

DESSA ROSE

By

Sherely Anne Williams

November 24, 1987

1 EXT - THE HUGHES FARM - LINDEN, ALABAMA - THE PRESENT: EARLY
SUMMER 1847 - NIGHT

The screen is black. A match flares, is touched to the wick of a drak lantern. The flame catches; the lantern is shuttered, the match quickly doused.

In the dimness, a female figure, carrying the lantern and a covered dish, hurries nervously away from the farm house. The house is dark except for a light in the attic. The woman, JEMINA, the light-skinned slave cook, passes a large tree heading towards what remains of a log cabin—the original farm house—at some remove from the house but visible from the tree. The root cellar is under the foundation of the cabin; its one window is out of sight of the house and the tree.

Except for the crickets, an ocassional bird call, the crunch of Jemina's footsteps, the night is still.

2 EXT - OUTSIDE THE ROOT CELLAR WINDOW - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Jemina stoops outside the barred cellar window, the plate of food beside her.

JEMINA

Psst! Have something from the
white folks table. Hey.

3 INT - CELLAR - IMMEDIATELY - FOLLOWING

DESSA, barely distinguishable in the gloom, dirty and dishevled, lies awake on a thin mattress; she is chained hand and foot to the wall. Moonlight touches her face. She licks her lips, pursing them as though to speak or sing, but no sound emerges.

4 EXT - OUTSIDE THE ROOT CELLAR WINDOW - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

JEMINA

Hey, Devil Woman.

Silence.

DESSA

(hoarsely)
Ain't no devil woman.

JEMINA

Don't mean no harm by it. Poor
slaves got to have something to
laugh about, brag about.
(pause)

This here's double chocolate cake.

(CONTINUED)

4 CONTINUED:

She hands it through the window; after a moment she draws her hand back the cake still in it.

JEMINA

Not going to hurt nothing to talk,
honey.

Silence; after a moment Jemina rises and walks away.

5 INT - CELLAR - IMMEDIATELY - FOLLOWING

We hear Jemina's receding footsteps. Dessa's eyes are glittery with tears. We hear KAINE'S THEME, a simple blues figure, and the rattle of chains. She closes her eyes.

6 EXT - HUGHES FARM - DAY

The Hughes farm is a moderate sized property, unpretentious, meticulously maintained. SHERIFF HUGHES, a bluff, hearty, outdoors type, and ADAM NEHEMIAH, dapper, fastidious in manner, seem to be the only people about as they cross the side yard which is almost somnolent in the noon heat; chickens and geese wander around. Jemina appears on the front porch, sweeping, looking after Hughes and Nehemiah; ANOTHER SLAVE appears, raking the yard.

Hughes opens the cellar door. Light from the doorway cuts a swath across the darkness below, revealing an untouched bowl of mush on the floor. Dessa is not in sight. Hughes and Nehemiah descend the steps.

7 INT - CELLAR - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Hughes and Nehemiah stand in the light, Nehemiah with a hankerchief to his nose.

HUGHES

Here, gal.

We hear the clank of chains and see Dessa seated in shadow, her back to the wall. Except for her eyes, she is a barely distinguishable huddle of wretchedness. She doesn't move. Nehemiah stares, repelled and fascinated.

HUGHES

Come on, now. This is Master Nehemiah; he's an officer of the Court same as me. He's going to ask you some questions and I want you to answer him honest.

(CONTINUED)

7 CONTINUED:

He herds Dessa toward Nehemiah who backs hastily away from her dark scuttling form.

NEHEMIAH

That's all right, Sheriff, I'll—
I'll take it from here.

Hughes goes up the steps, leaving the door open. Nehemiah stands in the light, seeming to tower over Dessa who sits in the shadows. Nehemiah walks around her, keeping to the light, pausing between each sentence.

NEHEMIAH

That was a good trick you darkies
played on the white men, filing
those chains open.

(pause)

Is that how it happened? Someone
gave you a file.

(pause)

Who gave you that file?

Close to her now, he touches her with his shoe. She starts away from him; startled, he jumps back.

NEHEMIAH

Easy now.

Nehemiah watches her; he can see something of her face now; she looks less nightmarish.

NEHEMIAH (Cont'd)

I bet you were right there in the
thick of it. Fighting alongside
one of those big bucks.

He crouches down; Dessa backs further into shadow.

NEHEMIAH (Cont'd)

(sharply)

Look at me when I speak, nigger.

Dessa sits half in, half out of the light, the mound of her pregnancy clearly visible. She looks at her stomach as though seeing it for the first time.

DESSA

(hoarsely)

. . . Kaine say this baby is
Master's. But Master ain't had
nothing to do with our baby.
Mistress slap my face when I say
that. I shoulda killed her, too!

(CONTINUED)

7 CONTINUED: (2)

NEHEMIAH

Killed? Who else did you kill?

Dessa, chains rattling, settles in the darkness.

8 EXT - VAUGHAM PLANTATION, SOUTH CAROLINA - SUNSET - SEVERAL MONTHS EARLIER: SPRING 1847

The Vaugham Plantation is large, acres of cultivated fields, barns, stables, spring house and dairy, laundry, bath house, separate kitchen. The beautiful manor house is surrounded by landscaped gardens; an orchard borders one side. The Quarters are some distance from the outbuildings, separated from them by a patch of woods.

Dessa, no sign of her pregnancy visible, Dessa's sister, MARTHA and several OTHER SLAVES are framed against the sunset as they come in from the fields. TARVER, the burly, negro driver, a short bull whip at his side, walks a little behind the group, a part of, yet separate from them. The first comments, unhurried, punctuated now and then by the thud of some farm implement (the sound might be mistaken for the rasp of chains) rise anonymously in the half-light.

FEMALE VOICE

I seen Monroe chained out at one of the barns this morning.

MALE VOICE

Much as Boss Smith work us in the field, how Monroe "find" a chance to visit that gal over to Master Jefferson?

The people are now distinguishable; many wear scarves or hats; all are shabbily dressed, dirty and sweaty. The camera finds Dessa, dark-skinned, healthy rather than pretty in a conventional sense, almost shy, hovering charmingly between girl and womanhood, and Martha, twenties, brown skinned, good looking and confident. There is an obvious closeness between them; they talk together as much by touch and look as speech. There is scattered laughter.

MALE VOICE

Least if his woman is over to Jefferson, a man ain't got to see her always under the lash.

MARTHA

Now you know Master Vaugham don't like the mens planting his seeds in Master Jefferson's garden.

(CONTINUED)

8 CONTINUED:

Dessa hunches Martha warningly, looking back at Tarver who looks stolidly ahead.

TARVER

Monroe's hard head just make more
meat for the slave dealer's
coffle.

MALE VOICE

(after a pause)

Aw, ain't nobody going be sold
away for going to see a
sweetheart, Tarver.

KAINE

(o.s., singing his
theme)

Hey, hey . . . sweet mama. Say
hey now, hey now--

9 EXT - SAME AS ABOVE

Dessa's husband, KAINE, appears playing the banjo. Brown-skinned, early twenties, he has a mime's careless grace and a self-mocking awareness that he is a slave and a man -a combination that could get him killed. The only time he is seen without the banjo on him is when he eats and sleeps; even then it is close by.

KAINE (Cont'd)

Dessa da'ling . . . this Kaine's
holla . . .

Dessa pushes to the front and hurries toward him.

10 EXT - SAME AS ABOVE

Kaine, banjo at his back now, lifts Dessa in his arms, swinging her around.

DESSA

(worried)

What you doing down here so early?
If Boss Smith see you--

KAINE

(laughing)

He think I'm still up there at
that old piecea green-house trying
to make strawberries grow all year
round.

(CONTINUED)

10 CONTINUED:

DESSA

You just asking for trouble.

KAINE

Baby, I'm already in trouble.

DESSA

What you mean?

MARTHA

(catching up to them)

Mean a nigga ain't born to nothing
but trouble and if a nigga don't
court pleasure, he ain't likely
to get none!

KAINE

(tipping an imaginary
hat)

Evening, Martha, ladies,
gentlemens.

(sarcastically to
Tarver)

Boss.

TARVER

Sun go down in the garden before
it set in the fields, huh?

KAINE

(hugging Dessa)

Oh, Master sent me down here to
take care that breeding business
I been let slide.

He gestures broadly, miming the bulging stomach of pregnancy,
pointing to the flatness of Dessa's. The others laugh; Tarver
is visibly chagrined.

11 INT - DESSA AND KAINE'S CABIN - DUSK

The cabin is crudely built: makeshift fireplace, an iron pot
set on fire-blackened stones, a thin corn husk mattress, a
stool, no table; a stand with a basin, water in a tin beside
it, a dipper on a nail above it, a stubby tallow candle by the
bed. Dessa and Kaine, seated on the floor, eat from gourd
bowls.

DESSA

Why you take off early? You know
how Master complain.

(CONTINUED)

11 CONTINUED:

KAINE

Lefonia gived me a little of that
beef master had for dinner and
I pulled them young greens and
seasoned em with just a touch of
fatback.

DESSA

A touch was all we had. Kaine—

KAINE

(exasperated)

You think white people pee
"champagne," huh? They get the
runs same as we do and it stank—.

DESSA

You better quite talking under
white folks' clothes like that!

(curiously after a
pause)

What is champagne?

They laugh.

KAINE

(picking up the banjo)

You worries too much about Master
and Mistress, Dessa. You know
they sho don't be worrying too
much about us.

(putting a finger to
her lips)

Shoo.

(plucking at the banjo)

You don't need all this rilement
and you just coming out the
fields.

(playing a blues figure)

Ain't that sweet?

Dessa is charmed despite herself.

KAINE

(singing)

Go to sleep; go to sleep, my loving girl.
Papa's going stay right here with you.
Go to sleep; go to sleepy, loving baby.

He looks at Dessa as he finishes. She is sleep; he covers her
and lies down.

12 INT - DESSA AND KAINÉ'S CABIN - DAWN

It is dark inside the cabin. A rooster crows.

DESSA
You wake, honey.

The sound of kissing; Kaine groans sleepily.

DESSA (Cont'd)
Honey? Mmm—.

They begin to make love. It is lighter in the cabin. The conch sounds. They groan with a different urgency.

DESSA
Kaine, we got to go. Kaine.

There is the sound of more kissing. The conch sounds again as the lovemaking climaxes. They are quiet a moment.

KAINE
Damn! I wisht Mistress would take
you on at the House.

Laughing, Dessa finds her long drawers in the covers.

DESSA
Now you know I ain't light-skinned
enough for Master.

KAINE
(pulling her back)
You too young and pretty for
Mistress.

They kiss; the conch sounds again. Dessa jumps, dresses hurriedly as Kaine pulls on his pants. She ties yesterday's scarf on her head; he hands her a cold corn cake from the ashes of the fire-half. They hurry out.

13 EXT - QUARTERS - MORNING

The sun rises as Dessa and Kaine, the banjo strapped at his back, hurry through the Slave Quarters, dozens of weathered clapboard, one-room cabins set in haphazard rows. Garden plots are laid out beside two or three other cabins, including Dessa's; compared to the others, it shows robust signs of life. The Quarters are deserted now except for several pre-school children who shout greetings at the couple and an old woman hoeing a small plot at the side of her cabin, who pays them no mind.

14 EXT - WOODS - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Dessa and Kaine hurry along a path through a small wood; they come to a fork in the path and embrace.

A horse and rider emerge from the woods beyond the couple unobserved by them.

Dessa hurries away. Kaine turns, whistling.

The horseman, TERRELL VAUGHAM, the thirtish, handsome, dissolute, master of the plantation, blocks Kaine's path. He is carelessly dressed, has obviously been out all night and is somewhat the worse for it.

VAUGHAM

What the hell you doing down here,
boy?

KAINE

(touching his hat)
Morning, Master Vaughan.

Kaine tries to edge around the horse but Vaughan moves to block his path.

KAINE

On my way to the greenhouse now,
Master.

The horse saddles nervously and Kaine hurries off.

15 EXT - THE FIELDS - DAY

Dessa's work-group is weeding and thinning young plants. BOSS SMITH, the white overseer and MISTRESS VAUGHAM, fair-haired, some years older than her husband, both on horseback, survey the workers. Mistress Vaughan carries a furled riding whip.

Dessa leans wearily on her hoe, mops her forehead, though the others appear in no distress. She resumes hoeing half-heartedly. Martha looks up as Dessa falls; she throws down her own hoe and hurries to her.

MARTHA

What's wrong, Dessa?

DESSA

Don't know. I gots a swimming
in the head and feel like that
little hoecake I ate this
morning--

(CONTINUED)

15 CONTINUED:

TARVER
(hurrying over)
What the hold up here?

Dessa starts to hoe but Martha stops her.

MARTHA
Dessa like to keel over out here.

TARVER
Look like she can finish out this
row.

Mistress Vaughan and Boss Smith ride up as Martha answers.

MARTHA
You know Master don't allow you
to pick on breeding women.

MISTRESS VAUGHAM
For heaven sakes, Tarver, let the
gal have a set-down; she can
finish that row when she rested.
(to Dessa)
Mind now, we need healthy
pickanninies.

She smiles and they ride away..

DESSA
You shouldn't be changing no words
with Tarver on count of me. You
know how he is with the womens.

MARTHA
Tarver just think he Master's arm;
he ain't got no parts of white
on him. But it's true ain't it,
Dessa? You is going have a baby
ain't you?

Dessa, grinning, nods, yes.

DESSA
Oh Martha, you think it's eyes
going dance the way Kaine's do?
You think—?

16 INT - DESSA'S AND KAINE'S CABIN - NIGHT

On the pallet, Dessa sits between Kaine's knees; he braids her
hair in serviceable plaits and sings acapella.

(CONTINUED)

16 CONTINUED:

Kaine

I'd fall on my knees, call the laws
To see the dimple in your cheek when you smile.

If you let me love you, baby,
Ain't nothing I wouldn't do for you.

I'll get a teacher, baby, To read you story books
I'll make you a talking mirror, woman,
Just to tell you how good you look.

If you let me love you baby,
Ain't nothing I wouldn't do for you.
I wants to be your lover, baby,
I wants to be your only man.

DESSA

Kaine, Martha say I might be
making a baby.

Kaine

(laughing)

Martha say? What you say? And
what your sister, Martha, know,
anyway? She setting up to replace
Lafonia as mid-wife?

DESSA

(Laughing herself)

But it's true, Kaine. I believe
it's a baby sho enough.

Kaine

(flatly)

Then best you go see LaFonia for
sure.

DESSA

(startled)

Why?

Kaine

(savagely)

Cause I don't want no baby slave.

DESSA

(shocked)

You mean— You mean you don't want
our baby?

Kaine

Master's baby, you mean.

(CONTINUED)

16 CONTINUED: (2)

DESSA

Naw. Kaine, this our baby, ours.
How you can say have Aunt Lafonia
kill it?

Pause.

KAINE

Dessa, where your brother, Jeeter,
at now?

DESSA

(hurt)

You know Jeeter gone, sold—.

KAINE

And Master'd sell off any youngun
on the place as soon as look at
em cause he know we can always
make another one.

A pause.

DESSA

Kaine,
(whispering, frightened)
Kaine we could run— .

KAINE

(sharply)

You always talking about my mouth
going get me in trouble. Now you
the one asking for it. Where we
going run to, Dessa?

DESSA

(whispering)

North.

KAINE

North?

(angry, frightened now
himself)

You know what is North, Dessa?
Huh? What is North? More whites!
(bitterly)

They won't let a black man work
a job less the white workers say
so and even when he hauling and
carrying same as them, he gets
paid less. A white man hit him,
black man ain't allowed to hit
back.

(more)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

KAINE (Cont'd)

And we can't talk before the laws,
not against no white man, not even
for our own selfs. A "free man
of color" told me that— He don't
call hisself a nigga. He call
hisself a free man of color. And
the slave catchers sold him same
as the trader sold me.

It be two lists, Dessa, one say,
"White Man Can," other say, "Nigga
Can't," and white man is the
onliest one can write on em.

Dessa, you don't see Aunt Lefonia,
I see her for you.

Kaine takes up the banjo and starts to plays. Dessa puts her
hand on the banjo, stopping the music.

DESSA

I don't know about no lists and
no laws but— Ain't it nothing
we can do? Why else they talk
about it, sing about it, if it
ain't no freedom.

(pause)

I could talk to Joe Big; he always
talking about following the stars
in the drinking gourd to the
North.

KAINE

No! You go on see—

DESSA

Least let's try, Kaine.

KAINE

Dessa— . All right. All right.
I'll talk to him tomorrow.

Dessa is uneasy; Kaine has surrendered too easily.

17 INT - THE STABLES - DAY

JOE BIG, the slave blacksmith, is shoeing a horse as Kaine
enters. They nod; Joe Big continues with his work.

JOE BIG

Dessa said you all wants to cross
over to the North?

(CONTINUED)

17 CONTINUED:

Kaine

We all has our crosses to bear—.

They hear a horse approaching; Joe Big, putting the iron back in the fire, looking busy, waves Kaine away. Terrell Vaugham, cursing, handsome features distorted by anger, rides in. He sees Kaine before the latter can move.

TERRELL VAUGHAM

Damn gardner! Loafing again.

JOE BIG

(quieting the horse)

Master, please he was just passing through.

VAUGHAM

(striking at Kaine with his crop)

Get back to work, nigger.

Kaine

Whoa, now, Master. Master— .

Kaine dodges back to keep Vaugham from hitting him but Vaugham is relentless in his attack. Kaine grabs the crop and yanks on it, pulling Vaugham from his horse. Kaine, alarmed at the turn of events, backs away as Vaugham gets angrily to his feet.

Kaine

Master, Master, I didn't go to hurt you. I just was—

Vaugham grabs Kaine; they tussle, Kaine struggling to keep Vaugham from hitting him without himself hitting the Master. Mistress Vaugham enters, dressed for riding, carrying her riding whip.

MISTRESS VAUGHAM

What—? Terrell, you leave that yard-boy alone. Boy, boy, you turn the master loose.

Kaine

Master, I ain't fighting you.

18 EXT - STABLES - DAY

Dessa and Martha, hoes in hand, approach the stable doors. They are rather furtive with Martha the bolder of the two.

MARTHA

Don't hurt to see if Kaine really talked to Joe Big. We be back before Tarver miss us.

19 INT - STABLES - DAY

Dessa and Martha enter the stable. The scene is chaos. Kaine and Vaughan struggle with each other while Mistress Vaughan alternately exhorts and berates Kaine and Terrell Vaughan. Joe Big tries to quiet the horse, which is neighing and rearing (as are other horses in the stable) and tries to pull the combatants apart. Two or three other slaves, attracted by the noise, peer curiously around Dessa and Martha.

Dessa sees Mistress Vaughan hit Kaine with her whip. Startled, Kaine cries out, letting go of Vaughan who starts to choke Kaine with the banjo strap. Dessa knocks Mistress Vaughan down; Vaughan still has Kaine in a strangle hold with the banjo. Dessa attacks him with her hoe, knocking him from his feet.

JOE BIG
(letting go the horse)
Ceasar, Sambo, some o' yo'all
help.

Dessa drops the hoe and runs to Kaine. She touches him; his body rolls lifelessly.

Dessa is stunned. Mistress Vaughan hits at her with the whip.

MISTRESS VAUGHAM
You were sleeping with Terrell,
weren't you? Weren't you?

DESSA
(rising, backing off)
Ain't been with no master. This
baby Kaine's; it's all I—

The whip catches Dessa across her hips and thighs.

MISTRESS VAUGHAM
And breeding, too!

DESSA
Ain't no master's baby!

Dessa is knocked to the ground near the fire. She is a bloody mess her waist down. Mistress Vaughan tosses the whip aside and, taking the iron from the fire, brands Dessa.

MISTRESS VAUGHAM
Little slut!

Dessa's eyes start open; she sees Mistress Vaughan's face, pink, shiny, distorted by fury, framed by tangled light colored hair.

20 INT - MAMMY ROSE'S CABIN - DAY

Dessa lies face down on a pallet. She is naked, her face bruised and swollen, her back smooth and unblemished, her buttocks a bloody mess. Dessa's mother, MAMMY ROSE, middle-aged, worn, kneels at her side wringing water out of a rag into a tin basin. She pauses, gently touches Dessa's face, smooths her hair. The cabin door burst open, silhouetting Boss Smith in the doorway; NATHAN, a tall, dark, shaven-head slave, stands behind him.

BOSS SMITH
Mistress Vaughan sold her, Rose.

MAMMY ROSE
No!

Dessa opens her eyes, grabs Mammy's hand.

DESSA
Mammy—.

Boss Smith motions Nathan to get on with it. Not ungently, Nathan pries their hands apart.

21 EXT - THE FRONT OF THE VAUGHAM HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Slaves, including Martha line the front yard, some hiding their faces, others staring straight ahead. Nathan, astride, slowly walks his horse forward. Dessa, disheveled but clothed, her wrists tied to the guide-rope Nathan holds, stumbles along behind him. Young Mistress stands on the porch, talking to Wilson. His dirty-white horse is in front of the porch.

MISTRESS VAUGHAM
All that wench has is a few scars
on her thighs and one little tiny
brand no buyer is likely to see.
None of which impairs her value
all that much. And she is
breeding. Four hundred dollars
and not a penny less.

WILSON
Done, madam. Done.

Mistress Vaughan hands Wilson a bill of sale. He hands her a bag of coins which she starts to count as he mounts his horse.

Wilson starts off at a trot, calling to Nathan to hurry. Nathan follows slowly.

Wilson, seeing this, rides back and hits Nathan's horse across the rump as a wild shrieking rents the air OFF SCREEN.

(CONTINUED)

21 CONTINUED:

The horse bolts about the yard, dragging Dessa behind; the scream halts abruptly. Nathan gets the horse under control.

Mammy, head rag askew, dress dirty and torn, stumbles toward Dessa. Martha breaks from the line of slaves. Tarver knocks Martha down and grabs Mammy.

Wilson looks at Mistress Vaughan on the porch, the slaves in the yard and prevents Nathan from dismounting.

WILSON

No.

(pulling the rope)

Get up, darky.

Dessa, her face determined, struggles to her elbows. She sees Mammy struggling with Tarver, Martha's body on the ground. She sees Wilson on the dirty white horse and Young Mistress on the porch in her immaculate, exaggerated crinoline skirts. Wilson tugs on the rope, pulling Dessa's elbows from under her. She looks at him.

Dessa manages to stand. Nathan and Wilson walk their horses down the tree-lined drive. Dessa falls once, twice; each time they wait for her to get up. Each time she does. They disappear around a bend.

22 EXT - DAY - MOMENTS LATER

Nathan and Wilson stop; Dessa wavers a minute. She is dirty from head to toe; tears make mud tracks down her face. She falls. Nathan looks at Wilson and, at his nod, dismounts.

WILSON

No hard feelings, Nate. The Biddy wanted to make a sample of her. It's a shame the way these people just plain abuse goods.

Gently, Nathan gathers up Dessa in his arms.

23 EXT - YARD - HUGHES FARM - DAY - THE PRESENT

The yard is bathed in sunlight. Nehemiah stands in the shadow of a large shade tree watching as Hughes brings Dessa up from the cellar. She is chained at ankles and wrists. Although thoroughly disheveled, there is a certain dignity about her as she stands in the sun for the first time in days. For all her dirt she is not bowed.

(CONTINUED)

23 CONTINUED:

Dessa stops at the pump and, chains clanging, splashes water on her face, drinks from cupped hands. Water gleams wetly on her chin and neck, soaks the front of her dress, molding her bodice to her chest. Her breasts, like her belly, are fuller now, the nipples clearly defined by the wetly clinging cloth. Nehemiah watches.

24 EXT - MOMENTS LATER

Nehemiah sits on a crude chair; Dessa sits near him on the ground, knees drawn up to her chest, manacled hands clasped about them; her dress covers the leg-irons that hobble her feet. A chain attached to her ankle-bead is wound around the trunk of the elm.

It is hot; now and then Nehemiah blots his face with a handkerchief or holds it to his nose. Dessa hums. Nehemiah takes a pen and his journal, loose sheets of paper bound with a thin ribbon, from his inside breast pocket.

*NOTE: Whenever Dessa is outside, slaves watch from hiding to catch a glimpse of the notorious "Devil Woman." Dessa takes note of this only where indicated; whenever Nehemiah looks around, the slaves are nowhere to be seen.

NEHEMIAH

Who had the file you used to break
the chains?

Humming, Dessa looks over Nehemiah's shoulder and sees two small children. They wave at her.

NEHEMIAH (Cont'd)

Where did the file come from?

Dessa allows one eye lid to drop slightly, then closes both eyes. Nehemiah nudges her with the toe of his shoe.

NEHEMIAH (Cont'd)

Another darky?

Dessa moves away, careful not to look directly at him. He taps his watch-case impatiently.

DESSA

(staring into space,
singing)

Lawd, give me wings like Noah's
dove ...

Nehemiah is startled. Sunlight filtering through the leaves dapples Dessa's face with shadow. A trickle of sweat make its way down Dessa's bosom. Nehemiah watches fascinated.

(CONTINUED)

24 CONTINUED:

DESSA (Cont'd)

I'd fly cross these fields to the
one I love . . .

Dessa sneaks a glance at Nehemiah. All she can see of him is
his finger, tapping his watch case.

DESSA (Cont'd)

Mammy say that putting yourself
on the same level's God's peoples
is on. Course Mammy ain't knowed
no more about God and the Bible
than what the white folk tell her
and that can't be too much cause
Master don't be liking religion
in his slaves.

NEHEMIAH

(recollecting himself)

Darky!

Startled, Dessa looks at Nehemiah. His grey eyes are magnified
by the lenses of his eyeglasses. She draws back, stuttering.

DESSA

. . . Kaine play the banjo for
me . . . He made that banjo
hissself.

(pause)

And Master used it to kill him.

NEHEMIAH

Why did you darkies kill the white
men?

A pause.

DESSA

(fiercely)

I kill white men cause I can.

25 EXT - OUTSIDE THE CELLAR WINDOW - NIGHT

Jemina, a plate of food, beside her stoops at the cellar window.

JEMINA

Writer man sent Master Hughes off
looking for some darky name Kaine.

26 INT - CELLAR - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Dessa sits in the moonlight under the window, a piece of chicken in her hand. Pause.

DESSA

Jemina, they caught everybody what
runned from the coffle?

JEMINA

Don't know, honey.

(pause)

They hanged a lot of them they
did catch. Writer man trying to
find out if anybody else got away.

DESSA

He ain't going find out from me.

JEMINA

Kaine wasn't no one with the
coffle was it, honey?

DESSA

(quietly)

No.

(touching her stomach)

that wasn't no one from the
coffle.

(pause)

Jemina, what's a "Court"?

JEMINA

Bunch of white folks. You know,
where they took you and the rest
and told yo'all what bad niggers
you is?

DESSA

Ain't been no place like that.

(pause)

Jemina, they going kill my baby?

JEMINA

Course not, honey; you know babies
just more money for the white
folks.

DESSA

They going kill me?

JEMINA

The Lord will provide.

A pause.

DESSA

Tell him I want a bath.

27 EXT - COLLAGE OF COFFLE TRAVELING - DAY - THE PREVIOUS SPRING

It is full spring now, trees in leaf, young crops hazing with green the gently rolling hills. Wilson, on the dirty white horse, rides at the head of a procession of forty to fifty slaves, chained or roped together (the coffle). The slave men, in neck and ankle chains, walk behind him in twos; a few carry small parcels, most carry nothing. The women straggle along some distance behind the men. They are roped together at the ankle, leaving their hands free to carry various small and pitiful bundles. The children old enough to walk are tied to them by a rope at their waist. A few women carry small children as well as parcels. Nathan and THREE WHITE MAN ride up and down the line of slaves. The supply wagon brings up the rear. TWO FAIR-SKIN SLAVE WOMEN ride on the seat beside the ELDERLY SLAVE who drives the wagon. Dessa, bruises fading on her face, tosses restlessly in the back of the wagon.

Slaves sing in the distance.

SLAVE SONG

Way down in the bottom
Where the cotton so rotten
You won't get your hundred today
Poor little Johnny,
He's a poor little fellow;
He won't get his hundred here today.

Slaves chop young cotton in fields that stretch to the horizon.
Their song continues O.S..

Dessa, her pregnancy visible, her wounds healing but still painful, walks on the coffle with the other women.

Dessa stumbles, falls, starting a chain reaction that brings the whole line down in a tangle of rope, arms, legs and crying children. Nathan rides back and dismounts to help.

28 EXT - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Nathan returns a whimpering toddler to his mother's arms. Dessa, in some pain from her wounds, watches him from where she has fallen. Wilson rides up as Nathan turns to help Dessa. She doesn't draw away from Nathan.

WILSON

(to Dessa)

Ain't learned your lesson?

NATHAN

She ain't healed.

(CONTINUED)

28 CONTINUED:

WILSON

You talking back? And how would you know?

(suspiciously)

You been plowing in there all ready?

NATHAN

Naw, suh.

(pause)

Master Wilson, suh?

Nathan gestures toward the wagon. Wilson considers a moment; he speaks as he turns his horse to ride away.

WILSON

She can ride now but I wants her chained with everybody else from now on.

29 EXT - COFFLE CAMPED - NIGHT

Wilson and the other white men sit around the campfire; Nathan, securing the slaves for the evening, chains Dessa between an ADOLESCENT SLAVE and an OLDER SLAVE.

NATHAN

This woman in the family way.
Don't none of you all be trying
to act no dog on her.

Satisfied that they will not touch her, he walks away.

OLDER SLAVE

(whispering)

Ain't nothing to be fraid of,
daughter. We ain't all brutes.

30 EXT - COFFLE CAMPED - LATER THAT NIGHT

The slaves settled for the night; the white men continue to talk around the fire; a bottle is passed back and forth. White Men #1 and 2 walk toward Dessa, who watches them warily. They've been drinking. Dessa's eyes follow them as they pass her and unchain TWO SLAVE WOMEN near her, pull them to their feet and lead them off into the brush. The white men at the camp fire take no notice.

WHITE MAN #2

(off screen)

Open up damn it; be little
friendly, now.

(CONTINUED)

30 CONTINUED:

We see Wilson and White Man #3 in the firelight, drinking and laughing. We see the faces of the slaves as they listen to the noise from the bush. Nathan's face is expressionless; he finally turns away.

One of the women in the bushes cries out; Dessa realizes they are being raped. Chains rattling, Leo takes Dessa's hand; she starts in fear.

OLDER SLAVE

Ain't good to pay no mind to
things you can't do nothing about.

31 EXT - COFFLE COMING TO A HALT - SUNSET - A FEW WEEKS LATER

The supply wagon pulls to a stop; the Elderly Slave driver is alone on the wagon seat. The slaves come to a milling halt; Dessa, her stomach a little bigger, drops wearily to the ground. White Men #1 and #2 dismount. The coffle is larger now, the new slaves distinguished from the older ones by their fresh appearance and the relative cleanness of their dress. Still roped or chained together, they sit in silent groups. The Elderly Slave begins to unload the wagon.

Nathan rides in; the white men approach him.

WHITE MAN #1

Bout time you got here. Not good
to have just two of us with so
much new stock.

NATHAN

Master Wilson dropped off a pair
of hands; he be long directly.

Nathan dismounts, keeping the reins in his hand; the white men see LINDA, a beautiful dusky-skinned black woman, with long, flowing hair, riding behind him. The white men are obviously attracted by her beauty. They move toward her.

WHITE MAN #2

Where'd you get her?

NATHAN

Master traded that family he
bought in Georgia for her.

Riley reaches for Linda and spooks the horse.

NATHAN

(as he quiets the horse)
Ware the goods! Master saving
this for the fancy trade.

(CONTINUED)

31 CONTINUED:

Wilson and White Man #3 ride up with four slaves, their wrists roped together, trotting alongside their horses.

WHITE MAN #1

What about it, Boss? You can't be saving this for the New Orleans trade.

WILSON

Yeah, she is a little too dark to bring top dollar. But I don't want no abuse, now. This still valuable property.

He turns to walk away. Riley starts for Linda.

NATHAN

Master.

Wilson turns; Riley stops. A pause.

WILSON

And I wants this coffle bedded down tight before anyone takes they pleasure.

(turning to Nathan)

Thought you had your eye on that little dark spit-fire I bought out to Simeon, Nate.

(pause)

Well, if you want some of that, you better take it before she get much bigger. Anything happen to that baby and I'll take its price out of your hide!

32 EXT - NIGHT - THE COFFLE BEDDED DOWN

The camp is sleeping. White Man #1 moves quietly, drunkenly toward Linda, chained next to the Older Slave. White Man #1 unchains Linda, pulls her to her feet. Linda looks around for help; the white men are sleep. Dessa, chained in another group, and the other slaves are awake but no one moves.

LINDA

Please, no, master.

White Man #1 puts his hand over her mouth and leads her off. We see their backs as they disappear in the undergrowth, the faces of the sleeping white men, the faces of the wide awake slaves.

(CONTINUED)

32 CONTINUED:

LINDA (o.s.)

Please, master, don't do this.

Hold on their faces as we hear the noise of a scuffle. Linda's hoarse cry is abruptly cut off by a loud thud. Silence. Linda, battered and disheveled, appears in the clearing, a blood stained rock in one hand, keys in the other. Leo stands up and his chains fall off.

VOICE

"Mercy— !"

The scene explodes in confusion. The other slaves in that group stand up in their chains. Amid cries of "Get the keys" and "Watch that kid!", a slave snatches the keys from Linda. He frees others as the Older Slave leads the attack against the white men who, roused, grab desperately for weapons, calling excitedly, "What the hell—?" "Nate—."

Amid the general melee, Nathan frees Dessa.

NATHAN

(to Dessa)

Stay here; I'm going catch up some horses.

He hurries away.

Gun shots sound. Dessa sees Wilson, back to her, firing wildly into a group of negroes led by the Older Slave. The Older Slave goes down. The gun jams. Rock in hand, Dessa leaps on Wilson's back screaming and clawing at his eyes, pounding at his head. He twists and turns trying to throw her off. A slave tackles him from behind, knocking him and Dessa to the ground. The gun flies out of Wilson's hand. Nathan picks it up and shots Wilson, killing him.

33 EXT - NIGHT - SOME MINUTES LATER

The fight is over; the white men are dead. The bodies of some slaves lie about, a few slaves still cower near their chains. The others gather around the fire, nursing their various injuries, eating hunks of corn bread and meat, drinking, there is a coffee pot and several cups that are shared back and forth. Nathan, with a hat jammed down around his ears, sits with Dessa.

FEMALE VOICE

I hit that white man a good one.

MALE VOICE

Did you see that little woman jump on the slave dealer back?

(CONTINUED)

33 CONTINUED:

FEMALE VOICE

He squalled like a scalded cat.

MALE VOICE

Yeah, we did them white men.

VOICE

(shouting)

We free!

Several of the people do a spontaneous dance, laughing, crying, singing. Nathan watches, smiling; Dessa sits and as the word "free" sinks in, she closes her eyes in pain.

MALE SLAVE

(as they settle down)

I'm following that old drinking gourd.

MALE SLAVE

Can't follow no stars cept at night.

FEMALE SLAVE

(derisively)

How else you think we can travel?
Going ride down the main road in
broad daylight?

FEMALE SLAVE

We ought to split up. White folks
see all these negroes without a
white man, they going know
something wrong.

MALE SLAVE

(to Nathan)

Which way you going, big fella?

NATHAN

(after a pause)

Well, I ain't going North. That's
the first way they search. Might
try to make it to the gulf coast;
it's bands of runaways along in
there.

(turning to Dessa)

Think you can make it that far.

DESSA

(drawing away from him)

I ain't looking for no man.

(CONTINUED)

33 CONTINUED: (2)

NATHAN

And I sho ain't looking for no
little old hankty gal like you.

MALE

(as others nod)

I think maybe I'll go along that
way, too.

NATHAN

We got to split up; we can't all
go the same way.

DESSA

How come they can't come, too.

NATHAN

You going get yourself killed,
trying to worry about other
peoples.

34 EXT - A FOREST CLEARING - MORNING

Nathan and Dessa, riding before him on the dirty white horse,
enter the clearing, followed by the other rebels, tired but
satisfied. Some are walking, others ride two and three to a
horse, others sit on top of the supplies in the wagon.

NATHAN

We'll camp here and push on
towards Mobile tonight.

35 EXT - CLEARING - DAY

The runaways are asleep pretty much where they dismounted;
animals bedded down but no gear put away. Dessa, covered by a
blanket, sleeps next to Nathan who has none.

Gun shots sound startling them all awake. SEVERAL WHITE MEN
charge into the clearing. Nathan shoots once, emptying the gun.
He takes Dessa's hand and runs with her into the trees.

36 EXT - FOREST - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Yelling and gunfire in the background; Dessa, hand held by
Nathan as they run, stumbles and falls, almost pulling him down.
She jerks her hand from his.

DESSA

Go on! Go on; don't let em catch
you!

(CONTINUED)

36 CONTINUED:

She scrambles up and runs back toward the sound of gunfire.

As Nathan follows her, he is hit in the shoulder and falls in the brush where he lies unmoving.

37 EXT - FOREST IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Dessa, brandishing a stick over her head, bursts into the clearing and is knocked down by a WHITE MAN.

38 EXT - A CREEK - HUGHES FARM - DAY

Dessa, fully clothed, her wrists shackled, stands in the water. Jemina stands on the bank, holding one end of Dessa's ankle chain, urging her on; cattle, tended by children, drink downstream. Dessa walks gingerly into the water, slips, sits. She flings water on herself, scrubbing intently at her arms, her face, her hair.

Standing now, wet from head to toe, the dress plastered to her body, Dessa lathers her full breasts, molds the dress to her thighs with soap, lathers the big mound of her belly. Head bent, she might almost be carressing a lover. Nehemiah watches openly.

Despite her pregnancy, she looks erotically sensual in her enjoyment of the water.

Nehemiah realizes that Jemina is watching him; he turns hastily away and is startled to see Hughes, rather travel stained, dismounting from his horse, his expression sour.

NEHEMIAH

Any luck, Sheriff?

SHERIFF

These planters going to have to search their own quarters before I ride out on another wild goose chase. We rode north far as Sutton's Creek and west into Franklin County. Ain't found no trace of darkies that didn't belong to someone—and no one ain't heard of this darky you say the gal was babbling about.

NEHEMIAH

Yes, well, I'm sure the Governor will appreciate your thoroughness, Sheriff.

38 CONTINUED:

Nehemiah's attention returns to Dessa. She sits with her skirts and chains spread out around her as Jemina dries her head. Nehemiah speaks without looking at Hughes.

NEHEMIAH

Sheriff, the coffle manifest describes the wench as branded on her, er, lower extremities.

(as Hughes looks at him curiously)

I will want to note that in my report to the Governor.

HUGHES

Never inspected her myself.

39 EXT - HUGHES FARM - DAY

Dessa and Nehemiah, in his shirt sleeves, his tie precisely knotted, despite the obvious heat, seated under the tree. It is a hot, sultry day; thunder rumbles in the distance. Dessa, chained only by an ankle, on her knees looks at Nehemiah's pad.

DESSA

(suspiciously)

You be writing down what I say?

We see that the pad is blank except for the day's date, July 12, 1847.

DESSA (Cont'd)

What that there? And there?

Nehemiah, laughing, holds the pad away from her.

DESSA (Cont'd)

Why you write what I say?

NEHEMIAH

(anxiously)

Girl, Odessa, you know I mean you no harm. I made the sheriff take some of those chains off you.

He reaches for her hand. Unaware of his gesture, Dessa avoids his touch.

NEHEMIAH (Cont'd)

Odessa, what I write here has no effect on you; you've already been tried and judged.

(more)

(CONTINUED)

39 CONTINUED:

NEHEMIAH (Cont'd)

I write what I do in the hope of
helping others to be happy in the
life that has been sent them to
live.

Dessa turns away.

DESSA

(wonderingly)

Me and Kaine always had to
pleasure ourselves in the mornings
cause I was too tired to love at
night. Cept in winter; cept on
Saturday half days. . . .

Nehemiah, visibly moved raises his hand to touch Dessa.

DESSA (Cont'd)

(firmly)

Kaine choosed me; Master tell
Martha to lay wid Tarver. And
we all be knowing that it ain't
for nothing but to breed and time
the children be up in age, they
be sold off. And all what mammy
say don't make Master no never
mind—. Kaine choosed me— .

Dessa gropes blindly with her hand, struggling to rise touches
Nehemiah's leg, his knee. Nehemiah's hand moves instinctively
to cover hers. Using his knee for purchase she pulls herself
to her knees.

DESSA (Cont'd)

If what I say now going help
people be happy in they life, why
I not be happy when I lived it?

Nehemiah looks at his hand covering hers; her hand is on his
knee. He looks at her, a certain avidity on his face. Dessa
turns blindly away.

40 INT - PARLOR - HUGHES FARM - NIGHT

The parlor is a comfortably masculine room. Hughes and Nehemiah
are sharing a night-cap, a half empty bottle on the table
between them.

HUGHES

(leering good naturedly)

That's some powerful tale she
telling that got you listening
on a Sunday in all this heat.

(CONTINUED)

40 CONTINUED:

NEHEMIAH

(coldly)

I told you, I merely read a few Bible verses to her. A practice you might well follow with your own slaves.

HUGHES

A little late in the day to be saving her soul.

NEHEMIAH

(stiffly)

My rapport with the wench does not affect my sense of discipline. The governor asked me to investigate this incident because my previous research on slave management has been so well received. Were you not so lenient with your own slaves I doubt you'd be so concerned about what I do with the girl.

Hughes grins broadly.

41 INT - CELLAR - NIGHT

Dessa lies on the mattress. She hears a noise at the door. Puzzled, she creeps to the steps.

DESSA

(whispering)

Jemina?

The noise continues, ending with a loud thud. The door opens and Nathan, left arm in a sling, descends the steps, carrying a dark lantern. We are aware of another figure keeping guard outside the door.

DESSA

(embracing him)

I thought you was dead.

NATHAN

White folks did, too. Hold still.

Shielding the lantern with his body, Nathan stoops and begins to file at the chain on Dessa's ankle.

(CONTINUED)

41 CONTINUED:

NATHAN (Cont'd)

They left me for dead. I managed to grub a few roots and berries when I come to myself with this wound. Even stole a chicken or two. Had the devil of a time trying to wring its neck with only one wing myself. If I hadn't met up with—.

HARKER (o.s.)

Someone coming.

The door closes; Nathan shuts the lantern. He and Dessa move into deeper shadows.

NEHEMIAH (o.s.)

Odessa.

Dessa sees the pale blur of Nehemiah's face at the window. He stoops awkwardly at the window, his face almost touching his knees. Dessa looks fearfully at Nathan; neither of them can be seen from the window. Nathan nods and Dessa moves to the window. Standing on tip-toe, she holds the window bars.

NEHEMIAH (o.s.)

Odessa, I—.

He covers her hands with his; she snatches them away.

NEHEMIAH (o.s.)

Look, I have the keys.

He shakes them in her face. There is the sound of a blow; Nehemiah keels over. His body is dragged away.

DESSA

What was that?

NATHAN

Must be Harker!

The door opens. HARKER, a tall brown-skin fellow, descends the steps with Nehemiah's body thrown over his shoulder. He holds out the keys.

HARKER

Thought you might could use these.

NATHAN

(laughing)

Meet my nurse.

(CONTINUED)

41 CONTINUED: (2)

Dessa looks from one to another. There is an open friendliness about Harker in contrast to Nathan's guarded watchfulness. Almost unwillingly, Dessa smiles.

INT - CELLAR - MOMENTS LATER Nehemiah lies unconscious on the floor, chained hand and foot, a hankerchief stuffed in his mouth. Harker starts up the steps. As Dessa and Nathan follow, Dessa stumbles, her hand going to her stomach.

NATHAN

You all right? It can't be your time yet—is it?

DESSA

(almost a wail)

I don't know.

HARKER

You can't have no baby now. We got more'n a day's rough riding ahead.

Nehemiah rouses. Dazed, he watches Nathan disappear up the steps. The cellar door thuds shut. We hear Nehemiah's frenzied grunts, the rattle of his chains in the darkness.

42 EXT - SOME WOODS - NIGHT

Dessa, Nathan and Harker, the men almost carrying Dessa, enter a tiny clearing; two horses are tied there.

NATHAN

You take her up with you. If we followed, I'll try to lead them off.

Harker mounts and pulls Dessa up before him as Nathan pushes her from behind. Nathan mounts; they ride off.

43 EXT - OPEN FIELD - NIGHT

Harker, with Dessa before him, and Nathan gallop across a broken field. Thunder cracks; lightning streaks across the sky. Harker's horse rears; rain pours down. Harker controls the horse and exults.

HARKER

There go the trail!

Dessa grins weakly. Suddenly she grimaces in pain as they ride on.

44 EXT - SOME OTHER WOODS - NIGHT

The rain is heavier now; thunder growls and lightening flashes, illuminating Nehemiah and the Sheriff on horses, a MALE SLAVE afoot and two bloodhounds sheltering under a tree. All are soaked, the Sheriff and the slave decidedly uncomfortable.

HUGHES

Mr. Nehemiah, the trail is gone.

NEHEMIAH

No; turn those dogs loose; they'll find her.

HUGHES

(turning his horse
about)

Female in her condition can't travel too far or fast; we'll catch up with them in the morning.

NEHEMIAH

Those bucks could have her clean out of the county by then.

HUGHES

Come on, man, there's nothing to follow in this rain.

NEHEMIAH

(blocking his path)
You can't turn back.

HUGHES

This your first dark meat, huh?

NEHEMIAH

Dark--? Why, what do you mean?
This gal is an escaped criminal!

HUGHES

(starting off)
Come on, Cicero.

NEHEMIAH

You won't get away with this, Sheriff; shirking your duty. The Governor will have your badge for this. Sheriff! . . . I'll get that slut despite you!

45 EXT - SOME MORE WOODS - DAY

Rain pounds steadily on a square of tarp thrown across several tree limbs. Dessa, Harker and Nathan shelter beneath it. Dessa lies on the ground, her head cradled in Nathan's lap; he holds her hand. Harker kneels beside her. Grunting and straining, weeping silently, Dessa labors.

NATHAN

Ain't it nothing else we can do?

HARKER

(worriedly)

I done done all I knows to do.

A heavy pain hits Dessa; a moan escapes her lips. Harker scrambles awkwardly to Dessa's feet.

HARKER

Bare down; bare down!

Pause.

Dessa gives a mighty heave, clutching desperately at Nathan's hand. A scream is ripped from her throat. Nathan sits back hard

Pause.

An infant squalls. Harker lays the squirming newborn on Dessa's chest. She smiles weakly and faints.

46 EXT - OPEN FIELD - SUTTON'S GLEN - DAY

Sutton's Glen is a large isolated property in the sparsely settled pinewoods of northern Alabama. From a distance it suggests a smaller version of the Vaughan Plantation, columned House, grounds, outbuildings, rolling fields.

The House is only partially finished, however, the grounds overgrown, the outbuildings delapidated and inconveniently located. A few acres are planted to oats, some to corn, more to cotton; many more have reverted to brush, or not been planted at all. In these fields, tree stumps stand as mute witness to the largeness of FitzAlbert Sutton's aborted dreams.

Dessa is feverish; she lies on a makeshift litter pulled behind Nathan's horse. Harker rides along side them. Though mindful of their burden, they travel at a steady clip, skirting a field of thigh-high corn. On the far side of the field, CULLY, a lanky brown-skin youth in his late teens, and FLORA, a hefty seal-brown woman in her late twenties, pause in thinning the thickly planted stalks to wave at the men. Heavily forested mountains rise behind them.

Harker lifts his hat in greeting; they ride on.

47 EXT - KITCHEN YARD - SUTTON'S GLEN - DAY

RUFEL SUTTON, the pale-skinned, red-haired Mistress of the Plantation, tries ineffectually to fill a bucket from a cranky pump. Behind her is the one-room kitchen with a lean-to attached at one side. There is a large shade tree on the House side of the kitchen; under it is a large, slab-top table; a few chickens poke about the yard. Rufel is dressed in a gown more appropriate to a drawing room; it is stained and wrinkled as though slept in. Her hair stands about her head in disarray. She looks tired, puffy-eyed and mutters petulantly to herself, looking around darkly as she pumps.

RUFEL

Danged old darky! Pass right by this pump every morning—.

Rufel looks up, sees riders at a distance.

RUFEL (Cont'd)

Now who-- ? Lord, what new darky has Harker brought here now?

The riders, Nathan and Harker, approach.

RUFEL (Cont'd)

People might not come way out here looking for a chicken or even a pig, but somebody going to want to know about these horses.

Nervously, Rufel steps into their path. Harker and Nathan hesitate.

RUFEL

You been stealing from white folks? And who is this?

HARKER

(starting around Rufel)

These horses not from round here.

Rufel sees Dessa strapped in the litter behind Nathan's horse. Putting her hand out, she stops the horse. Dessa looks young, vulnerable, ill.

Dessa opens her eyes; she sees Rufel's worried white face, framed by light colored hair that seems to writhe in the sun, hears Rufel's shrilly questioning voice.

RUFEL

Another one? What's going on?

(CONTINUED)

47 CONTINUED:

DESSA

Mistress—.

(weakly, she tries to
rise)

My baby—. Don't let em—.

HARKER

(dismounting)

Miss Rufel, this just a poor
mistreated slave.

Dessa's newborn baby, MONY, starts a thin wail, startling them.

Hesitantly, Rufel pulls back the bloodstained covering over
Dessa. The baby, wrapped in none too clean cloth, lies on
Dessa's chest.

Rufel's heart goes out to the pitiful looking mite. With sudden
resolve, she picks him up.

RUFEL

Get Ada. Bring her on in the
house.

Rufel heads toward the rear of the House, which looks like the
back of a stage set: a handsome two-storey Georgian front
propped up by scaffolding; steep steps lead up to the back door.

48 INT - CENTRAL HALL OF THE HOUSE - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

The hall and both rooms of the House are generously
proportioned, high ceilinged, oak floored. A large, elaborate,
fanlight graces the front door at one end of the hall. We see
the base of a grand staircase. Rufel walks to the open parlor
door followed by Nathan carrying Dessa.

49 INT - HALL - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Rufel stops on the threshold. The room is crowded with dining
and parlor furniture, clothes, a dress form, dishes and
knick-knacks. Across this clutter, Rufel sees CLARA, her 18
month old daughter, cherubic, classically white, propped in a
chair at the dining table, playing happily in a bowl of cereal.
Cereal covers her hands, spots her face and the cluttered table.
She beams at her mother.

RUFEL

We can't—.

(flustered again)

Clara's eating— .

(CONTINUED)

49 CONTINUED:

She looks helplessly at Nathan. His hat shadows his face. Rufel fidgets uneasily. Mony starts to cry; Rufel tries to pacify him. Dessa moves restlessly in Nathan's arms. In desperation, Rufel points to the door opposite the parlor.

Nathan pushes the door open and stops.

NATHAN
(surprised)
In there?

RUFEL
(exasperated)
Well, where else you want me to
put her, on the floor?

She starts to follow him but ADA, an elderly, brownskin woman in a colorful bandana, brushes past her rather officiously. Ada is followed by Harker; he carries water and clean cloth. They enter the bedroom.

50 INT - BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The bedroom seems almost bare compared to the clutter of the parlor. Ada, Harker and Nathan are an alien darkness against the white walls as they tend Dessa in the white canopied bed. Rufel, Mony in her arms, stares.

Dessa rouses and, seeing Rufel holding Mony, struggles to rise. Nathan and Ada try to restrain her but fear gives Dessa unexpected strength and Harker has to help them.

DESSA
Mistress— ! Mistress going kill
my baby!

Nathan grabs Dessa's shoulders, shakes her, slaps her sharply across the face.

Rufel backs hastily out the door.

Dessa's eyes fill with tears.

DESSA
Won't let my baby be slaved!

She faints.

ADA
Start a fire there and put that
water on.

(CONTINUED)

50 CONTINUED:

HARKER

You really going put her in this bed?

Ada pauses.

Though traces of a former beauty are discernible in Ada's face, slavery has taken a physical toll on her and she seems almost ancient beside the two men.

NATHAN

That's what she said.

Ada starts to unfasten Dessa's dress. We never see more than Dessa's naked shoulders. Harker lays a fire in the fireplace. Dirt and signs of neglect are apparent in the room now. The bed linen is clean, but the bed hangings are dusty and clothing is carelessly strewn about.

ADA

Told you she ain't got good sense-- Not that Miss Ruint would harm your woman.

NATHAN

Dessa not my woman; she belongs to herself.

ADA

Then you better turn your head.

Nathan turns away.

ADA

(looking down)

Lawd! Why would anyone whip a body like that?

NATHAN

(without turning)

Some white folks don't need no "why."

Silence.

HARKER

Miss Rufel, didn't get so, so flighty till Dorcas died, and you know it, Ada.

NATHAN

Who's Dorcas?

(CONTINUED)

50 CONTINUED: (2)

HARKER
Miss Rufel's "mammy."

ADA
(sharply)
Dorcas was Rufel's maid. These white folks call you "Mammy" like you was some kin to em. And buy and sell you, even breed you like you was stock. Dorcas ain't bit more nursed Rufel than I did.

51 INT - PARLOR - A WHILE LATER

The parlor and bedroom have French windows, facing wooded mountain slopes, and fireplaces. Heavy winter curtains are still hung in the parlor, closing off much of the view. Despite its clutter, the parlor is a cozy room, used for everything but sleeping and cooking. Clean laundry is strewn about; neither breakfast nor Mony's bath water have been cleared away. Clara sleeps on a backless lounge, hemmed in by sofa pillows. Except for the babies and Rufel, the room is empty.

Rufel, totally absorbed in her task, ties the last fastening on the baby's gown, alternately scolding and loving.

RUFEL
Stupid gal, got you out in them old woods, and you just a little old bit of chocolate, sweet enough to eat.

Finished, Rufel cradles Mony to her chest where he nestles against her, searching for her breast. Rufel holds him away from her, laughing nervously. He cries; she rocks him, looking around self-consciously.

She makes pacifying sounds at the baby who continues to cry; the more she rocks, the more he cries. Almost furtively, Rufel, her back to the camera, loosens her gown.

52 INT - PARLOR - A WHILE LATER

Rufel sits, back to camera, totally relaxed. A knock sounds; startled Rufel looks around as the door opens. Ada and behind her, Nathan and Harker, stand on the threshold staring at Rufel who stares back at them over a bare shoulder. The infant's head is visible on her arm and it is obvious that she is nursing the baby. She is embarrassed by their stare.

ADA
'Scuse us Miss Rufel. Scuse us.

(CONTINUED)

52 CONTINUED:

Ada backs out the door, finally having to poke Nathan, directly behind her, to get him to move.

53 INT - HALLWAY - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Ada closes the parlor door and turns to Nathan and Harker; all are shaken. We see that the staircase ends at the first floor ceiling.

ADA

That staircase shoulda told us something.

NATHAN

Lotta people got dreams they can't reach.

They walk down the hallway toward the back door.

ADA

(flatly)

Master Bertie's dreams was your nightmares. Dorcas said he was so cruel he couldn't keep a slave on this place. And she all the time acting like she never heard a scream or a moan.

Dorcas did run this House though. Bossed them half wild niggers after he left--till they runned off, too. Hadn't a been for Dorcas taking in runaways after that husband left wouldn't be a soul to work this place now.

54 INT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dessa, feverish, her hair clean and unbraided, lies in the big bed tangled in Rufel's hair. Rufel snores gently, an arm thrown carelessly across Dessa's waist. Clara sleeps on the outside next to Rufel; Mony on the outside next to Dessa.

Rufel's hair is the tangible manifestation of Dessa's nightmare. Asleep, yet terrified, she turns her head frantically, silently, trying to shake the strands from her face. Rufel sighs in apparent satisfaction and turns from Dessa. The last strand of hair is removed from Dessa's face as a mouth organ wails faint as memory. Dessa sweats. Blindly, her fingers touch Mony's head; her breathing calms. Turning away from Rufel, she, too, settles deeper into sleep.

55 INT - BEDROOM - DAY

Dessa lies alone in the big four poster feather bed, almost lost in the white covering. The bed is clean, the linen pressed. Though the rest of the room remains unchanged, it is the most spacious, elegant room Dessa has ever seen and she stares wide-eyed.

RUFEL (o.s.)

Mammy always knew what to do.

Dessa sees Rufel, dressed in a wrinkled dinner gown, standing before the mirror, pinching color into her cheeks. Her hair is elaborately but carelessly arranged. Several pieces of clothing lie discarded on the floor.

RUFEL (o.s.)

I had the best come-out ball.

Dessa blinks, disbelieving her own eyes, snuggles deeper, realizes she's in a bed, touches the linen, the pillows in surreptitious wonder, looks toward the mirror.

Rufel is gone. Amazed, Dessa sits up.

Rufel, still in the dinner gown, sits in the rocking chair, nursing Clara as she stares out the window at the wooded hills. (Mony sleeps on a blanket spread near her feet, out of Dessa's sight.)

Dessa, watching Rufel nurse, touches her night gown where milk from her breasts has stained it; she looks around, searching frantically in the bed covers.

DESSA

Lawd, where my baby at; where is my child?

A Pause.

RUFEL

Right here. See?

Dessa turns. Rufel, a shoulder and breast bare, stands near the bed holding Mony against her chest.

Dessa sees Mony's black face against Rufel's white breast and, screaming, struggles to rise.

DESSA

Try to make my baby a slave. I kill you!

She lunges at Rufel.

(CONTINUED)

55 CONTINUED:

RUFEL

Ada! Ada, this gal starting up again!

Ada rushes in, takes the baby from Rufel and shoos her out of the room.

56 INT - BEDROOM - A FEW MINUTES LATER

Ada lays Mony beside Dessa. As they talk, the neglected aspect of the room is clearly visible.

ADA

See? He know his mamma.

Dessa looks down; Mony stares up at her. She touches a tiny fist; it opens to grasp her finger. Rufel peeks silent and unnoticed through the bedroom door.

ADA

Go on; nurse him.

Dessa gasps at the first tug on her breast.

ADA (Cont'd)

It's a mercy if you ain't dried up, way you been carrying on.

(smiling conspiratorily)

Attacking white folks and scaping all crosst the country in the dead of night.

Ada settles comfortably in a chair by the bed.

DESSA

Nathan— ?

ADA

Set with you the whole time you was out your head. Him and Harker, too.

Pause.

DESSA

Free? Yo'all—.

ADA

Free?

(pause)

I wouldn't zactly call it free.

(more)

(CONTINUED)

56 CONTINUED:

ADA (Cont'd)

We runned away, me, Cully,
Flora—though we didn't none of
us run from the same place.

(darkly)

Master put me out. Too old to
breed, milk dried up. Dorcas took
me in. Miss Ruint let us stay.

(confidentially)

Actually, her name, Rufel, Rufel
Sutton.

Ada looks over her shoulder; the door is now firmly closed. She
leans toward Dessa and makes the sign for craziness.

ADA (Cont'd)

Her husband, Mr. Bertie,
gone—selling cotton, so she say;
gambling, if you ask me—all they
slaves runned off. She need our
he'p. Once Dorcas took us in,
what could Miss Ruint do?

White folks think we hers. And
thank the Lord not many white
folks comes round here.

57 EXT - SUTTON'S GLEN - MORNING

The House, with its false front, against wooded slopes that fill
the horizon. Though isolated, there is something almost idyllic
about this small holding in the wilderness.

58 INT - BEDROOM - DAY

Rufel, in a rumpled ball gown, sits in the rocker by the
windows, rocking, setting big careless stitches in a white cloth
over her knees. The wooded slopes, with nary a sign of
habitation on them, are clearly visible through the windows. An
open souvenir album lies near Rufel's chair. We see a calling
card, "FitzAlbert Sutton, Esq." in italic script printed across
the face, a yellowed dance program, a dried corsage, an
elaborate invitation. Clara sleeps on a blanket spread out near
her feet. Rufel speaks between stitches, now and then glancing
toward Dessa in the bed but clearly not expecting an answer.

RUFEL

. . . Mammy would know.

Dessa is half asleep, Momy in her arms.

(CONTINUED)

58 CONTINUED:

DESSA
(sleepily to Mony)
Mammy ain't never talked about
no white woman like this.

RUFEL)
. . . . I had on a dress that Mammy
made. Mammy said—

DESSA
(rousing)
You don't even know mammy.

RUFEL
(startled, indignant)
I do so; Pappa gave her to me.

Dessa turns away. her eyes filling with tears. Again she speaks
to her baby.

DESSA
My Mammy live on the Vaughan
plantation near Simeon on the
Beauford River, McAllen County.

RUFEL
We talking about two different
people. My Mammy—.

DESSA
(scornfully)
Mammy ain't birth no white babies!

RUFEL
You probably don't know your own
name and here you is trying to
tell me something about Mammy.

DESSA
(struggling to sit up)
Mammy's name is Rose. That's a
flower so red it look black. We
called her that count of her
skin—smooth black.

Clara starts to cry; rattled, Rufel picks her up.

RUFEL
Mammy's name was, was,— How you
think you could know someone I
know?

(CONTINUED)

58 CONTINUED: (2)

DESSA

Mammy give birth to ten chi'ren;
these the ones we think still
living

(ticking the names off
on her fingers)

Seth and Bess, left when Mammy
was give to Old Mistress' for a
wedding gift. Martha, the first
child born at Vaugham to live;
'Jeeter, sold away.

RUFEL

Uppity, insolent--.

With Clara in her arms, Rufel turns and stalks out, slamming the door.

DESSA

Dessa, Dessa Rose, the baby girl.

Anger spent, she holds Mony and weeps.

DESSA

Oh, I pray God mammy still got
Martha left.

59 EXT - CREEK BANK - MOMENTS LATER

Rufel, still smarting from her run-in with Dessa comes out on the creek bank, Clara toddling merrily along before her. The baby careens into a boot and sits down hard. The boot belongs to Nathan who is fishing, the pole propped between his knees, his back propped against the tree trunk, battered hat over his face. The sling hangs unused across his chest. Startled, he grabs Clara before she starts to cry. Seeing Rufel, Nathan rises awkwardly. He seems all arms and legs, a shapeless darkness contained by ragged clothes, topped by a light-colored hat.

He holds the baby before him and walks slowly toward Rufel. She is torn between fight and fright.

RUFEL

This my place! You-all
everywhere, everywhere, my house,
my bed— And Mammy—
(she burst into tears)
Course I know Mammy's name.

NATHAN

Mis'ess. Miss— .

(CONTINUED)

59 CONTINUED:

Hesitantly, he reaches to comfort her.

RUFEL

Mammy— . Dorcas. Mammy's name
was Dorcas.

Rufel collapses in tears; Nathan, Clara still in his arms,
reaches out clumsily, hesitantly to keep her from sinking to
the ground.

60 EXT - MOMENTS LATER

Calmer now, Rufel sits sniffing; Clara stands quietly at her
side. Nathan offers her a ruffled cloth. She blows her nose
daintily, then realizes that she has used her own petticoat.
She turns to Nathan aghast and catches her breath.

Nathan's face, shadowed by the hat, is a mat of blackness.
Rufel blinks and draws away. Nathan backs off.

Rufel looks again, surreptitious, embarrassed, fascinated. She
draws farther from him, taking Clara in her arms. Nathan takes
up his fishing pole and moves farther from her.

RUFEL

That wench you all brought here—

NATHAN

(quietly)

Dessa?

RUFEL

(turning away)

I was just trying to cheer that
old gal up. Must be dull as straw
laying up in that bed all day.
Wasn't no call for her to turn
so hateful. Making up all that
stuff just to be mean.

Rufel blows her nose and scoots closer to Nathan. Nathan eases
away. Rufel looks at him petulantly.

RUFEL

How come you not working?

Nathan takes up his fishing pole and moves farther from her.

NATHAN

I am.

He points to several fish on a line floating in the shallow
water at the edge of the stream.

(CONTINUED)

60 CONTINUED:

NATHAN (Cont'd)
Your dinner.

Pause.

RUFEL
How you-all get here?

NATHAN
(after a pause)
Escaped off a slave coffle.

RUFEL
(shocked)
You-all killed white people?

NATHAN
(steadily)
We ain't harmed no one didn't harm
us first.

RUFEL
You-all going to kill me?

Clara discovers the fising pole and the can of worms; Nathan tries to keep her away from them. He handles the child gingerly; she treats him with innocent affection, snuggling in his arms, smiling, patting his face. Rufel pays no mind to what Clara is doing and Nathan likewise tries to keep his mind on the conversation. He is genuinely shocked by Rufel's charge.

NATHAN
No, Mis'ess.
(rather piously)
We know not many white folks would
let us stay round like this.

RUFEL
(pettishly)
About time you darkies realized
that.
(pause)
That wench must have done
something pretty bad to be sold
away.
(ingenuously)
I bet was making up to the master;
that's why she was sold.

NATHAN
Dessa was breeding when Wilson
bought her, Mis'ess. Ain't no
white on her baby.

(CONTINUED)

60 CONTINUED: (2)

RUFEL

Well— his hair; darkies don't
have hair like that!

NATHAN

Mis'ess, every negro baby come
in the world got curls shine like
satin and nap-up

(he snaps his fingers)
inside six months. You see that
boy in a year, he won't even be
able to get a curry comb through
that crop.

RUFEL

Truly?

Nathan, mock-solemn, nods; Rufel laughs then catches herself
a little guiltily.

Rufel (Cont'd)]

Well, something happened that
caused her to be sold down the
river.

NATHAN

Whatever it was, it wasn't enough
to "impair her value."

(abruptly)

Mis'ess, I wouldn't take what
Dessa say much to heart. She been
through a hard time and you been
through a hard time, too—your
husband gone, Mammy Dorcas dying.

RUFEL

(outraged)

You comparing me to a slave? I
know it's more to this than you
telling, and I'm going to get to
the bottom of it.

Taking Clara by the hand, Rufel flounces off.

61 INT - BEDROOM - DAY

The rocking chair has been pushed to one side. Dessa and Mony
lie on a pallet on the floor near the windows. The souvenir
album lies near them.

(CONTINUED)

61 CONTINUED:

DESSA

(to Mony)

Don't know nothing bout your
daddy's peoples, but if Martha
or Jeeter ever has a baby, you'll
have cousins, somewhere. But we's
free, me and you. Ain't going
be sold no more, ain't going be
whipped.

She picks up a yellowed card sticking out of the album and turns
it over in her hands. "Happy Birthday" is written across the
front of it.

DESSA (Cont'd)

(carefully putting it
back)

Maybe, maybe, someday, we'' both
know what writing say.

62 EXT - FRONT STEPS OF THE HOUSE - DAY

Rufel, in a clean but rough-dried morning dress, sits on the top
step in a lawn chair, fanning herself desultorily. Clara sleeps
on a blanket near the chair. The front yard is overgrown,
flower beds gone wild or to seed, the grass knee-high. An
orchard, some of its trees dead or dying, is visible just
beyond.

Rufel sees a rider at a distance. She watches as a WHITE MAN,
dressed in town clothes, rides closer. Slowly she rises.

63 EXT - FRONT STEPS - MOMENTS LATER

Rufel, standing, nervously watches the White Man who does not
dismount. He touches his hat to her but doesn't remove it.
Harker, scythe in hand, comes around the corner of the House.
He is not surprised to see the White Man. He touches his hat
and begins to cut the grass. The White Man looks at him a
moment before turning back to Rufel.

WHITE MAN

Afternoon, Mrs. Sutton; your
husband around?

RUFEL

(nervously)

No. No, he's off on a business
trip.

(CONTINUED)

63 CONTINUED:

WHITE MAN

I got to have some cash money for
the bill Mrs. Sutton.

RUFEL

My husband—. I'm just short—.

WHITE MAN

Slaves same as cash.

RUFEL

Mr. Clark, any slave on this place
is worth twice that old paltry
bill. Now surely you can wait
till my husband's return.

WHITE MAN

(touching his hat again)

I can give you till the first of
the month.

Rufel looks around helplessly. Harker is gone. Clara pulls at
Rufel's dress. Rufel picks her up and starts around the side
on the House.

64 EXT - SIDE YARD HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Clara toddles through the overgrown flower garden at the side
on the House; Rufel follows at a slower pace. Roses and some
other flowers are in bloom, but the ornamental shrubs and bushes
are raggedly overgrown.

Clara grabs Nathan's leg. He stands with Harker near the
orchard, a game bag over his shoulder. He hesitates a moment
then picks up the child. Rufel sees them. Harker looks at
Nathan, touches his hat to Rufel and walks off. Nathan holds
the baby out to Rufel and touches his hat when she takes her.
He stoops near a shrub and uncovers a trap with a dead rabbit.
Rufel, now holding Clara by the hand, shudders prettily.

RUFEL

Dinner?

Nathan nods, remembers himself, touches his hat again. He puts
the rabbit in a game pouch and rises.

NATHAN

Yes'm.

He touches his hat.

(CONTINUED)

64 CONTINUED:

RUFEL

(sarcastically)

All you darkies escaping from a
cruel master, huh?

NATHAN

Who, me? I just got to wondering
why the harder I work the more
Master get.

(mockingly)

But I guess you wouldn't know
nothing about that?

Clara takes his hand, he hesitates, then picks her up.

NATHAN (Cont'd)

Harker, now he had a lotta
practice at running away. His
master made a living selling
Harker. Harker would run away,
meet up with his master, then the
master'd sell him again. Harker'd
run away. Master'd sell him.

(laughing)

Oh, he was a slick master, all
right, sold snake-bite oil and
a magic elixir was straight
puredee alcohol.

Nathan's delivery is dead-pan and Rufel does not know whether to
laugh at Nathan or reprimand him. During the following
conversation, they walk around the side to the front of the
House. Rufel sits on the front steps; Nathan stands or leans
against a column. Clara amuses herself while Nathan and Rufel
talk.

NATHAN (Cont'd)

Sold well, too—specially to
spinster ladies and widders.

RUFEL

(laughing)

You are the funniest darky—

NATHAN

(evenly)

Nathan. My name Nathan, Mis'ess.

Pause.

(CONTINUED)

64 CONTINUED: (2)

NATHAN

Harker's master got caught in a card game with more aces than the law allow and Harker high-tailed it. He been a wanderer ever since—until he happened on the Glen and a kind white lady named Miz—"

He pauses expectantly.

RUFEL

Rufel—Ruth Elizabeth. I mean
(embarrassed)
Mrs. FitzAlbert Sutton.

NATHAN

(tipping his hat)
—named Mistress 'Fel took him in.

Rufel smiles.

NATHAN (Cont'd)

That's better. Nice Miss Lady like you not supposed to go round all sad.

RUFEL

(startled and touched)
Thank you. Thank you, Nathan.

There is a pause as they sit a moment in companionable silence. Clara is asleep in Rufel's lap.

NATHAN

What going to happen when your husband come back?

RUFEL

Why—why nothing.

NATHAN

He going share the crop like you did? Or he going try to claim us?

RUFEL

He might; Bertie might do anything. He, he don't believe in free negroes.

(CONTINUED)

64 CONTINUED: (3)

NATHAN

You know ain't none of us going
be beat or sold again. Not by
white mens.

RUFEL

I— I wouldn't let him sell you
all.

Nathan looks at her; Rufel looks hurriedly away.

NATHAN

We don't have to be here when he
come back. Don't none of us have
to be here.

(eagerly)

You could do like Harker's master
did, go down in the black belt
and sell some slaves. Me and
Harker would let you sell us,
maybe Cully and Flora, too. We
run away, meet you a few days
later and you could sell us again.
long as you split the money with
us.

RUFEL

(confused)

You just said you all wasn't going
be sold any more.

NATHAN

We wouldn't stayy sold, and this
time, at least, we'd get some of
the money. Me and Harker'd bring
a thousand dollars a piece, easy,
a thousand cash dollars.

RUFEL

(skeptical)

What a dark-, what you know about
'cash dollars'?

NATHAN

(evenly)

Enough to know it'd be plenty cash
money for you; cash money for us
to be way far away from here by
the time your husband come back.

Nathan watches Rufel carefully; she is interested despite
herself.

(CONTINUED)

64 CONTINUED: (4)

NATHAN (Cont'd)

You'd have a stake waiting for him . . . And if he don't come back . . . You could go back to your people in South Carolina in style.

Rufel looks suddenly hungry at the mention of South Carolina, but she says nothing.

65 INT - HALLWAY - DAY

Rufel enters the hallway through the front door, carrying the sleeping Clara in her arms. She opens the bedroom door-- and stops.

66 INT - BEDROOM - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Dessa stands by the window, her naked back to the door; her bottom is so scarred that it looks almost as though she is wearing some kind of garment. Rufel stares at her through the open bedroom door. Dessa is unaware of Rufel. Bending, she steps into her drawers; briefly her breasts and hips are reflected in the dresser mirror; her loins look like a mutilated cat face. Scar tissue crisscrosses her pubic region.

RUFEL

(whispering)

To violate a body so.

Dessa secures the drawers about her waist and turning sees a shocked and embarrassed Rufel. Snatching up her dress, Dessa stands stiffly with it clutched in front of her bare chest. She smolders with hostility, but this is a white woman and she cannot turn away until told to do so. Rufel approaches hesitantly; Dessa inches proudly away, almost daring Rufel to touch her.

RUFEL

Who, who did that to you?

DESSA

(sullenly)

The Mistress.

RUFEL

Why, why she whip you like that?

DESSA

So a buyer wouldn't see no scars on my back.

(CONTINUED)

66 CONTINUED:

RUFEL
Odessa, I wouldn't never mistreat
a slave like this! No
mistresses—

DESSA
(fiercely)
You don't own nobody round here!

Rufel stops in her tracks.

67 INT - PARLOR - NIGHT

Rufel sits alone in the lamplight. Rested, calm, appropriately dressed, Rufel looks quite appealing; and lonely. Occasionally she turns the pages of a magazine.

The mouth organ sounds faintly; Rufel looks up, listening.

68 INT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

A lively tune is being played, OFF SCREEN, on the mouth organ. The back of the kitchen is open to yard; mats, rolled up, provide the only shield against the elements. Inside, the kitchen is dominated by a huge, ornate cook-stove, polished to within an inch of its life. Mony's basket sits on the floor near two folded up bed-rolls in a corner.

Dessa wearing a dress obviously made over from one of Ada's, hair neatly plaited, lays Mony in the basket. She gives him a final caress, then goes out into the yard.

69 EXT - KITCHENYARD - MOMENTS LATER

Ada, Harker, Nathan, Flora and Cully, playing a lively tune on the mouth organ, gather at the back of the kitchen. Dessa sits on an overturned pail patting her foot. The tune ends.

NATHAN
(clearing his throat)
Dess, me and Harker been talking
about getting out of here.

DESSA
(startled)
Why—? Where, where would you-all
go?

HARKER
We-all would go West.

(CONTINUED)

69 CONTINUED:

DESSA

West? West of what?

HARKER

Slavery. Oregon Territory,
California, plenty good land out
there.

DESSA

I don't care nothing about no
land, long as me and Mony can't
be sold no more.

HARKER

We won't never be nothing but
runaway slaves here, Dessa. If
Miss Rufel don't claim us, some
other white person will. In the
West, couldn't no one claim us;
everyone there is free.

DESSA

(soberly)

North, Gulf Coast, now West. I
done heard that free talk before.

HARKER

This ain't no song and story,
Dessa. It's places in this world
where our peoples is free.

NATHAN

And all of em take money to get
there.

DESSA

Money?

NATHAN

You know, what the mistress got
for selling you.

The others laugh good-naturedly.

DESSA

How black folk going get money?

CULLY

Same way white folks do, selling
negroes.

DESSA

(uneasily)

Negroes can't sell other negroes.

(CONTINUED)

69 CONTINUED: (2)

HARKER

But Miss Rufel could.

DESSA

(shocked)

Miss—? The white woman? You mean have her sell us back into slavery?

NATHAN

We won't stay sold. Later we'd run off and meet up with you and Miss Rufel—.

HARKER

Yeah. You make like you her maid, you know, kind of keep an eye on her—.

DESSA

(looking at each)

You put yourself back in bondage?

CULLY

If it mean a chance to be shut of slavery forever, a chance to be free.

NATHAN

Dessa, we need a stake to get West. And we needs a white person to make this scheme work.

DESSA

That white woman wouldn't bit more go along with this scheme than a man in the moon. Or, if she do, it'd just be to cheat us out the money.

HARKER

You'd be there to see she didn't try nothing like that.

Horried, Dessa shakes her head, No.

ADA

Going be mighty lonesome here by yourself when all the rest of us go off on this lark.

70 EXT - DAY - KITCHENYARD

At the back of the kitchen, Dessa, with Mony in her arms, stands a little apart from Ada, Nathan and Flora who watch with interest as Harker elongates Cully's sideburns and darkens his brow with a piece of charcoal. Dessa is both interested and skeptical. On a large bandana spread open near Harker's feet, we see a rope twisted into a simple halter, two small twists of paper, a knife. It is hot and they sweat.

DESSA

This what yo'all do on Sunday,
sit around and mark each others'
faces?

Ignoring her, Harker reshapes Cully's hat and puts it on his head.

HARKER

Don't pull your hat down too far
over your eyes; white folks think
you got something to hide. We
mostly look alike to them and long
as you act like a darky, they
won't pay you too much mind.

Flora picks up the halter from the saddle bag.

FLORA

You not suspecting us to steal
no horses is you?

HARKER

If you get caught out by patrolers
at night, show em the halter and
tell em you out looking for your
master's cattle.

She picks up a small twist of paper, opens it, looks at its contents curiously; starts to taste it with a moistened fingertip. Stops, looks around. No one is watching; she sniffs the contents. Sneezes violently. They all laugh.

Clara runs into Nathan's leg. Surprised he looks up to see Rufel, smiling with forced ease, approaching from the direction of the House. She is hot, fanning herself with a handkerchief, and self-conscious that she, a white woman, is seeking the company of negro slaves. Harker picks up and unfolds a piece of paper.

HARKER

If you really pressed, flash
this— .

(CONTINUED)

70 CONTINUED:

RUFEL
(accusingly)
Harker, you wrote a pass for them?

Caught unawares, Dessa and the others start guiltily. For a moment no one speaks

HARKER
(sheepishly)
No'm; I can't read nor write.
And not all that many white
peoples can either. Just about
any writing can fool em.

There is another awkward pause, the blacks are baffled by Rufel's presence, and uneasy.

She fans herself with the handkerchief.

After a moment, the men remember to remove their hats. They stand uncomfortably another moment; Ada is disdainful of their discomfiture.

ADA
Some of yo'all get Miss Rufel a
chair.

Shocked out of inertia, Cully picks up the stool he was sitting on. Nathan takes it from him, brushes it off with his sleeve and presents it to Rufel with a flourish. Pleased by the attention, Rufel sits. Dessa is not amused and Rufel is pleasantly aware of this.

RUFEL
(pointing at the saddle
bag)
You all going some place?

HARKER
No, Ma'am, we— .

NATHAN
(cutting him off)
We practicing up for that little
scheme I was telling you about.

RUFEL
(surprised)
You all going through with that?

DESSA
No!

(CONTINUED)

70 CONTINUED: (2)

HARKER
(quickly)
Dessa not going be in on the
selling, but the rest of us
willing.

NATHAN
(casually)
Thought we'd head for Mississippi.
They always need slaves in the
delta and they don't know nothing
about Alabama down there.

RUFEL
(nervously)
I broke enough laws for you dark—
for you all already.

Dessa laughs at their obvious disappointment and walks into the
kitchen carrying Mony.

71 INT - KITCHEN - DAY

Dessa puts Mony in the basket.

She watches Rufel and the others from the kitchen. Rufel's
pretty dress and white skin are a sharp contrast with their
rough clothing and dark skins.

72 EXT - KITCHENYARD - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Rufel, though rather ill at ease, is trying to get a
conversation going. The others are puzzled about what she's
doing there and look to Ada and especially Harker for clues.
Neither of them knows what's going on either.

RUFEL
This sure is some hot weather we
having.

Pause.

HARKER
Yes, ma'm, it is.

Pause

RUFEL
(turning to Nathan)
What, what did you do when you
was slaved.

(CONTINUED)

72 CONTINUED:

Nathan and Harker look at each other. Harker shrugs.

NATHAN

(blandly)

Worked for a slave trader grew
negroes by planting they toes in
the ground. Made em drink ink
at night to give em color.

RUFEL

(smiling)

What'd you really do?

NATHAN

Loved pretty white women like you.

Rufel gasps; Harker chokes back a laugh; Cully's eyes buck; Ada shakes her head; Flora does not believe what she has heard. Nathan grins.

Rufel looks from one to the other and laughs. Dessa is shocked.

Dessa noisily leaves the kitchen and stalks across the yard away from the House.

Harker sees Dessa, and follows her.

RUFEL

(laughing, turning to
Ada)

What did you do, Ada?

ADA

I was a breeder. Master got
children on me; drivers got
children on me. All sold away,
down to the last one.

At first Rufel takes this for more of the joke but by the end of Ada's speech, no one is laughing.

73 EXT - A FIELD - MOMENTS LATER

Dessa strides quickly across the field, Harker at her side. Neither speaks, though Dessa glances angrily at him. Harker looks blandly ahead. After a moment, they near some trees and Dessa slows.

They stop in a little clearing and sit down on a log. They are quiet for a while.

HARKER

You liking Nathan for your man?

(CONTINUED)

73 CONTINUED:

DESSA
 (laughing tiredly)
 That old red-eyed negro? He just
 like a brother to me.

Pause

HARKER
 I'm glad you ain't liking on
 Nathan, Dess, cause I think you
 great myself.

DESSA
 (rising, suddenly shy)
 That what you followed me out here
 to talk about?

HARKER
 You want me to say it in front
 of Ada-nem?
 Dessa is flustered; they stand a moment looking at each other.
 Harker kisses Dessa; she doesn't stop him but after a moment
 she pulls away and runs.

74 EXT - KITCHENYARD - MORNING

At the pump, Ada, acting infirm, almost decrepit, gives water
 to a WHITE MAN on horseback who looks around curiously as he
 drinks.

WHITE MAN
 Anybody up to the House?

ADA
 Naw, suh; off visiting.

Dessa, standing in the shadows of the back doorway with a tray
 in her hands, watches as the White Man returns the cup and takes
 a paper from his pocket.

The White Man unfolds the poster and holds it out to Ada. We
 see \$100 REWARD, a cartoonish drawing of a black female face,
 WANTED. Among other words we also see "Insurrection," "slave
 girl," "Odessa," "subscriber, ADAM NEHEMIAH." Ada ignores him.

ADA
 Can't read, suh.

(CONTINUED)

74 CONTINUED:

WHITE MAN

Give it to your master. You see
any strange darkies round here,
you let him know.

ADA

(taking the paper)
Master Bertie don't 'low no
strangers round here. Suh.

The White Man turns his horse and rides away. Dessa hurries
over to Ada who, having resumed her normal posture, tears the
poster into small strips as she watches the White Man ride out
sight.

DESSA

Who was that?

ADA

I don't know.

75 EXT - CORN FIELD - DAY

Harker, Nathan, Cully and Flora "pull fodder," strip the corn
stalks of leaves. When their hands are full, they bind the
leaves together with a few of the blades and hang the bundle
on the corn stalks.

Ada and Dessa bring the noon meal in a pot suspended between
them on a pole. Dessa carries Mony in a sling across her chest.
Ada gives a yodeling call. The workers look up and wave.

Harker looks at Dessa as she gives him his plate. Dessa
blushes.

Nathan watches.

76 EXT - KITCHENYARD - NIGHT

Cully plays a merry tune on the mouth organ; Flora sings a song
made up of whoops, hums, hollers. The rest clap; Nathan pulls
Ada to her feet; they dance. Dessa sits on an over-turned pail,
patting her feet.

HARKER

(bowing, smiling)
Dansay?

Dessa, shyly pleased, rises. They dance.

(CONTINUED)

76 CONTINUED:

HARKER (Cont'd)

How many times you been asked to
dance in French?

DESSA

What's 'French'?

HARKER

That's the way the black peoples
down to N'Orleans talk. They say
"Negro" for black man; "negress"
for black woman; "blank" mean
white.

DESSA

(laughing)

And white sure don't mean nothing
good.

Harker slows, stops dancing; Dessa fatlers, too. They look at
each other.

77 INT - PARLOR - NIGHT

Rufel sits alone in the lamplight, sewing forgotten in her lap.
Faintly, the mouth organ plays the same merry tune to which
Dessa and Harker have danced. A knock sounds at the door; Rufel
looks up.

Nathan, hatless, his head freshly shaven and gleaming, enters.
Softly, he closes the door.

78 EXT - A CLEARING IN THE WOODS - NIGHT

Dessa and Harker enter the clearing. Pine boughs, covered with
a tarp, form a bed. Seeing it, Dessa starts to turn away, but
Harker holds her. She doesn't struggle when he kisses her.

79 EXT - SAME AS ABOVE - A WHILE LATER

Dessa sits with her back to a tree, her dress draped across her
hips and legs; Harker lies beside her, his shirt draped across
his loins.

HARKER

I never wanted at nothing, Dessa
till I wanted you.

(pause)

You know I know how they whipped
you.

(CONTINUED)

79 CONTINUED:

He turns his head, lifts her dress, kisses her thigh.

HARKER (Cont'd)
It ain't impaired you none at all.
(He kisses her leg
again.)
It only increase your value.

His face is wet; he buries his head in her lap.

80 EXT - YARD - MORNING

Dessa, her face glowing with happiness, pumps water; finished, she takes the bucket and climbs the back steps.

81 INT - BEDROOM - MORNING

Clothes are strewn about the floor. The bed hangings and curtains are clean and the room generally has a fresher appearance than in previous scenes.

Nathan and Rufel lie in the white bed. Her skin has a pearly glow; his appears a rich, velvety blue-black. His face is buried in her bosom, one leg caught between hers.

Sated, still bemused with sleep, Rufel watches over Nathan's shoulder as Dessa enters, closes the door with her foot and turns.

DESSA
Morning, Mis—
(shocked)
Nathan? And Miss— Miss Ruint!

RUFEL
What? What you call me?

Pulling a sheet around himself, Nathan gets out of bed and urges Dessa toward the door.

DESSA
(shouting)
Ruint, that's what I called you.
Ruint!

82 EXT - YARD - MOMENTS LATER

Ada is at the pump; Harker drives a wagon piled with fodder, atop which sit Flora and Cully, toward one of the outbuildings. He sees Dessa coming out of the backdoor of the House, waves and changes direction, pulling the wagon up near the pump.

(CONTINUED)

82 CONTINUED:

Sweeping off his hat, he starts to greet Dessa.

DESSA

That fool Nathan laying up with
Miz Lady.

There is a moment's stunned silence, then Harker laughs.

CULLY

(with a big whoop)
Miz Lady bound to come in on the
deal now!

They jump down from the wagon and all start to talk at once.

DESSA

(outraged)
You all planned this, Harker?

HARKER

Ain't no such thing. And what
got you so mad, anyway, Dessa?

DESSA

Nathan laying with that white
woman wasn't part of no deal I
knowed about.

ADA

That fool negro going get us all
killed.

HARKER

West, here we come.

Harker and Cully dance around laughing. Cully grabs playfully
at Ada who brushes him away. He grabs Flora who stiffly allows
him to dance her around. Harker tries to waltz Dessa around.

DESSA

(shaking his hands off)
This how we going work our way
West, on our backs? And how long
you think we going last amongst
white folks with Nathan in her
bed?

There is a moment's pause.

CULLY

Yo'all just jealous cause he not
diddling you.
(more)

(CONTINUED)

82 CONTINUED: (2)

CULLY (Cont'd)
(sotto voce)
Don't nobody want no old mule like
yo'alls no way.

DESSA
That what you all think of us?
Mules?

HARKER
Apologize, Cully. Don't pay him
no mind, Dessa; he just young and
foolish and rude.

DESSA
That's what yo'all want, huh?
That doughy skin and slippery
hair.

HARKER
Cully, apologize!

DESSA
(before Cully can speak)
You better get another mule; this
one don't know how to be no maid.

She starts toward the kitchen. Harker stops her.

HARKER
Thought you wasn't liking Nathan
for your man.

DESSA
That's all it come down to, huh?
Somebody fumbling under somebody
else's clothes? You know she talk
to herself? You all going put
yourself, your freedom in the hand
of a crazy white woman?

HARKER
Dessa, we been trusting her all
along, just like she been trusting
us. Why you going stop now?

DESSA
I trust in our blackness, not her
whiteness.

83 EXT - YARD - DAY

Dessa at the clothes line finishes hanging a wet sheet. Picking up the empty laundry basket, she walks back down the line of wet laundry.

Rounding the end of the line of hanging laundry, she sees Ada, shelling peas, and Rufel, nursing Clara, sit under the tree. Rufel appears for the first time fully relaxed and confident.

Obviously uncomfortable at seeing Rufel, Dessa nods stiffly and starts toward the rinse tub.

ADA
(holding out container,
calling)
Dessa; take these peas on in the
kitchen for me.

Reluctantly, Dessa walks over, nodding again at Rufel.

DESSA
Miss'es.

Ada glances nervously from one to the other.

ADA
Dessa, Miss Rufel going to play
along with us on Harker's idee,
but— .

RUFEL
(breaking in)
But I'm not going no place till
you beg pardon for calling me out
of my name.

DESSA
(outraged)
Well, that fine with me, cause
I ain't going on no cork-brained
scheme like the one Harker talking
about.

ADA
(angrily)
Harker's plan ain't foolish.
Ain't no doubt we can be sold.

Taking up the container of peas, Dessa starts toward the kitchen.

(CONTINUED)

83 CONTINUED:

DESSA

I ain't got no doubts we can be sold; it's the one doing the selling that I has my doubts on.

(walking off)

You want me to go with you to find them herbs, Ada, you better come on now while Meny sleep.

84 EXT - WOODS - DAY

Dessa and Ada, carrying a walking stick, which she uses to poke about in the underbrush as she walks, an empty crooker sack slung across her chest, make their way through the woods, continuing an acrimonious conversation.

ADA

You know you ain't had no business calling Miss Rufel out her name.

DESSA

How far is this place anyway, Ada?

ADA

You don't want to do nothing to help us get away from here and now you trying to get us put off the place!

Dessa stops, starts to respond angrily; stops. Ada is right. They walk on in silence.

85 EXT - STREAMBANK - A WHILE LATER - DAY

Dessa and Ada walk out onto the bank of a small stream.

DESSA

(defensively)

You the one started me calling her Miss Ruint in the first place—.

On the opposite bank, Nehemiah and a POOR WHITE MAN on horseback allow their horses to drink. He is less clean and tidy, a light stubble on his face, no tie, dusty as though he has traveled many miles. Dessa and Nehemiah recognize each other at the same time.

DESSA

(pushing Ada back)

Run!

(CONTINUED)

85 CONTINUED:

NEHEMIAH
(starting forward)
That's her!

Ada stumbles; Dessa tries to help her up but Ada, shaking her head and holding her hip, tries to pull away. The horses bare down on them, Nehemiah grinning triumphantly.

ADA
Run! Run, girl!

Terrified, Dessa drops Ada's arm and runs into the trees.

Ada throws her stick in the path of the White Man's horse; his horse falls as Nehemiah's horse tramples her.

86 EXT - WOODS - MOMENTS LATER

Dessa cowers in the brush as Nehemiah, his horse barely under control, rides back and forth, searching.

The horse quieter now, Nehemiah looks more intently.

Sweating, Dessa freezes.

A shot sounds from the direction of the stream, startling Nehemiah's horse. Controlling the horse with difficulty, Nehemiah reluctantly turns back toward the stream.

87 EXT - STREAMBANK - MOMENTS LATER

Dessa watches from cover as Nehemiah, on horseback, approaches the White Man who is wrestling the saddle from the body of his dead horse. Ada's body is sprawled in a bloody heap nearby.

WHITE MAN
I ain't bargained on losing a
horse chasing after no nigger.

NEHEMIAH
She can't be far; if we hurry—.

WHITE MAN
How far you think we can go,
riding double? And how you going
explain that dead darky?

NEHEMIAH
(blustering)
Old Auntie like that can't be
worth all that much.

(CONTINUED)

87 CONTINUED:

WHITE MAN

Old or not, she belongs to
someone. We'd best be heading
back to town.

Reluctantly, Nehemiah holds the horse while the White Man mounts
behind him. They ride off up stream.

DESSA

(whispering)

Oh, Ada, I so sorry I called the
Mis'ess out her name.

88 EXT - GRAVEYARD SUTTON'S GLEN - DAY

Weathered posts mark the entrance to the Sutton family graveyard
on a knoll overlooking the back of the House. It is otherwise
unfenced, the few graves overgrown with weeds. An ornate
tombstone, broken and weathered, "FitzAlbert Sutton III, Beloved
First Born, Oct 1839 - Dec 1839," inscribed on it marks a small
grave. A small plaque with "Baby Sutton, 1841," inscribed on
it marks another. A plain weathered cross, at some remove marks
another. At an even greater distance, piles of stone mark the
graves of slaves.

The simple service for Ada is over. Nathan and Cully shovel
dirt in the grave. Dessa, Harker and Flora stand off to one
side; Rufel, somewhat uncomfortable, stands near them.

DESSA

(to Rufel)

Miss'es— Miss'es, I was rude
that other day; I apologizes.

Pause.

Rufel stares at the back of the House; it looks pretty desolate:
unfinished, neglected. She turns back to Dessa.

RUFEL

We'll have to find something
better than what you have on if
you're going to pass for a lady's
maid.

(turning to Harker)

Hope you're not going to paint
a moustche on me.

(CONTINUED)

HARKER
(seriously)
No'm, but it would help if you
had a hat to cover up that red
hair. You a respectable white
woman and all you got to do is
be yourself.

89 EXT - FOREST ROAD - DAY

In an open wagon, the group travels through sparsely populated pine woods, passing no other travelers. Dessa, neatly but plainly dressed, a bandana covering her head, holding Mony, sits uncomfortably between Rufel and Nathan. Nathan drives; Rufel, wearing a dark dress, a hat covering her hair, holds Clara. Harker, Cully and Flora, each with a small bundle ride in the bed of the wagon which also contains several bags. The only signs of habitation are distant cabins or traces of smoke against an otherwise empty sky.

NATHAN
I still think I ought to be sold.

HARKER
I hate to lose the money, too;
but I feel more easy having you
with Dessa and the Mistress.

90 EXT - ROAD - DAY

The countryside is less wooded but still sparsely settled; there are more signs of cultivation.

The wagon, with all aboard, passes an isolated cash-store. A cursing, irate WHITE WOMAN throws water on a FEMALE SLAVE. Dessa continues to look back at the scene.

91 EXT - TOWN STREET - DAY

Nathan drives the wagon up the main street of a small town. The few people about, mostly white, a few slaves, stop and stare at the wagon. Dessa stares at them, at the buildings, the drays and other conveyances. Rufel looks about more covertly, torn between excitement and embarrassment over the rough wagon and the company of negroes. The others look rather stoically ahead.

HARKER
Remember now, Nathan ain't going
wait but two days for no nobody;
we can't come back for no one.

(CONTINUED)

91 CONTINUED:

A mounted troop of soldiers, banners flying, rides down the street toward them, singing. Nathan draws the wagon aside to let them pass.

SOLDIERS' SONG

For every wound and every thrust
On prisoners dealt by hand a-curst
A Mexican shall bite the dust.
Remember the Alamo!

Rufel watches, eye gleaming with excitement. She turns to a passerby who has likewise stopped to watch.

RUFEL

What's going on?

WHITE MAN

Alabama Volunteers going off to
help Fremont whip them damn
Mexicans!

POOR WHITE MAN

Damned if I'm going to volunteer
to fight some greasers just to
make room for more niggers.

92 EXT - SLAVE WAREHOUSE - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Nathan pulls the wagon up before a slave warehouse. Two WHITE MEN lounging about, come to attention.

WHITE MAN

Well, look like we got a load of
business right here. John Butler,
at your service, madam.

He offers his hand to help Rufel down. She is somewhat nervous, but this is familiar gallantry.

RUFEL

Mistress Sutton of Sutton's Glen,
sir. Hard times have forced us
to part with a few trusted hands.

93 EXT -SLAVE WAREHOUSE YARD - DAY

A predominantly male crowd of whites, variously dressed, gather before the auction block on which Cully stands. Harker and Flora await their turns. Dessa, holding Mony, stands in the crowd between Nathan and Rufel holding Clara.

(CONTINUED)

93 CONTINUED:

As he speaks, the AUCTIONEER jabs at Cully's shoulder with his pointing stick, leers, points at Cully's privates, bares his back; the whites laugh.

AUCTIONEER

Prime field-hand—. I hear five hundred dollars! Prime. The gen-u-ine article. Seven-fifty! Nary a sign of bad on him. Bound to be good at studding and other field work. Nine hundred dollers, nine hundred—. Sold for nine seventy-five.

Dessa, tears in her eyes, turns blindly away.

WHITE MAN

Nigger went cheap

94 EXT - STREET - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Dessa, still carrying Mony, hurries down the street as the auction continues behind her. Harker is next on the block.

NATHAN

Dessa!

Dessa doesn't slow; Nathan catches her and pulls her into an alley.

95 EXT - ALLEY - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

In the background, Harker, his hands bound, is lead away.

Dessa is crying. Nathan tries to hold her but she resists.

DESSA

You going put Mony up next? Let her sell him like Harker?

NATHAN

(taking her in his arms)
Hush, hush; ain't no one going sell Mony, sell you neither. It's just a few more times, a few more times and that's the end; won't none of us be sold no more.

He is crying, too. They rock each other.

Cried out, they lean against the wall, laughing, a little embarrassed.

(CONTINUED)

9: CONTINUED:

NATHAN

We been through some times, ain't
we? Dessa,
(taking her hand)
Dessa, I was bred in slavery.

DESSA

(snatching her hand
back)
What you mean?

NATHAN

(grabbing her hand
again)
Dessa— Dess, why can't I like
you and like Ruth, too?

DESSA

Ruth? You calls her Ruth?

NATHAN

(steadily)
Yes, and she calls me Nathan.
Dessa, Ruth ain't like other white
folks, looking at black and seeing
something ugly, something dirty.
She look at us and all she see
is color. Oh, sure, she know its
some difference, but it ain't in
her to treat no one with all that
cuffin and name calling that most
white peoples use.

DESSA

I speaks to her. What more you
want?

NATHAN

I want you to be my friend.

DESSA

I wasn't the one stopped.

NATHAN

(grinning suddenly)
You a grudgeful little old
something, ain't you? Oh, you
can make me angry; you can even
make me sad. And someday I might
get tired of you acting so ugly
and leave. Till then, I'm going
keep at you, till you say
"friend," say "brother."

(CONTINUED)

95 CONTINUED: (2)

DESSA

"Brother" can't make us like we was.

NATHAN

Dessa, you lost a lot in slavery but I'm part of what you saved.

DESSA

(surrendering)

You know, it just like a darky to risk what he know is good on "chance," on "change."

NATHAN

And what darky you know, from this one

(pointing at Mony)

on up, don't have a little bit of that in them?

DESSA

(leaning against him)

Damn fool negro.

NATHAN

(arm around her.)

Hankty negress like you need a damn fool negro like me.

96 EXT - SLAVE WAREHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

The last of the auction crowd disperses as Nathan and Dessa return. They slow as they see Rufel talking to CLARENCE OSCAR, a big, ruddy-face white man.

RUFEL

(beaming)

Nathan, Odessa, Master Oscar has graciously offered me hospitality for the night.

MR. OSCAR

(eying Dessa
thoughtfully)

Now, if you'd put this one up for sale, ma'am—a proven breeder—you'd have gotten top dollar for sure.

RUFEL

(laughing prettily)

Why, Odessa is my personal maid, sir. Even hard times couldn't make me sell her.

97 INT - PARLOR, MR. OSCAR'S HOUSE - DAY

Mr. Oscar, very much the bluff, southern gentleman, and Rufel, with Clara on her lap, sit in the elaborately furnished parlor. Rufel is obviously charmed. Dessa, holding Mony, stands beside Rufel's chair, trying to be inconspicuous but looking around with great interest. The travelers' two large bags and a smaller one stand in a corner.

MR. OSCAR

Oh, Mrs. Oscar and the children
are visiting her people over near
Elyton.

RUFEL

Oh.

MR. OSCAR

But don't you worry, little lady,
she has these girls well trained.

YOUNG SLAVE GIRL

(as she enters)

Mistress room is ready.

Rufel rises from her chair, dropping her handkerchief. Mr. Oscar grabs her arm as she bends to pick it up.

MR. OSCAR.

Allow me.

(without turning)

Nigger, pick that up.

Dessa has her hands full with Mony and doesn't responds.

RUFEL

(yanking Dessa's dress)

Dessa!

The girl scurries over and picks up the handkerchief just as Dessa bends to retrieve it. They bump heads painfully.

Dessa straightens in time to see Rufel hiding a smile.

MR. OSCAR

Get the bags.

Dessa picks up the small satchel; the girl picks up the two big bags. They follow Rufel and Mr. Oscar out.

98 INT - BEDROOM - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Among the rooms comfortable furnishings is a metal wash basin and pitcher. Mr. Oscar bows himself out; Rufel closes the door and, putting Clara down, saunters over to the window.

(CONTINUED)

98 CONTINUED:

Dessa puts Mony on the bed and going over to a bag, begins to take baby things out of it.

RUFEL
(signifying)
Somebody better start paying
attention, or they going ruin the
whole thing.

Dessa, changing first Clara, then Mony, says nothing. Rufel undresses. There are pockets in her petticoat and she wears a limp money belt around her waist, which she takes off.

RUFEL
Probably never fill up these old
things with money anyway. They
didn't want to pay hardly nothing
for Flora. People were looking
for seamsters and laundresses.
They said she wasn't a proven
breeder.

Rufel takes a dress out of the bag.

RUFEL (Cont'd)
Iron this, Dessa.

Dessa takes the dress, holds it up by its thin shoulder straps, then picks out another one with sleeves and a collar.

DESSA
This more like what Harker said
you should wear.

RUFEL
I can't wear an afternoon ensemble
to dinner.

DESSA
(nonplussed but
stubborn)
Harker said you posed to be quiet
and respectable. Ain't nothing
plain about that dress, way it
cut low cross the bosom.

RUFEL
Harker said for you to treat me
like the lady I am!

A knock at the door forstalls Dessa's reply. The girl enters with hot water; Rufel and Dessa are silent while she sets the tin down. The girl turns to go; Rufel shoves the green dress in Dessa's hand.

(CONTINUED)

98 CONTINUED: (2)

RUFEL
Iron this, Odessa.
(to the girl)
You-all do have a flat-iron, don't
you?
(fuming, Dessa takes
the dress.)
Thank you. Guess I'll wear the
shawl, too.

Rufel throws the dress across Dessa's arm.

99 INT - HALLWAY - LATE NIGHT

First Rufel, then Mr. Oscar, carrying a candle mount the top stair, entering the upstairs hallway. Both are laughing; Rufel is flushed and rather giddy, her dress strap falling off one shoulder. She really is quite beautiful and Mr. Oscar, who is rather tipsy, cannot keep his hands to himself.

RUFEL
You are the most engaging rogue,
sir. Now you stop that.

She pushes his hand away from her hip.

MR. OSCAR
I can't help myself, ma'am. I
don't believe I've seen beauty
like yours in a month of Sundays.

RUFEL
Now I know you say that to all
the ladies.

At the door, she turns and holds out her hand.

RUFEL (Cont'd)
Thank you again, sir, for a
delicious supper and delightful
company.

Mr. Oscar tries to take her in his arms.

MR. OSCAR
No need to say good night.

RUFEL
Mr. Oscar!

Stuttering, Rufel fumbles behind her for the door knob while trying to push Mr. Oscar away.

(CONTINUED)

99 CONTINUED:

RUFEL (Cont'd)
It's time for me to turn in now.

MR. OSCAR
You were friendly at dinner.

Frightened, Rufel realizes that Mr. Oscar is serious.

RUFEL
Dessa, Odessa, open the door.

The door opens and Rufel and Mr. Oscar stumble through it.

100 INT - BEDROOM - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Rufel, still struggling, and Mr. Oscar, still amorous, stumble into the bedroom, their candle falling to the floor. Dessa, also holding a candle, picks it up, puts both down. Frantic, she snatches up a pillow and pummels Mr. Oscar with it. Surprised, he turns. Seeing Dessa, he roars with rage and knocks her down. Rufel attacks him; he wraps his arms around her burying his face in her neck.

Dessa picks up a heavy candle stick and, getting to her feet, hits Mr. Oscar across the back. He staggers and releases Rufel. Dessa hits him again; Rufel hits him over the head with the wash basin. They push him out the door. Dessa slams the door; they pull a chest in front of it, then lean against the chest, panting.

Dessa picks up the candle stick, places it on a table, picks up the wash basin.

DESSA
You know his head so hard it
didn't even dent this tin.

They laugh.

RUFEL
Gues we showed him. Lord I
thought I would die when I saw
you hit him with that pillow.
(soberly)
Guess I would have if you hadn't.
Thank you, Odessa.

Dessa, smiling, nods. They look at each other. Rufel's dress is torn, her shoulders and neck bruised.

(CONTINUED)

100 CONTINUED:

DESSA
(wonderingly)
You, you subject to the same
ravishment as me.

RUFEL
No. No, Odessa, its—. It's not
like you think.

Pause.

RUFEL
My husband was a gambler, wasn't
he, Dessa?
(pause)
Wasn't he?

DESSA
Yes'm. Yes'm, he is.

RUFEL
Why didn't Mammy tell me?

DESSA
It wasn't her place.

RUFEL
She should have told me anyway.

DESSA
What was you going to do way out
there by yourself, if you'd
knowned? You was happy, least she
thought you was.

101 INT - PARLOR - MORNING

Mr. Oscar, in his shirt-sleeves, a beef-steak held against his
black eye, watches out the window as Nathan helps Rufel, into
the wagon. Rufel is once again modestly dressed, her hair
almost hidden by a sober hat. Dessa, with Mony in her arms,
and Clara holding onto her skirt, stand beside him.

102 EXT - MORNING - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Nathan lifts Clara into Rufel's arms.

NATHAN
(to the women)
Everything all right?

Dessa and Rufel look briefly at each other, back at the house.

(CONTINUED)

102 CONTINUED:

A curtain moves at the parlor window.

Rufel and Dessa nod.

103 EXT - VILLAGE STREET - DAY

Nathan, with Dessa, Rufel and the children beside him, drives the wagon down the short main street. In the distance they see a WHITE MAN in barkeep's apron trying to beat a black man with a cane. The black man backs out of reach; turning, he sees the wagon. It's Cully; he runs toward the wagon.

CULLY

Mistress! Mistress, help.

WHITE MAN

This your nigger, ma'am?

Rufel nods hesitantly as Nathan stops the wagon. Cully climbs quickly into the wagon.

WHITE MAN (Cont'd)

Well, you better take him on.
Been hanging around here all
morning and when I gave him a note
to take down to the sheriff to
get hisself whipped, he gave it
to one of my darkies who got
whipped instead!

104 EXT - SOME WOODS - NIGHT

Harker hides in bushes along a river bank, in water up to his knees; he sweats. In the distance we hear the baying of hounds. He runs on downstream.

105 EXT - A FIELD - NIGHT

A WHITE MAN on horseback and TWO NEGROES, holding a pack of dogs. The dogs are in turmoil, whining pawing their eyes and noses. The blacks are hard put to control them.

WHITE MAN

Jasper! What the hell's wrong with
the dogs?

JASPER

Don't know, master; seem like
something got up their nose.

He manages to pick up a handful of earth, sniffs it.

(CONTINUED)

105 CONTINUED:

JASPER (Cont'd)
 Whew! Just what I thought.
 Pepper. Ain't going get no more
 tracking out these dogs for a
 while, master.

He quickly hides his grin.

106 EXT - CAMP - DUSK

The group is camped for the night in a grove of trees. Nathan, Cully and Flora sit silently around a small fire. Dessa finishes nursing Mony; she lays the sleeping infant on a bedroll. Rufel sits near the sleeping Clara. There is an attitude of strained waiting about all of them.

Harker walks out of the trees.

HARKER
 Thought I smelled something
 cooking.

They all exclaim with surprise and delight, Nathan, Flora and Cully crowding around him. Dessa hangs back a little. Harker sees her.

DESSA
 Made it back.

HARKER
 (taking her hand)
 We all made it back.

Cully takes out his mouth organ and begins to play and dance around. Flora catches his arm; Harker grabs Dessa. Rufel begins to clap; Nathan takes Clara's hand. They dance a moment in the moonlight before they recollect where they are and calm down.

Laughing, tired, Dessa and the others sit around a blanket. Rufel, with her back turned to them, takes a money belt from around her waist. Opening it, she counts money—bills and coins—into a pile in front of herself and a larger pile in front of Harker.

RUFEL
 That's it. After I paid the
 auctioneer, we made one thousand
 eight hundred thirty-six dollars.

Though Dessa, Flora and Cully are impressed, Harker sorts through the pile of money obviously disappointed.

(CONTINUED)

106 CONTINUED:

NATHAN

Well, boss?

HARKER

We'd do better selling ourselves.

Pause.

RUFEL (nervously)

You mean me?

HARKER

Auctioneer take almost a dollar for every one we makes. All you got to do is ask what's fair.

NATHAN

You seen how white peoples gather round when we stops in a town. Pass out a few handbills and peoples will come from miles around to buy.

(to Harker)

And I got to be sold. Even without the auctioneer's part, it going to take us from now till Christmas to raise any kind of stake at this rate.

HARKER

(uneasily)

I dont' want to have Dessa and the Miss'ess all alone—.

Rufel and Dessa look at each other.

RUFEL

Flora is all by herself among strangers.

CULLY

But Flora—.

HARKER

Subject to ravishment.

FLORA

I can keep care of myself.

RUFEL

Dessa and I can take care of ourselves, too.

(CONTINUED)

106 CONTINUED: (2)

HARKER

Who going to drive the wagon?

Pause.

DESSA

I can; I can drive it.

(as they look at her)

Well, I ain't had much practice
with two horses, but my daddy
taught me real good with
one—before he was sold away.

107 EXT - VILLAGE SQUARE - DAY

Flora, Cully, Harker and Nathan, the men stripped to the waist,
stand in the bed of the wagon; a small crowd of avid whites
gathered around it. Rufel stands in the midst of the crowd.
Dessa, holding Clara with one hand and Mony in the other arm,
stands a little apart.

RUFEL

These are prime hands; guaranteed
sound..

WHITE WOMAN

This gal cook?

WHITE MAN

I could use a hand know
blacksmithing out at my place.

Rufel hesitates, looks up at Nathan who nods almost
impreceptively.

RUFEL

Yes, ma'm. My mamma herself
trained Petunia here.

WHITE MAN #2

Eight hundred dollars.

More people have stoped; Rufel gains confidence.

RUFEL

Sir! Petunia was part of our
family, her biscuits the envy of
the whole neighborhood.

WHITE WOMAN

I'll go eight-fifty.

(CONTINUED)

107 CONTINUED:

Rufel pouts a little; a VOICE in the crowd yells,
 "Nine-hundred." WHITE WOMAN #2 hunches her HUSBAND. He calls
 out.

WHITE MAN #3
 Nine-seventy-five!

108 EXT - VILLAGE SQUARE - A WHILE LATER

The crowd disperses, Flora, bundle in hand, following a white
 man; Cully, a rope tied to his wrist, follows a white couple who
 hold the other end of the rope.

A WHITE MAN counts money into Rufel's hand. Nathan and Harker
 stand behind him; Dessa, with the children, stands behind Rufel.

WHITE BUYER
 There you go, ma'm, twenty-one
 fifty for the pair; and a fair
 bargain you've made of it, if I
 do say so myself.

Rufel nods her thanks. She and Dessa climb in the wagon.

109 EXT - VILLAGE SQUARE - MOMENTS LATER

The wagon, with Dessa driving, disappears down the street.

The White Buyer herds Harker and Nathan over to an open wagon.

He takes Harker's bundle from him. Opening it, he finds a pair
 of shabby pants and a shirt; when he shakes them, a knife and
 a small packet fall out. He puts the knife in his pocket,
 looking long and hard at Harker. He breaks open the packet,
 scattering pepper. All three fall to sneezing.

110 EXT - SMALL TOWN STREET - DAY

We hear fife and drum music and speaker's voice rising above
 it, exhorting.

WHITE MAN
 Now the damn Mexicans are trying
 to take back Texas and won't sell
 California. You know it's the
 manifest destiny of America to
 stretch from sea to sea and for
 an American to take his niggers
 any damn where he pleases. Your
 country needs you; no loyal son
 can refuse her call.

(CONTINUED)

110 CONTINUED:

The WHITE MAN is standing on a deal packing case exhorting the small, mostly male crowd. Dessa and Rufel, each with her child, watch the crowd from the sidewalk. Some passerby's pause a moment, others walk by paying no mind.

Rufel and Dessa continue walking. They come to a newspaper office, its press visible through the window. Some broadsides are being printed. We see the headline, "Mexican War, Alabama asked for Three Volunteer Companies. Dessa is fascinated with the presses; she stops and turns to Rufel.

DESSA

All those marks mean something,
dont' they? What they say?

RUFEL

Governor's asked for more
volunteers to fight in that war
with Mexico.

Dessa take a last look at the presses; it is uncertain whether she understands what Rufel has said.

The women go into a general store. Dessa looks around her with wonder. The shelves are crammed full of all kinds of goods. The WHITE STOREKEEPER waits on A WHITE WOMAN at the counter. Rufel stands behind her. A WHITE CHILD is listening to a small music box further down the counter. Dessa is drawn to the sound and watches enthralled as the girl winds the box and it plays again. Rufel, her own purchase finished, walks over to Dessa and presses some coins into her hands. Dessa looks at the coins looks at the music box and, when Rufel nods, picks it up. Rufel walks out of the store. Dessa puts the money down beside the storekeeper and hurries after Rufel. The storkeeper picks up the coins, counts then, calls out to Dessa. Dessa turns, frightened, but ready to fight. The storekeeper hands her the change. She stares at it and at him a moment then hurries out the door, a look of wonder on her face.

111 EXT - OPEN ROAD - AFTERNOON

Dessa, with Rufel and the children beside her, drives the wagon through an undulating prairie, heavily wooded in some sections, bald in others. The unwooded slopes are covered with a dense growth of grass and weeds. Often they pass dense growths of cane. Now and then in the distance, they see a house but there is little sign of habitation or cultivation.

Dessa pulls the wagon up to a mile stone.

In the distance, Flora and Cully break from the cover of some trees and run toward the wagon.

112 EXT - GROVE OF TREES - NIGHT

The small camp-fire is almost invisible outside the grove of trees. Cully, Flora, Rufel and Dess huddle around it silently; the children are fretfully.

DESSA

What the man name that bought
Harker-nem.

RUFEL

Thompson.

CULLY

Mistress what bought me, say he
making a new plantation west of
Rileyville.

DESSA

We can't leave without them.

RUFEL

(uneasily)

Harker said not to wait for—.

DESSA

Then we got to find them.

Silence.

FLORA

Harker said not to go back for
no one.

DESSA

How far you think we going get
without em?

There is a moment's uneasy silence.

RUFEL

You bound to be stopped, Odessa,
even with a pass . . . unless,
unless I go with you.

DESSA

(shaking her head)

Then what going happen to Clara
and them? Sides they might be
on the look-out for you.

RUFEL

(eyeing Cully)

For a white woman, yes; but not
for a young white man.

113 EXT - THE GROVE OF TREES - A WHILE LATER

Rufel, dressed in Cully's clothes, his hat pushed down around her ears, and Dessa, almost swimming in Flora's too big pants and shirt, prepare to leave. Rufel is mounted bare-back on one horse. Cully holds his hand so that Dessa can mount the other.

RUFEL

Remember now, the horse threw a shoe and your master walked it into town.

DESSA

If we not back by tomorrow, you all go on to Arcopolis. Try to get far North as you can.

RUFEL

We'll be back before then.

They start off.

114 EXT - A PLANTATION - DAY

Slaves, many of whom wear tight leather collars with bells attached, are clearing ground, cutting down trees, trimming trunks of their limbs, hauling logs away—some with the help of mules, others in groups of three and four—and prying tree stumps from the ground. Some of the slaves are tied together in twos by heavy ropes at their ankles. In the distance, a Great House is under construction; there are a few out-buildings in various stages of completion.

The air is filled with the sound of ax blows, the jingle of slave bells and animal harnesses, an occasional holler or snatch of song.

The White Buyer, astride a horse, a whip prominently displayed, a rifle across his pommel, supervises three slaves and a mule pulling an especially large tree stump out of the ground.

Harker, roped to OCTAVIUS, a light-skin slave, and Nathan, roped to another BLACK MAN, cut down a tree; all are belled.

115 EXT - WOODS - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

The White Buyer watches the tree-cutting from a distance. Dessa and Rufel watch the scene from cover. The tree falls; the White Buyer rides off.

Rufel rises from cover and, fixing her lips to whistle, saunters out of hiding. She cannot whistle. Nervously she wets her lips and tries again. Nathan and Harker work on, unaware of her presence.

{CONTINUED}

115 CONTINUED:

The White Buyer turns and surveys the scene again. Rufel ducks into hiding. Dessa from her own place undercover puts her fingers in her mouth and whistles shrilly. The White Man looks up; Rufel and Dessa, in their separate places, lie flat. The White Man allows his horse to walk a few steps as he looks around trying to see where the sound has come from. Satisfied that all is as it should be, he rides on.

Rufel begins, more stealthily this time, to move closer to Harker and Nathan. Dessa yodels from cover. Nathan and Harker look up. They see Rufel.

116 EXT - WOODS - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Rufel and Dessa are now together in hiding. Harker, closely followed by Octavius to whom he is still roped, hobbles toward Dessa's and Rufel's hiding place. A lock of hair has fallen across Rufel's forehead and she brushes at it absently.

OCTAVIUS

We don't need to come this far
to take a leak. Master going
whip— .

He breaks off as he sees Dessa and Rufel.

Nathan enters the clearing, strong-arming his rope companion into silence.

NATHAN

This one ain't nothing but a white
mouth.

HARKER

Tie him up; let's get these
collars off.

OCTAVIUS

Take me with you.

Dessa and the others look at each other silently.

117 EXT - NEW CAMP SITE - DARK

Dessa, Rufel, Harker, Nathan and Flora, including Octavius, finish the evening meal.

DESSA

We done pushed our luck too far
as it is.

(CONTINUED)

117 CONTINUED:

HARKER

(patiently)

Got to push it some more. We sell
Octavius, we can make—

OCTAVIUS

(rising)

Sell? Thought yo'all was free!

NATHAN

We all will be, you come in with
us. Miss'es sell us; we run away,
meet up later with her and Dessa;
divide the money.

OCTAVIUS

You mean I gets to keep some money
for myself.

HARKER

Well, we-all put our money in
together. Going West; leave slave
law behind.

(pause)

We got to pay for passage up the
Mississippi. Slaves travel as
baggage far as St. Louis, but
that's still a lotta miles. We
have to buy what we going live
on while we getting to the West
and whatever we plans to live
on till we make our first crop
once we get there.

NATHAN

If you not with us—.

OCTAVIUS

You sure she come back for us?

FLORA

We ain't missed no one yet.

HARKER

We'll take the first steamship
bound for St. Louis soon as we
get to Arcopolis.

Cully hurries into the clearing.

CULLY

Someone's coming!

(CONTINUED)

117 CONTINUED: (2)

Flora and the men scurry around getting their gear together, hiding the plates and cups in an open satchel. They take whatever gear belongs to them and fade into the trees. Dessa looks around to make sure nothing is left. Rufel takes Clara in her arms, sits and opens her dress to nurse.

The White Buyer and ANOTHER WHITE MAN ride into the clearing. They dismount. Dessa rises to meet them; Rufel remains seated. though her back is to the men, it is obvious that she is nursing. The white men are made uncomfortable by this.

Rufel starts to rise and Clara starts to cry.

WHITE BUYER

Oh, no, don't stop on our account!

After a moment, Rufel lays Clara down, rights her clothes and turns to them.

RUFEL

Why, Mr. Thompson, what a pleasant surprise. How are those darkies doing?

WHITE BUYER

(sourly)

Thought maybe you might know that, seeing as how they run off as soon as I got em home.

RUFEL

(shocked)

Run off? I can hardly believe it, they're such trustworthy boys. Are you sure they're not just playing truant, sulking somewhere around your place.

DESSA

Maybe the gentlemens would like some coffee, mistress.

Rufel looks at him questioningly. The white Buyer nods, Dessa serves the coffee, using the cups previously used by the runaways. Both White Men sit. Rufel sits close to the White Buyer with Clara between them. As they talk, Clara plays with the White Buyer while Rufel tries, purposefully ineffectual, to control her. The White Buyer is very much aware of Rufel's eyes, which in the firelight seem big, innocent, beautiful, the gleam of her red hair, the translucent quality of her skin in the firelight.

(CONTINUED)

117 CONTINUED: (3)

RUFEL

You know it's possible somebody stole those boys, prime hands, like that—.

WHITE BUYER

One of the niggers did say something about seeing a red-headed boy.

RUFEL

(laughing merrily)

Why, Sir, you're not accusing me of having a brother, are you? I assure you I have none. And to appear, in public, in gentlemen's attire—.

She lowers her eyes demurely. The White Buyer clears his throat and looks away. Rufel continues earnestly.

RUFEL (Cont'd)

I'll send those boys right back to you if they dast to show their faces back home again. I don't know what we'd do if you was to ask for even a tiny portion of that money back.

There is an uncomfortable pause. Finally the white men rise.

WHITE BUYER

Maybe you're right about those nigras, Mrs. Sutton, but I'd be obliged if you keep an eye and an ear out for word of em.

RUFEL

You have my word on it, sir.

118 EXT - ON THE ROAD - DAY

With all in the wagon and Nathan driving, the wagon traveling a beautiful countryside, the fields in full, rich, ripe flower. Negroes work in the fields, they see occasional whites on horseback or in carriages and gorgeous, plantation Houses at a distance.

119 EXT - ARCOPOLIS - DAY

The landing, full of boats, small and large houses rising up the hill; the streets are crowded with drays, dust, boxes, barrels and business.

The wagon ascends a steep road leading up to the town on the bluff.

120 EXT - STREET - DAY

The wagon with all aboard is pulled up in front of the hotel on the busy main street of the town. There is some vehicle traffic; a few of the pedestrians look at the wagon curiously. Nathan helps the women down; each carries her child. Money belts bulge at the waists of Dessa's and Rufel's dresses. Rufel speaks purposefully loud.

RUFEL

Take the hands round to the hotel
slave quarters till I call for
them.

Dessa gives Mony to Flora.

DESSA

I be round to see about him soon
as I get the Mis'ess settled.

Harker takes her hand.

HARKER

You got more than him to see at.

121 INT - RIVERBOAT TICKET OFFICE - DAY

WHITE MAN

Yes indeed, ma'am, we can
accommodate you and your hands
on the packet leaving for St.
Louis tomorrow morning.

Rufel pays for the tickets in gold.

122 EXT - STREET - DAY -MOMENTS LATER

Dessa is fascinated by the streets: The dressmaker's, the barber shop, and the printer's—Rufel again has to pull her away from the printing machine in the window of the newspaper office—the horses, the different wagons and carriages, the way the white people dress, the staggering variety of goods in the stores and warehouses. They are almost like girls together but when Rufel takes Dessa's arm as they laugh at a window display, a passing matron frowns them down.

123 INT - HOTEL ROOM - DAY

Dessa leans against the closed door; Rufel lays Clara down.

DESSA

We come a long way, ain't we?
What we used to do with fear and
trembling, we doing now for "fun."

Rufel, looking uneasily at Dessa, begins to undress, unwrapping the money belt from around her waist, she tosses it on the bed where Clara plays with it. Dessa takes coins and bills from the seams of her petticoats and pulls it out of the legs of her drawers and pours money on the bed.

DESSA

This what we come to get—not
"fun"—this
(waving the money)
put us out the reach of slavery
and the more we have the better.

Pause. Dessa sits on the bed.

DESSA (Cont'd)

Would you—; would you show me
how you count it?

Smiling, Rufel sits on the bed and and picks up a coin.

RUFEL

This is a five dollar gold piece;
it's worth five of these. Or five
of these.

She picks up coins in one hand, dollar bills in the other. Clara, laughing, imitates Rufel picking up money and putting it down. Both women are on the bed, laughing and playing in the money.

124 INT - HOTEL ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The women lie on the bed, tired, smiling. A money belt bulges under Dessa's dress. Clara, a bill clutched in one hand sleeps peacefully.

RUFEL

Dessa, what if I went on to
Council Bluffs with you-all?
(in a rush)
What I got to stay round here for?
I can't work that farm. Nathan
say it's other womens have gone
West.

(CONTINUED)

124 CONTINUED:

Alarmed, Dessa sits up.

DESSA

Nathan? I thought you was going back to your peoples.

RUFEL

I don't want to live round slavery no more; I don't think I could without speaking up. What you think about that, Odessa? About you-all coming with me?

DESSA

White men kill black men for even thinking under a white woman's clothes and here you is talking about risking us all for some belly-rub.

Dessa claps her hand over her mouth. Rufel is equally shocked. But Dessa can't bring herself to say sorry; she mumbles.

DESSA

Mis'ess— I— I know it ain't my place to speak. I'm going see at Mony.

Dessa hurries toward the door. Rufel shouts after her and Dessa hesitates.

RUFEL

(mimicing)

"Ain't my place, Missy." That's how they answer everything:
"Morning, Mammy" "Ain't my place."
"Afternoon, Dessa;" "Ain't my place."

Dessa goes out, closing the door firmly behind her.

RUFEL (Cont'd)

(yelling)

Well, I ain't talking no 'place,"
no "mistress."

125 INT - HOTEL HALLWAY - DAY - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Dessa with her back to the door, breathing fast; something thuds against the door.

RUFEL

(screaming o. s.)

I'm talking friends.

126 EXT - STREET - OVERLOOKING THE RIVER - MOMENTS LATER

Dessa watches as a large sternwheeler, majestic as a dowager makes it way up river.

DESSA

(wonderingly)

This the dammedest white woman.
White as a sheet and about that
much sense—sleeping with negroes,
selling runaways, wanting to be
my friend. Wanting to be my
friend.

Who want to be her friend anyway?
After the way she swole all up,
told me I didn't know a "dinner
dress" from a "morning gown"—.

It's just like her to take for
granted I'd want to be her friend,
that we-all would want her to come
West with us, like she can have
what she want for the asking.
Would "friends" put us in danger
the way she do? And she want to
be my friend.

(pause)

And I want to believe it. After
all the sand I raised. But I want
to believe she ask me to friend
with her.

Dessa turns back toward the hotel.

DESSA (Cont'd)

I won't put no dependence on her
holding to it. "Friend" to her
might be like "promise" to the
rest of these white folks,
something to break if it do em
some good. But I'm not going draw
back from her neither.

127 EXT - STREET - DAY

NEHEMIAH (o.s.)

Odessa. Odessa.

Dessa keeps walking, but looks around, trying to see where the
voice is coming from. Suddenly, a hand claps her on the arm.
Dessa grabs her waist—the money belts are under her
clothes—Nehemiah, more disheveled than ever, jerks her around.

(CONTINUED)

127 CONTINUED:

NEHEMIAH
I knew it was you.

DESSA
(pulling away from him)
Master, Master, I don't know you.

White people have stopped to gape and Dessa calls out to them.

DESSA (Cont'd)
I don't know this master. I
belongs to Mistress Sutton
staying down to the Hotel Gilmore.

The whites talk among themselves, some laugh but no one moves to help Dessa. Nehemiah starts pulling her along. Dessa fumbles in her pocket, withdraws her hand and shakes it in Nehemiah's face. They both sneeze; Dessa jerks away and runs.

NEHEMIAH
(yelling)
Stop her! That's a dangerous
criminal. Reward.

Dessa is knocked off her feet.

128 INT - JAIL OFFICE - DAY

Dessa stands with her arms held tight behind her back by Nehemiah. She is dazed and confused and does not realize until he speaks that Nehemiah holds her arms. The SHERIFF and several other WHITE MEN are present.

SHERIFF
Now just a minute, Nemi, you can't
keep kidnapping niggers off the
street looking for that gal of
yours—

NEHEMIAH
This is a dangerous criminal and
I want her held.

SHERIFF
Who are you, gal? And turn her
loose, Nemi.

The Sheriff pulls out a chair; Reluctantly, Nehemiah lets go of Dessa's arms; trembling, she sits. The Sheriff sits down on the edge of the desk facing Dessa and Nehemiah. Dessa and Nehemiah speak at once, his voice overriding hers.

(CONTINUED)

128 CONTINUED:

DESSA

I belongs to Miss Sutton—

NEHEMIAH

(taking a paper out)
Sheriff, she matches the
description in the poster.

SHERIFF

Speak up, gal.

DESSA

Master, I never seen him before
in my life.

(she pretends to cry)

This master scare me so.

(sincerely)

Oh please, Master, just go to the
hotel and ask Miss Sutton.

NEHEMIAH

Let's have that dress off; let
her prove she doesn't have scars
all over her butt.

The other white men in the room murmur approval.

DESSA

(frightened)

Ware the goods. Ware the goods!

SHERIFF

Damn it, Nemi, you had your last
peep show in here. All right you
men, clear the office. This is
a jail not a carnival. You there,
Jed, go on down to the hotel and
see if you can find this Mistress
Sutton. The rest of you all clear
out.

NEHEMIAH

You got to lock her up, Sheriff.
(reading from the paper)
Hundred dollar reward. Escaped.
Dark complexion. Spare built.
Shows the whites of her eyes—

SHERIFF

Nemi, that sound like about twenty
negroes I knows of personally.
You ought to go on home, man; let
the Law take care of this.

(CONTINUED)

128 CONTINUED: (2)

NEHEMIAH

Like they took care of it already?
The Law let her escape in the
first place!

SHERIFF

Come on, girl.

The Sheriff takes Dessa through a wide doorway into the cellblock.

129 INT - THE CELLBLOCK - MOMENTS LATER

Dessa stands at the cell door holding onto the bars, head bowed. She is desolate. Nehemiah stands in front of her, tapping his fingernail against the watch, in his trade-mark gesture. She looks up.

NEHEMIAH

(casually)

Smart gal like you doesn't have
to end on the gallows. I know
you've been lying with some buck,
but I won't hold that against you.
A woman like you needs.

Dessa is stunned; she backs away staring at Nehemiah as he taps his breast pocket. He looks wild, throwing his head back and brushing at his forelock, advancing on Dessa; she backs away.

NEHEMIAH

Sly bitch. I caught you; I got
you now. Right in here,
(tapping his chest)
you lying sow.

Dessa bumps against the edge of the bunk. Nehemiah reaches through the bars; Dessa screams.

SHERIFF

Nemi!

130 INT - CELLBLOCK - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Dessa sits on the bunk in the cell watching Nehemiah through the doorway. He sits in the office with his legs crossed. Now and then he brushes at his hair or flicks an imaginary speck, apparently unconcerned. He crosses his legs and Dessa sees his ankles showing gray and bony above his low-top shoes.

The Sheriff whittles.

(CONTINUED)

130 CONTINUED:

Dessa looks at Nehemiah's collarless shirt, his dirty ankles. Her eyes fill with tears. She hears the sound a door opening.

RUFEL (o.s.)

Sheriff, what is this nonsense about my girl? I couldn't make any sense out what this man said.

Rufel, with Clara in her arms, marches into Dessa's view; she looks upset.

RUFEL (Cont'd)

Is somebody trying to steal Dessa?
Is that what he was trying to say?
It's just scandalous how people will prey on defenseless women.

Rufel stops in front of the desk, turns and sees Dessa standing, holding on to the bars.

RUFEL (Cont'd)

Odessa! You come out there right this minute!

She starts toward the cell. The sheriff blocks her way.

SHERIFF

Ma'am; beg your pardon, ma'am.

131 INT - JAIL OFFICE - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Nehemiah saunters over to Rufel and the sheriff. Bowing, he holds out his hand.

NEHEMIAH

Madam. Adam Nehemiah.

Rufel draws back but otherwise ignores him.

DESSA

(loudly)

I don't even know this master, Mistress.

NEHEMIAH

But I know you; I know you very well.

(CONTINUED)

131 CONTINUED:

SHERIFF

(frowning at Nehemiah)
Nehemiah, this is the law's job.
Ma'am, this darky is accused of
being an escaped criminal with
a price on her head.

RUFEL

(taken aback)
Why, why that's impossible.

DESSA

They mistook me for another Dessa,
Mistress. Tell em can't be no
reward on me.

RUFEL

This girl is mine. There can't
be a reward for her.

NEHEMIAH

This wench belongs to the state,
madam. I put up fifty dollars
of the reward myself.

Rufel ignores Nehemiah. Clara, still in Rufel's arms, plays
with the Sheriff's badge and babbles contentedly; Rufel smiles.

RUFEL

Sheriff we just come in from
Aikens to meet some hands my daddy
is sending to help with the
harvest. He—
(gesturing over her
shoulder)
just mistook my girl for someone
else.

NEHEMIAH

You would lie for her, Madam?

RUFEL

(offended)
Sheriff, who is this person?

NEHEMIAH

Adam Nehemiah, professor, author—

DESSA

He done dragged other girls in
here, Mistress. And undressed
them.

(CONTINUED)

131 CONTINUED: (2)

RUFEL

(genuinely shocked)
Sheriff, is this true? What is
going on here?

NEHEMIAH

(orating)

Evil, madam. Oh, she's pulled
the wool over your eyes; she
pulled it over mine, too--at
first. A nice white lady like
you can't know the blackness of
a darky's heart. They sing and
laugh, but they're plotting all
the time. Do you know this wench
lusted with her master? That's
why she was sold. I have it all
down here.

(he taps his chest)

Oh, she's a sly piece, Madam; and
a violent one. She tried to
strangle her Mistress and laid
with all the bucks on that slave
coffle--that's how she escaped
from there.

RUFEL

One little pesky colored gal did
all that?

SHERIFF

The law will handle this,
Nehemiah.

(to Rufel)

Maybe the gal Nehemiah is looking
for didn't do everything she's
accused of, but she must have done
something, else there wouldn't
be a poster on her.

RUFEL

(flatly)

Well, it can't be my Dessa.

NEHEMIAH

She fits the description.

(pause)

I assume, madam, that you know
the penalty for slave stealing?

Startled, Rufel draws away from him as Clara grabs the paper out
of his hand. Rufel takes the paper from Clara, giving it to
the Sheriff. Her smile isn't so fresh now.

(CONTINUED)

131 CONTINUED: (3)

SHERIFF

(embarrassed)

They branded the one he's looking
for, ma'am.

NEHEMIAH

Yes, let's look under the "Devil
Woman's" dress!

RUFEL

(nonplussed)

Why— . How dare you talk under
a darky's clothes to me!

SHERIFF

Nehemiah! Beg pardon!

NEHEMIAH

(grudgingly)

Forgive my intemperance, madam.
This slut— Well. I was a bit
forward in my speech but my point
remains. I can prove who this
wench is by the brand on her
thigh.

The Sheriff looks silently at Rufel. Rufel pats Clara; she
switches the baby from one arm to the other and fans herself
with a hanky. She bats her eyes at the Sheriff; the Sheriff
looks at his feet.

RUFEL

(blustering)

Odessa doesn't have any scars.

NEHEMIAH

The Law needs proof.

DESSA

Mistress!

Rufel look at Dessa who pats the money belt under her dress.
She looks at Rufel and down at the hand patting her waist.

DESSA (Cont'd)

Mistress, look at him.

Rufel looks at Nehemiah, noting for the first time, his
crumpled suit and stained shirt front, his unshaven jaw that
makes his face look dirty.

Rufel puts her hanky to her nose and turns to the Sheriff.

(CONTINUED)

131 CONTINUED: (4)

RUFEL
 Sheriff, may I talk to you?
 (as Nehemiah starts to
 follow)
 In private.

132 INT - CELLBLOCK - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Rufel walks over to Dessa's cell. Clara reaches for Dessa; Dessa grabs her hand and looks at Rufel who licks her lips and smiles weakly.

RUFEL
 Sheriff, we're carrying a lot of
 money to hire these hands. Open
 your dress, Odessa.

Dessa unfastens it at the waist and turns so the Sheriff can see without Nehemiah seeing too.

RUFEL (Cont'd)
 We're traveling alone; I can't
 have my girl undress in front of
 some one I don't trust. And I'm
 certainly not going to have her
 make a show of herself before a
 stranger—like those other girls
 did.

SHERIFF
 (defensively)
 I had a old auntie look at them.
 I'll send someone at Chole now.

NEHEMIAH
 (howling)
 You can't set a darky to check
 a darky, catch a darky; that's
 the mistake they made at the last
 place. Sheriff, you can't take
 a darky's word on this.

SHERIFF
 You'll take the word of the law
 and be done with it.

133 INT - JAIL OFFICE - AFTERNOON - SOME MINUTES LATER

AUNT CHOLE, an old black woman, smoking a pipe and mumbling to herself, a cloth folded over her arm, enters. The Sheriff makes her known to Rufel and Nehemiah.

(CONTINUED)

133 CONTINUED:

RUFEL

(looking at Nehemiah)

It's an outrage to shame a good girl on the word of just someone.

NEHEMIAH

Don't look her in the eye, granny; she's got the devil in her.

SHERIFF

See if this gal is whipscarred about her privates.

AUNT CHLOE

(bowing her head)

Yes, suh; Miz Ma'am.

134 INT - CELLBLOCK IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

Aunt Chole puts the cloth up around the cell, blocking the view of Nehemiah and the others, mumbling the whole time.

NEHEMIAH (o.s.)

I bet she has calluses on her legs from being chained.

Dessa, whispering, unfastens her dress, trying to catch Aunt Chole's eyes.

DESSA

Granny, granny, I was scarred as a child; girl was watching me dropped me in the fire. I'm much ashamed of them scars.

Aunt Chole looks at Dessa with milky eyes. Dessa pulls down the top of her dress and shift. Aunt Chole runs her hand gently over Dessa's back. She whispers in Dessa's ear.

AUNT CHOLE

Devil Woman!

Dessa jumps, looks around quickly but says nothing. Aunt Chole steps back. Slowly, Dessa starts to lift her skirts. Aunt Chole's hand reaches out suddenly, stopping her. She calls out loudly, all the while looking at Dessa grinning, running her hands over Dessa's face and shoulders as she speaks.

AUNT CHOLE

(calling out)

Masa Joel, Masa Joel, I ain't seed nothing on this gal's butt. She ain't got a scar on her back.

(CONTINUED)

134 CONTINUED:

NEHEMIAH
(yelling o. s.)
You're lying. Sheriff, I told
you about these darkies.

Dessa re-fastens her clothes; Aunt Chole pulls the cloth down
from round the cell.

135 INT - CELLBLOCK - MOMENTS LATER

The Sheriff opens the cell door. Clara reaches for Dessa as
she comes out of the cell. Dessa takes Clara, and hugs her
close.

NEHEMIAH
(stunned)
You can't mean this, sheriff.
You taking the word of some
nearsighted mammy? Let me see
for myself.

Nehemiah reaches for Dessa who dodges back.

SHERIFF
(pushing Nehemiah)
Nehemiah, are you out your mind?
Leave that gal alone.

NEHEMIAH
I know it's her. I have her down
here in my book.

Nehemiah takes out the little note pad. Rufel pulls on Dessa's
arm, but Dessa doesn't move. Nehemiah walks toward Dessa as
he reads.

NEHEMIAH
'I kill white people, cause I
can!' That's what she said.
Here's some more— . Here— .

Nehemiah shakes the pad in Dessa's face. Clara reaches for the
book and knocks it out of his hand. The unbound pages fall
out, scattering about the floor. Nehemiah grabs at the papers,
pushing them in the Sheriff's hand and into Rufel's.

SHERIFF
Nehemiah, it's nothing but some
scribbling here; no one can read
this.

(CONTINUED)

135 CONTINUED:

RUFEL
 (turning the papers
 over)
 And these are blank, Sheriff.

NEHEMIAH
 (still on his knees)
 What? No, it's all here.

Nehemiah lurches to his feet; the Sheriff grabs him.

NEHEMIAH
 She walks on the inside of her
 feet from being on that chain.
 I know this darky, I tell you;
 I know her very well. Her hair
 fits like a cap on her head
 underneath that scarf. I know
 her.
 (reaching at Rufel)
 You understand. Science.
 Research. The mind of the darky.

He taps his temple; Dessa and Rufel move.

NEHEMIAH (Cont'd)
 You're in this together. Sluts.
 All alike.

SHERIFF
 Nehemiah, for God sake.

Nehemiah is down on his knees, scrambling among the papers.
 Rufel, shaken and angered, almost stops, but Dessa, who is
 behind her, keeps her going.

Dessa takes one last look at Nehemiah on his knees among the
 papers; hiding a smile, she goes out the door.

136 EXTERIOR - STREET - IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING - DUSK

DESSA
 (exultant)
 Mis'sess, Miz—

RUFEL
 (swinging around)
 My name is Ruth, Ruth Sutton.
 I ain't your mistress.

(CONTINUED)

136 CONTINUED:

DESSA

Well, if it come to that, my name
Dessa, Dessa Rose. Ain't no O
to it.

RUFEL

That's fine with me.

Both are testy. Clara starts to pat Dessa's face and Dessa hugs
her, looking at Rufel.

DESSA

(desparately)

Maybe we can't speak but so honest
without disagreement, but that
don't change how I feel.

RUFEL

(as Dessa speaks)

Dessa—

DESSA

Rufel—

RUFEL

(as Dessa speaks)

Who was that white man—?

DESSA

That was the white man—.

They stop, start to hug each other, remember where they are;
settle for smiling at each other broadly. They walk down the
street; Dessa walking just a step behind Rufel. They see
Harker, holding Mony, Nathan Flora, Cully and Octavius standing
in front of the hotel, and wave. They wave back.

THE END