

I called him.

"Do you know what a myth is, Jefferson?" "A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe they're better than anything else on earth--and that's a myth. The last thing they ever want to see is for a black man to stand, to think, to show that common humanity that is in ^{us} all ~~of us~~. It would destroy that myth. They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are ⁱⁿ. As long as none of us stand, they're safe. They're safe with me. ~~I don't want them to feel safe with you~~ They're safe with Reverend Ambrose. I don't want them to feel safe with you. ^{or more.} I want you to chip away at that myth by standing. I want you, yes, you, to call them a lie. I want you to show them that you are as much man, ^{more} man than they. Guidry doesn't believe it. He calls me professor, but he doesn't mean it. He calls Reverend Ambrose Reverend, but he doesn't respect him. When I showed him the ~~tablet~~ ^{note book} and pencil I brought you, he grinned to himself. Do you know why? He believes it was just a waste of time and money. What can a hog do with pencil and paper?"

We stopped again, away from the table. His head was down.

"Look up at me, Jefferson, please." *I said.*

He raised his head. He had been crying. He raised his cuffed hands and wiped one eye, then the other.

"I love you," I told him. "I need you. I need you much more than you could ever need me. I need to know what to do with my life. I want to run away, but go where and do what? I'm needed here and I know it, but I feel that all I'm doing is choking myself."

I need someone to tell me what to do. I need **you** to tell me, to show me. I'm no hero, I just want to give something small. That's all I have to offer. It is the only way that we can chip away at that myth. You, you can be bigger than anyone you have ever met. Please listen to me, because I would not lie to you now. I speak from my heart. You have the chance of being bigger than anyone who has ever lived on that plantation or come from this little town. You can do it if you try. You have seen how Mr. O'Farrell makes a slingshot handle. He starts with just a little piece of rough wood. Any little piece of scrap wood--then he starts cutting. Cutting and cutting and cutting, then shaving. Shave it down clean and smooth till it's not what it was before, but something new and pretty. You know what I'm talking about, because you have seen him do it. You had one that he made from a piece of scrap wood. Yes, yes, because I saw you with it. And it came from a piece of old wood that he found in the yard somewhere. And that's all we are, *Jefferson* all of us on this earth, a piece of drifting wood, until we, each one of us, *individually* decide to become something else. I am still that piece of drifting wood, and those out there are no better. But you can be. Because we need you and want you to be. Me, her, the children, and all the rest of them in the quarter. Do you understand what I'm saying, *to you,* Jefferson? Do you?"

He looked at me, and all the pain was still there. He looked at me with pain, not doubt, not yet. He could not have doubt yet, because to have doubt you must think, and he had been denied that

twenty-one years. So there was no doubt yet, but pain and fear, and maybe wonder. Asking himself(maybe)how can I be anything else but what I am? Yes, yes, yes, I cry because of the things you have said. Not that I understand any of it--no, I don't. I cry--not from reaching any conclusion by thinking^{Reasons}--but, because lowly as I am, I am still part of the whole.

"Come on," I said. "Let's have some gumbo."

del We went back to the table.