

Fugue

By Reggie Cuyler, Jr.

Winter in south Georgia was never bad until I found myself on the run from a pack of plantation folk. They were dying to quench the thirst of their vindictive souls, and the beverage of choice was my blood. The icy air singed the back of my throat and nostrils with each breath. My thighs felt like a brush fire had spurred in my trousers from how long I had been running. What bothered me the most wasn't that I was being hounded by a mob angry good ol' boys. It was that I was well aware of what I was getting myself into by getting involved Bobbie. Before he passed away my father always would tell me to be careful with women. Dealing with the wrong one could lead to death of 'ya, and with no surprise the reaper was gnawing at my ankles with each stride.

"Run boy! Run!" one my pursuers taunted from a distance. Shortly after his southern drawl cut the silence of the night, the piercing snare from a fired shotgun followed. I flinched and stumbled at the sound. I looked back and in the distance I caught sight of four fiery orange and yellow floating orbs of light. I couldn't see, but judging from the stampede of feet I heard trudging through the brush of the woods, there was at least at dozen of them. "You can't hide forever, Bo. You gon' pay, boy!" another of them shrieked. My face twisted with disgust and I dug my callused bare feet deeper and deeper into the earth topping out my speed given the fatigue that had set in. Being addressed by that name always brought a sour taste to my mouth and memories that were even more bitter.

I wasn't always a slave. Forced servitude wasn't a part of life until I turned fourteen. Before now I lived my life as a mulatto child that was born to a loving white mother and a paranoid black father. Back in those days I was too young to fully grasp how much of risk they were taking by trying to lead a normal life as man and wife. It wasn't until after the ranch was burned down that I fully understood why Papa owned more rifles than a musketeer.

My Dad, Quesny, Sr. was a pure blood slave from birth until he ran away with my uncles. They made it up to Philadelphia where he met my mom Thelma. Though they were in the north and people were a little more tolerant of free black men, the two of them being together was still taboo. My mother's parents were a little more open to idea of having negroes around but not as a son in law and definitely not a grandson. However they were gracious enough to accept a young black woman named Rita, that migrated from a plantation in Covington to find a home with them as a maid. During

my mother's late teen years she would tell her how strong and handsome black men were, leaving her interested in seeing if all the hype was true. From what I could remember of my mother's stories, she didn't care how forbidden it was for a young white woman to even speak to a black man, my father was the first Negro she seen and Rita's talk was true plus some if you let mama tell it. She would always tell me it was something about his chocolate skin and tight locks of curly hair that made her curious, and in turn her curiosity led to me growing her belly with no way for them to hide it.

She was a nineteen year old white woman pregnant with a black man's child. Mama took the risk and told my grandma that I was on the way. To my advantage my grandmother was as sharp as a tack and passed some her wits along to my mother who was studying to be a psychologist the University of Pennsylvania at the time. In order to save all of our lives, Grandma was to send all three of us down to live on the ranch that the family owned in Valdosta immediately after I was born. The plan was that my mom raised me until I was old enough to fend for myself then return home, in hopes that could pass as white. My father was to work the land and hunt to feed us all.

It all panned out well. I was born on January 10, 1874 in Philadelphia at my grandparents house to the same midwife that delivered my mother. My grandfather wasn't too happy that I was a mixed child but he loved his daughter too much to see us harmed, so he reluctantly funded our trip down a few weeks after I was confirmed healthy. They wanted to get all of us out of town before I got too old. They had to be safe just in case I started to take on the color of my father. It just so happened to work in our favor that I was born with blue eyes, which supported the lie that my father was a wealthy plantation owner in Ponta Rosa. We rode by wagon all the way down to the ranch, and my father played the role as a newly bought slave that we were taking to work.

As early as I could remember my Mama did her best to impart her schooling on me. Shortly after I learned how to talk, she worked on teaching me to how to read and write. I received more education from her by the time that I was eight years old, that most Negro children would receive in a life time, and darn good at it too. Reading mama's old school books was always an escape, especially her Psychoanalysis Collection. I retained most of everything she taught. However couldn't resist my wandering thoughts. Hours at a time would pass by while I'm on a stake out as Valdosta's hero Detective Ace Brown, or shucking corn as Jimbo the nine fingered farmer. It went from mama saying it was cute, to 'oh little Quesny has an imagination on him'. When Papa found me playing me in the creek as Riley the cigar smoking fisherman, it finally ended up as her wanting go to town for me to see a head doctor. It

became less of a possibility the more and more my fair skin and soft wavy hair succumbed to my father's genes. My mother's hopes of me seeing a doctor or returning to Philadelphia to pass off as white dwindled with each year that passed. By the time I was fourteen the idea was completely abandoned and she was pregnant yet again. Due to complications with the pregnancy we lost them both, and I had to send the letter of bad news to my grandparents, Papa couldn't read or write. Not too long after my mother's death, my father and I were discovered at the plantation by a group of rogue slave catchers and were sold separately. We haven't seen one another since.

Now I found myself following in Papa's footsteps as a runaway. Another jarring roar escaped from the muzzle of one of my pursuer's shotguns. Each shot charged my desperation to flee. A roar of anguish escaped my lips when my foot rammed into a stray log that was lying inconspicuously in the brush. Cries of celebration echoed through the night from the men behind. My shriek was quickly followed by the thud of my body meeting the earth face down. "YEEEEEEEE!!!!, Good shot, Rudy!" one of them exclaimed in the distance. Apparently they were under the impression that their blind fire had struck gold. Fortunately, whoever Rudy was, didn't have as much of a sharp shot as they were celebrating him to be. A warm crimson stream protruded from the cracked nail on my left big toe.

The distance between me and the approaching horde of vicious headhunters was quickly turning for the worse. I rolled onto my back and faced the night sky. Wincing in pain, I widened my eyes and caught a glimpse of the moon. Its posse of stars and constellations surrounded its luminous glow that was obstructed by the tree tops. There were a few spots every here and there where its light could shine through. Mama would always say that there would be a day when people would walk the moon. In my mind it was something that could never be done, so when I would ask her how, she'd respond, 'When a man has a vision and the determination to see it come life, impossibility because a figment of the imagination'. I would wait until night fall just to gaze at the moon and wonder what it would feel like to go for stroll with my parents up there. I still find catch myself staring from time to time, but tonight definitely wasn't one of those moments. I quickly gathered to my feet and continued to hobble through the woods in a halfway jogging, halfway limping manner. "Ya' hit em', but he's still a'kickin'" another other of the men's voices echoed from behind. The trail of my blood tailed my every move making it easy for them to follow. At that pace it wouldn't have been long before we all met face to face.

My ribs were aching and the gasps of air that I took in grew shorter by the second. It was mind boggling to think about how Quesny Sr. was able to successfully

get away. Trying to pull off the stunt that he did on both levels was no cake walk. Being a slave on the run wasn't the only thing that my father and I had in common. The love of my life didn't share the same complexion as me either, and for obvious reasons it was a huge problem. Especially when she was discovered by her father wrapped in the arms of one of the slaves on his plantation. Bobbie was so similar to Mama that it got creepy at times. The major difference between the two of them though is that Bobbie's father had less than zero tolerance for his daughter being with a black man. She would catch a swift back hand to the face for even thinking about anyone with a little bit of color to their skin.

She had never seen a Negro with blue eyes before. Maybe that's what sealed the deal with her. Regardless of what it was, it initially started as her trying to figure out why we shared the same eye color and eventually led to late night rendezvous in woods by lake. When she felt risky, visits at the barn where all the workers were quartered were customary. I wasn't opposed at all. Her five foot seven, healthy frame, auburn curls, and clear face were second to none in comparison to my distraught, and often times emaciated counterparts. Our luck was cashed in tonight when her burly red headed father with an even redder face came barging through the doors of her room after a venture as Vinny, the French butler lead me between her sheets. The sounds of her shrill voice still rang through my ears despite the length of time that had passed since I had been on the run. "Papa don't kill him. He's one of us you can't!"

The pain in my foot grew dull and a tingling numbness settled in. "Bobbie, take your ass back to the house!" One of the men behind me exclaimed. "Bo! Don't let them catch you!" followed shortly. It was her, I could recognize the squeak of her screams from a mile away after tonight. Another shot rang out and a thud crashed into the leaves and dirt behind. Swiveling my neck at the sound to get a view, I looked desperately to see if Bobbie was the unlucky receiver of the shell. A cool icy feeling crept up my left foot then my right foot next. Before I could stop and make a quick cut in either direction besides the one that led straight into the lake that Bobbie and me would frequent, I was already waist deep and sinking into the pitch black water. Of all the things Mama Thelma taught and preached, swimming didn't make the cut.

The murky mass flowed in and out of my mouth and nostrils. I thrashed, punched and kicked in a desperate attempt to stay afloat. The frigid water slowly rose to my chest and neck. In no longer than thirty seconds of my bout with the very lake that brought so much joy, I found myself submerged from head to foot in despair.

“Honey!” a shrill familiar voice, muffled its way through the water. My eyes eased open. Surprisingly the water was crystal clear and lights were wiggling around above the surface. I immediately rose out of shock at the change in scenery, watering the green marble countertop and off white tile in the process. “Relax! What’s wrong?” the woman continued. It didn’t take long to realize that it was Bobbie’s voice. After coming completely out of the water, her crystal blue eyes met mine. She wore a look wore on face along with the bright red lipstick and charcoal mascara.

The washroom belonged to a home that was spiffier than the three story plantation house that I used to live on with my parents. A washtub big enough for a small family, gold trimmed faucet knobs, and a mirror nearly the same length as the twenty foot by twelve foot wall it was mounted to. I stood in front of the studio style lighting. The tattered flannel and patched trousers that fashioned my six foot slender frame were gone, and I didn’t miss them at all. Bobbie approached and wrapped her arms around me from behind. I flinched in preparation that she would rub against the welts that spanned from my waistline to my neck. She came closer and surprisingly the stinging, burning, and itching that usually accompanied my wounds didn’t follow. Immediately I turned to face the mirror and seen that my back was as smooth as a bartender at a speakeasy.

“Your back is fine, Hurry we’re going to be late,” she said sounding annoyed. She released her grip and went for the door. She disappeared on the other side of it and started into the unknown. It wasn’t long before she called for me to join her in the darkness looming through the threshold of the washroom. I proceeded cautiously. The consequences of being seen tagging alongside Bobbie weren’t the type that one could survive to warn others about. Our feelings were growing for one another but that wasn’t enough to risk both of our well being, mainly my life. “C’mon! You are wasting time. We’re going to be late,” she pestered before grabbing me by the arm and escorting me through the largest residence I had ever seen.

Portraits and framed newspaper clippings were placed decoratively amongst the beige paisley pattern walls. Our reflections danced around the polished wooden floorboard on our trek through the second floor of the house. Directly outside of the washroom there was clear view over the white balcony with posts that were cut in the shape of double handled baseball bats. There was a huge chandelier that looked like an array of glowing icicles trimmed in gold. I stopped shortly to marvel at the sight before Bobbie gave me another sharp tug to the wrist.

We weaved in and out of the winding corridors. One of the portraits on the wall encased a photo of Bobbie and me smiling with my arms around her from behind, both of our eyes gleamed like two pair of blue marbles. What was more shocking than the fact that we were hanging up as if we were completely a normal couple, the picture had just as much color as the very hall that we were standing in. Next to it was another frame encasing a news clipping with a headline read "District Attorney Chad Fulton Close \$11 Million Dollar Wrongful Death Claim, March 2009". A black and white photo of me was trimmed by the words of the article.

Bobbie was finally able to drag me into what I guessed was our bedroom. We got dressed; wearing clothes that weren't ripped and torn was an experience within itself. The tan blazer and stone wash denim maybe look like I owned five plantations. Bobbie was even sportier. Her pink and green floral dress complimented her frame flawlessly. It took nearly ten minutes just to get the front door of the house. The thing she called a car that was parked outside made the carriage that Bobbie's father rode around on look like scrap metal on wheels. The exterior was painted bright red and was shiny enough for me give myself a clean shave from the reflection.

We drove through a town that had buildings that I couldn't see to the top of. Lights in funny colors that I had never seen before were all over. All kinds of folks were bustling around and jumping in out of the back seat yellow versions of the car that Bobbie and I were in. We parked in a huge layered structure with hundreds of other cars that were either nice as or even better than the one that Bobbie was maneuvering around the bends and turns of the building. She hopped out and shut the door behind her. I stared blankly trying to figure out how she was able to get out so easily. "So you're going to just sit there?" she said. Her voice was muffled from being on the opposite side to the interior of the vehicle. The windows that surrounded the body of the car brought on a little bit of claustrophobia. Before I could try my luck fiddling with all of the knobs and gadgets on the side of the door she came to my rescue. After a few quick gestures I was free and able to join her on the outside.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach and I made it a priority to trail a couple yards behind, I didn't want any trouble. "What's gotten into to you tonight?" Bobbie raised her voice. She turned around and locked her fingers with mine. I quickly let go, but she was persistent. We nearly broke out into a full arm wrestle before I gave in. We held hands the entire walk from the car until we sat down in the movie theatre. Perspiration trickled down my back, and my throat tightened out of anticipation for the worst. But there were plenty other mixed couples just like us, so I eventually came at ease. After a while I felt proud to be able to openly show the world that Bobbie was mine. Once the

movie started I could barely pay attention to what was going on. I was too amazed by the fact that I could actually hear the voices of the actors coming from all around. It seemed like the cast was surrounding everyone in the theatre, acting out their roles from all directions. On top of that seeing everything in lively, vivid colors was still astonishing.

Rain seeped through the night sky after the movie. A car passing by drove through a puddle on the side of the road where we were standing and a wave of water and mud blanketed us both. Soaked and aggravated, we made a mad dash back to where we parked.

We made it back home looking like we had been swimming in a swamp. At least we were together and didn't have to hide it. I planted soft kisses all over her cheeks and lips. I walked back to the washroom to get cleaned up. My clothes sat in a muddy clump in the hallway outside the door.

The water was still in the tub as I had left it. I climbed in expecting it to be just as warm but to my surprise it was cold as a Philadelphia winter. I tried to hop back out but instead I sunk deeper and deeper until I was fully submerged. My flailing arms and legs did nothing. The lighting in the room quickly grew dim. I had nearly given up before a hand latched onto my wrist. Relieved that I had stopped sinking, I completely submitted to my rescuer. Bobbie had showed up just in time once again.

Well at least that was what I thought until I was raised from the water by her red faced father and his cronies. It didn't take long for me to realize that I was back at the lake. They were all visible, every single last one of their twisted faces. Before I could attempt to flee my hands and feet were laced with rope thick enough to hold the stallion in place that accompanied them. I could feel the heat from the torches that they carried. The next rope was fastened to my neck. My face tightened out of anger. I wasn't afraid, my father had raised me to understand that fear was an infection that weakens the heart of men. Once again I was following his footsteps by facing the same demise as he did. One of the men retrieved a pocket knife from his peeling leather boot, and slashed the rope tied to my feet. The others surrounding me hoisted me onto the back of the horse that they brought with them. I looked up at the moon, and in the process I saw that the rope around my neck extended from my body all the way into the tree tops. Bobbie's father walked over and looked in my eyes and said, "Serves you right" before cracking his whip twice on the stallion's rear end and it ran from beneath me.