Fields on one end and Bill Charles on the other, I managed the arced stretch in between. We dragged the shallows till the sun reached midmorning height, camp-meeting time, and brought in more mackerel and red drum than we could carry. Fields and Bill Charles both took a share, precious bounty for families that never went unfed but were not quite fed enough. As author of the idea, I was allotted the two biggest drum. Each was nigh as long as my thigh and all but as thick. Hooking a hand in a gill of each, I lugged them up to the Etheridge House.

The fish were heavy and it was a far hike.

I passed through the kitchen, greeting Ma’am Dinah, who was dishing broth into a ceramic serving bowl. She tossed up a silent hand as hello, then returned to her work, paying me and my load little mind, as my presence hereabouts was regular and never unexpected. I pushed into the doorway to the dining room and stood there, eyes lowered.

The family was at table after church, over at Roanoke Island Baptist, which John B.’s father, Adam, had built. John B. sat across from his wife, Mistuss Margery, Missie Sarah across from Patrick. Sarah saw me first.

“Hey there, Dick! What have you got?”

“I brung you a couple of drum,” said I, raising my face.

“ ‘*Brought* you,’ ” Sarah corrected. “I’ve taught you better than that.”

“I *brought* you a couple of drum,” I said, and extended my arms toward the table, though each one ached and trembled from the exertion of the trek over.

Patrick looked mightily impressed. But as he rose to inspect the catch Mistuss Margery scolded, “Stay right where you are, Patrick! You are not dismissed.”

I said to John B., “I borrowed your nets for the venture and expect I owe you something for their use.”

There was a hint of a smile on John B.’s face. “You might ought to ask permission beforehand rather than assume my nets are for public purpose,” said he. “But I appreciate your honesty, and the initiative.”

“I wanted to show you what I can do when given the chance,” I said, aiming for an assertive tone and not that of a question. “I’m becoming grown and thought maybe you’d give me a chance to run one of your fishing boats.”

Patrick jumped in: “Me and him could run it together, Uncle John.” He added, “Of course, I would supervise.”

“I’ve seen how you supervise Dick,” said John B. “As for you”—he turned back to me—“you would do well to show a little less of these superior capabilities, lest I have you out bright and early every morning before your duties, catching our noontime meal.”

Mistuss Margery cleared her throat, though she maintained her focus platewise. “Does it not worry you, John, an industrious servant with his own program and aims, and maybe an axe to grind?”

The hint of smile quit John B.’s face. “Why should it? I’ve taught him his place.”

“As I’m sure Goodman Turner up in Southampton County thought he had taught the nigger Nat his,” said Mistuss Margery, moving carrot coins about with her fork.

No one seemed to suspect that I understood the reference. I left my eyes low so as not to give away that I did.

For raw spleen, John B. could match crossedness for crossedness. “Dick will one day be to our darky community what we are to the Sand Banks. Etheridge stock always shows its pedigree.”

The strained muteness of the room portended the peril that might of a sudden befall me with this barbed turn. But I’d noted my father’s words: he had spoken of my “pedigree.”

The silence stretched.

“Take them back to Mammy Dinah,” I heard John B. say, his words still sharp, though directed at me and no longer at his wife.

I slipped out of the room and left the drum on the kitchen counter and scooted out the door.

Later that afternoon, Patrick turned up at Ma'am's cabin. "Hey, Dick!" he hollered, calling me outside—boldly but not too bold. Whatever he might be learning about his station as white folk, every blessed soul on the island knew his place with my mother.

I dragged myself to the door and Paddy waved me over. He scolded, "Why didn't you tell me you boys was seining today? I'd have joined you."

"It's family Sunday, Paddy," said I. "Your place is over at Roanoke Island Baptist, then up to the House for dinner, with the family."

I'd meant the words to sting.

He went on about being left out of the fun, as was his right. I demurred but did not bow, as befit my blood—my "pedigree."

After he left, it was my ma'am's turn to scold me: "You got to carry whatever load he command you to, but not aught else." She wasn't talking about Patrick. She knew about the two big drum. Word travels fast on an island, especially among its colored. "He don't do for you, you do for him. So you don't owe him one precious thing."

My ma'am supposed that my attention toward John B. was a sign that I had no buck. I knew this. But it wasn't that, not ever. I had buck and then some. No, it was because the man was my father.

I told her, "Mass John B. say I got initiative and I got drive and might can run one of his boats." I didn't expect her to feel the pride from this that I myself felt, but I knew she would recognize its useful implication. "That be more catch and whatnot for you and me, and for everybody!"

" 'Mass'?" she said. "His name 'Master'?"

She awaited a reply.

I offered none.

"Not in my eyes, it ain't," she said. "And not in my cabin. No, son. That word is not permitted here."

Insolence wasn't ever my way, and so it was as though I was hearing some other self speak. "May not be for you. But for us-all else it is."

"Pardon?" Ma'am said. "What did you say?"

I'd accomplished something with my sunrise venture and John B.'s acknowledgment of it, and it bore remarking. Me, the man of our household and head in the making of the colored section. Me, Richard.

“For everybody else,” I said, “ ‘Mass’ be the man’s first name.” I couldn’t help myself. I added, “And he a pretty good one, too, I expect, as masters go.”

Contrary words did not fluster my ma’am. They brought forth her rage.

“You think because he let you hang about his house that he think you special? That you different?”

The unceasing silence commanded that I raise my face. It defied me not to!

I refused.

“You ain’t sleeping in it, though, is you?”

I responded then, my voice as soft as smoke. “He taught me letters. Not to no slave boy other, just to me.”

“It weren’t John B. what taught you but his daughter. All he did was *not* disallow it.” She harrumphed fiercely, but only so as to catch her breath. “He allowed his daughter a pet to play with of a Sunday afternoon, a grinder’s monkey on a leash.”

Her silence went gentle then, and I realized that it was because my cheeks were shiny with wet. Ma’am didn’t abide soft, but she sat in her sewing chair and pulled me into her lap. My body stretched almost as long as hers, yet I curled up small and sank into her breast.

I never knew my ma’am’s true age, only that she’d bore me when of about as many years as I had turned that day. She always seemed older. But curled up there, sobbing into her chest, I saw the beautiful girl she had once been, the face from my earliest memory—welcoming eyes; honey on a fingertip that I sucked at; hummed words that might be song or maybe just nonsense feather sounds.

“Making a baby don’t make a father,” she told me. “Remember that. Soon as you start to thinking elseways, you have forsook your own self. You got to understand, son: he *own* you. Just like you had owned them dead drum.”

I knew my ma’am to be right, as sure as day begets night and night becomes day. But pups will favor their paps. I knew this, too. A boy will seek out his father.

I’d known Fanny on about as long as I’d known anyone, excepting Ma’am. She was a part of our pack—of Fields Midgett and Bill Charles, Dorman Pugh and the rest, and Paddy, too, when he’d make himself a part of us. Depending on the season and our Masses’ moods, we might not find one another save for Sundays, but then for sure. Fanny was often the only girl, but none made a distinction. She was just Fanny. And, at most-all we undertook, she was tops. She swam better than Fields and knew whisper-tales on island folk that us others did not and was generally first picked when we chose sides for chuck-farthing. Whatever the

endeavor, she gave as good as she got. The only difference was that she wore a sack dress and covered her head in a bonnet where I and the others had on short pants and plaited straw hats.

She and I first recognized ourselves to be more than just playmates one night out on Shallowbag Bay. I'd been left behind to unload John B.'s haul of terrapin from the Margery & Sarah, and Fanny was shelling a basketful of shrimp out on the dock. Night had fallen and she was late getting them to Ma'am Beulah for serving at suppertime. I left my chores and squatted aside her and helped her at it. Our knees touched as our hands worked in unison. We got the shelling done before trouble befell her for tarrying, and feeling as much joyful as relieved I leaned over and kissed her, unprovoked. Just as easeful as that, a natural thing to do.

I would swear to this, at least, though my memory may have tailored the particulars. It may have been her that initiated the kiss. For that was Fanny.

It's said that, on account of unrelenting proximity, island folk can sometimes fool themselves into believing an earnestness of feeling that isn't in fact true. With Fanny, it wasn't fooling. That first kiss confirmed it.

"How is it you did *not* know it until now?" she asked a few nights later, sitting alongside me at our secret spot over by Uppowoc Creek. "The top coons of the top buckras must surely breed the bestest pickaninnies, no? Why would I choose some other?"

She was joshing, of course. But not, too. We were children yet, but not children for long. Such was the life of a slave. Even at our young age, I recognized that she was the one I would venture down the road with.

Paddy and I were in the barn, grooming John B.'s stock. Paddy loved those horses nigh on as much as did John B., and he often joined me in carrying out horsely duties. The scree-screeing of cicadas from outside the open barn door was a music we worked by. Even if, with age, we occupied diverging stations, we still talked much, too, open and free. We were debating how best to treat Syntax, the prize of the stable but that had been favoring her hind leg. Paddy wanted heat but I knew cool to be better, to keep the swelling down. It went my way, as Paddy tended to trust my judgment on such things.

As I cool-wrapped the leg atop the fetlock, he showed me a picture he had drawn. It was nice, right nice, of a shipwreck, with Sand Bankers on the dunes working to salvage the lumber and sails. He'd titled it "Graveyard of the Atlantic" and had captured justly the ominous look of the dark, heavy surf. I was no judge; all I knew of fine arts and picture-making were illustrations in books and the portraits of famous Etheridges that lined the walls of the Etheridge House. But, to tell by Paddy's drawing, he had a flair for it.

He said, “You’re pure hell with a horse, you boat well and fish even better, but here’s something I’ll always best you at. I can draw the hairs on a fly’s arse and get the shading just right.”

Paddy could crow with the best of them.

I told him, playful, “Mass John B. thinks it impractical and not a good use of your time.”

Despite my ma’am’s admonition, this was the proper way of referring to my father.

I’d cast the words jokey but meant them as a caution to Paddy also, to forewarn of John B.’s inevitable outburst of anger. This newfound interest was just one more thing that seemed to disappoint John B. about his nephew. But Paddy retorted, “Uncle John thinks that whatever I do, if he did not bid it done, is a poor use of my time. I’ll make my fortune one day on my skill with pen and ink, with oil painting, and Uncle John will see that I’m all the man any Etheridge ever was, and me, by my own path.”

I reached the picture back at him.

He smiled broad and would not take it. “Go on and keep it. You can be my first customer.”

“But I ain’t paid you aught for it,” said I.

“Well, you can still be my first customer, so long as you don’t tell anyone I gave it away for free. Tell them I made you muck out the horse stalls for it or something.”

“Smokes, Paddy-boy, I got to do that anyway.”

It was moments such as this one that recalled our closeness coming up, fondly, with a regret hardly befitting a soon-to-be man, and not fit of a slave ever, no matter the age. And so I wanted this now rare feeling to last. I told him, “I think I might make a gift of your art-piece to Fanny.”

Not asking permission, mind you, just confiding.

“Annie Aydlett’s handmaid?” he said. “You got something going with her?”

It wasn’t joy for me that I saw in his look but something other.

“Well, let me tell you,” he continued, “you ain’t the only bull in the yard sniffing after that heifer. I tried to get her into the woods myself just the other week.”

Crowing again, raw and ugly. He was not done. “She wasn’t having none of it. But you know it’s just a matter of time. A nigger-gal ain’t keeping nothing from nobody.”

Even then I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I tried to teach him better. “Is that what you think of me, Paddy? Am I just a nigger, too?”

“I’ve known you all my life,” said Paddy, seeming dismayed, as though he’d not recognized his words to be cruel and the knowledge was only now dawning. “It’s different with you, we come up together. You’re like family.”

“*Like* family? Patrick, you and I *are* family.”

My defiance brought on his anger, which was always close at hand and ignited high-hot. “Nobody ever whipped you! You tell me one time you was whipped, maltreated. Hell, we learned you letters. You sleep well right here nearby us, eat well. What more do you want?”

I dropped my eyes—not out of deference, no!—but because to not do so was to take the next step in this rising encounter, and that could only end poorly. I understood just then something about the source of his constant rivalling with me. If I bettered Patrick at most-all, it was because overseeing me and the others rather than working alongside us had softened him by comparison. I was sure he fared well when with other white boys. But when with me or Fields or Dorman? Not hardly.

To see his face—clenching, even as his eyes darted elseways—it was as though in that moment he recognized it as well.

Silence blanketed the barn, so thick that it smothered the nature noises beyond the open door.

He said, his voice subduing, “We ought to take Uncle John’s sloop over to the Alligator River come Sunday. Black bear is pesking this time of year. I bet you if we laid some traps we could get us one.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sure we could.”

“It’d be fun! And well worth it—for the hide and claws.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, “if you wish it.” All but calling him “Mass Patrick.”

He realized I would not join in his empty banter. Pointing toward the stalls, he spat a command about me mucking them once I was done with Syntax, then stormed out. And I did so, making sure to leave his sketch among the droppings and chips that I carted off.

I felt regret again then, only not wistful this time but a shameful, shameful remorse. A heifer, he’d said; not keeping nothing from nobody. I realized that, as with my ma’am and John B., I’d merely looked after my own hurt. I hadn’t even attempted a defense of Fanny.

War had broken out at the end of the summer. Our Masses pretended it was a foreign affair to do with faraway concerns, but we colored whispered on it. When the Northerner Army landed down at Hatteras Island, to our south, and overran the Confederate States soldiers from inland, we knew it in the slave cabins before serving the breakfasts over which our Masses would dispute the implications.

The implications were clear. The Northerners were headed our way, toward Roanoke.

And so the implications were likewise clear for me. I found myself that evening walking up the lane that ran alongside Uppowoc Creek, past the barn and the windmill partly obscured by evening fog, toward the Etheridge House. Then standing in the vestibule, grayly lit by lantern light. Then afore the great doors to the dining room.

Had I knocked or just entered?

Dinner conversation of a sudden stopped as they noted me there, astraddle the threshold. Mistuss Margery and Missie Sarah. Patrick. John B. Ma'am Molly's Peter, the colored boy who served meals, was still now, too, his head bowed and eyes lowered, a platter outstretched toward Mistuss Margery but not close enough that she might successfully spear a fillet of the grilled bluefish.

"The Union Army is nearby, across the sound at Chicamacomico," I heard myself saying. "They are taking on colored laborers and I will go there in the morning and enlist."

I'd directed this at John B., but Patrick was the one who reacted. His face broke into a familiar, impish smile, as though I were taunting him with prankful play. Then it shifted, from amused to surprised and on to something darker, darker like I'd only on rare occasion seen.

"The hell you will."

None else moved, not even a flinch. Ma'am Molly's Peter stood stiff as statuary, the platter outstretched.

"The hell you will!" Patrick repeated, only stronger, as though it was him the master of the house and not John B.

Though, indeed, it would be him one day who took the seat at the top of the dining-room table, Patrick become John B. This, too, was clear. My place would be out at the cabins, attempting to own things I had no right to own. New and not new at all. I had come to feel a great need to protect Fanny, and, though my ma'am was proof of the folly of the notion, I deemed myself capable of it. Hence the course I was undertaking.

Just then Mistuss Margery speared a fillet of bluefish—a sharp *clink!* of metal tine on metal platter. She had yet to speak a word and refused even to look at me. Ma'am Molly's Peter slipped out the side door thereon, off to the kitchen, though aught other had been served.

John B. said, “The Yankees will soon overrun the island. You will do as you will from here on, Dick.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, wondering was the “sir” still mandatory or even appropriate.

I did not drop my eyes, though, as was custom and had always been my habit, and our gazes locked. Was it remorse I saw in his face, or was that merely what I hoped to see? I wished that the truth might expose itself. What did the man behold when he looked upon me? A son claiming his station, with the begrudging pride that this might inspire, or a slave of a sudden become ungovernable?

No such wish granted. Just his expressionless face and the sharp *clink* of tiny metal—Mistuss Margery hotly poking at pieces of fish, heedless that no one else had been served.

“But Uncle John! He can’t,” cried Patrick, less in protest than as a plea. He turned toward me. “It’s their war, not ours. They will move on and things will . . . And who knows but that you might get . . .”

He seemed not to know at whom to aim his appeal, only that it was falling on deaf ears, as neither his uncle nor I would face him, each of us facing the other.

Then Patrick’s voice changed. I heard something like contempt. “When you are killed and your nigger head is just some ornament hanging from the gum tree aside the square on Shallowbag Bay, we will leave it there for all to see what you have chosen.”

He pushed off fiercely from the table and toward me, his chair toppling backward. Our statures mirrored one another’s, as always, only now I felt taller, as though looking down upon his approaching form. Our shoulders collided, deliberately, as he went past and out the door.

It felt as nothing to me. I noted only the sharp breeze from the east that smelled of salt. I did not wait to be excused but quit the room and returned to my ma’am’s cabin. I hadn’t aforehand told her of my intention, hadn’t even told Fanny. It had come to me so of a sudden that I’d followed the need to act without pondering it further, not for fear of a change of mind but from the great relief one feels at a Bible-like epiphany.

“You couldn’t just run off like other colored do?” Ma’am said when I told her, her angled face unsparing. “You needed to beg for his approval?”

“Tell me,” she added. “Did you get it?” ♦