

"I told her I was praying for both of them," Vivian said.

"That's good," I said. "That's the best thing you could have said to her."

"Get back to Irene," Vivian said. "She's <sup>the one</sup> ~~who~~ we're talking about."

"Irene and my aunt wants from me what Miss Emma wants from Jefferson," I said. "I don't know if <sup>Miss Emma</sup> ~~she~~ ever had anybody in her past that she could be proud of. Maybe, maybe not. But she wants that now, and she wants it from him. Irene and my aunt want it from me. Miss Emma knows that the State is about to take his life, but before that happens she wants something to remember him by. Irene and my aunt know that one day I will leave, but they are not about to let go without a fight. It's the same thing, the very same thing. Miss Emma needs a memory. Do you know what she told me when I sat on that bed? That Reverend Mose and I should get along, and together we should reach Jefferson. Why not only Reverend Ambrose? Why not only the soul? No, she wants memories, memories of him standing. Oh, she will meet him soon, and she knows it. But she wants memories, if only for a day, an hour, here on earth. Do you understand?"

"No," Vivian said. *And she wan't drinkin' either.*

"Let me explain it to you, let me see if I can <sup>really</sup> explain it to you," I said. The brandy was <sup>really</sup> working well now. "We have always failed. We as black men have failed our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken and can't protect them, or we run away and leave them alone to look

after the children and themselves. So when another male child is born they look at him hoping that he will be the one to change this vicious circle--which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even tries to, it is too heavy <sup>a burden</sup> because of all the others who have run away and left theirs. So he too must run away if he is to hold onto his sanity and have a life of his own. I can see in your face you still don't agree, so I'll try again. What she wants is that he (Jefferson) and I (that's me) to change everything that has happened the past three hundred years. She wants to hear ~~he~~ <sup>hear</sup> about it so in case she ever gets out of that bed again she can go to that little church there in the quarter and say proudly, "You see, I told you, I told you, I told you he was a man". If she dies an hour after that--all right; but what she wants to hear, first, is that he did not crawl--he stood at that last moment. Because ~~if~~ <sup>if</sup> he does not, she knows she will never get another chance. ~~To see a black man stand for her.~~ And with my aunt and Irene it is the same. Who else does my aunt have? And what has Irene, and so many others there in the quarter? They look at their fathers, their grandfather-s, their uncles, their brothers--all broken. They see me--I who grew up on that same plantation--can teach reading, writing and arithmetic. I can give them something that neither father nor grandfather did, so they want to hold on. But they don't know that their holding on will break me, too. That in order for me to be what they think I am, what they want me to be, I, too, must go, run, as the others have done. <sup>into Paris</sup>

I drank. "Let Jefferson who is about to die, let him break that ~~vicious~~ <sup>vicious</sup> circle. Me, I must be free," he said.

Vivian had been listening patiently.

"And what will you say to Jefferson when you go back up there, Grant?" she asked.

"I don't have the least idea," I said.

"I have," she said.

I drank and looked at her.

"Life is not worth living if you're not responsible for at least one ~~other person~~ <sup>human being</sup>," she said.

"And what about self?" I asked her. "Doesn't it all begin with self? How can you give if you don't have respect for self?"

"You keep twisting ~~things~~ <sup>things</sup> around," she said.

I poured another shot from the bottle. Vivian was not drinking, she was just watching me.

"To the circle," ~~I~~ <sup>I</sup> said, raising my glass. "May it be broken--one day <sup>by someone</sup>"

Vivian kept on looking at me. Then she raised her own glass.

"May it be broken," she said.

"By someone."