

BEFORE DAWN

Written by

Ernestia Fraser

fraser.ernestia@gmail.com
242.437.1688

CAPTION: 1850 - BEFORE THE EMANCIPATION OF BLACK SLAVES

FADE IN:

EXT. PLANTATION COTTON FIELDS - EARLY MORNING

Large grassy plain. The HAZE OF SUNLIGHT over countless COTTON PLANTS in the distance.

SOUND of FEET POUNDING the GROUND. CAMERA shows the FLASHING IMAGE of RUNNING LEGS. PANS UP to reveal --

EXT. CONNOLLY'S PLANTATION - SAME

CONRAD CONNOLLY (55, robust and scruffy) dismounts off a brown horse while his side-kick, COLEBROOKS (45, skinny and stately), on his GALLOPING white horse, strides towards him. The two men carry rifles.

Connolly walks alongside a row of badly-beaten BLACK FIELD SLAVES, mostly men, all of whom carry Connolly's BRAND MARK. Two white PLANTATION MANAGERS, strapped with whips and bolstered hand guns parole the line of slaves.

Among them stands JOSHUA FOSSIL, (45), with a gash over his eye -- the blood slowly DRIPPING from the tip of his lashes.

CONNOLLY

Now what's this I hear about you
Niggers wanting your freedom?

Connolly stops, standing face-to-face with Joshua who stares him down. FRAME WIDENS to reveal a large HANGING TREE in the distance.

CONNOLLY (CONT'D)

You know what freedom is, Nigger?
(re: hanging tree)
Go on then. Let freedom reign.

CUT TO:

An African American man, ELIJAH HALL(48). In his arms, his eight year old SON, dangling and unconscious -- a bloody gash on his forehead, blood oozing from the mouth.

On Elijah's neck is a SLAVE BRANDING -- a "C" with a cross over it etched in his skin. Strain on Elijah's face as he powerfully moves towards the vast evergreen forest ahead --

EXT. FOREST - SAME

A SWARM OF RAVENS fly above the treetops. A few ruddy SLAVE SHACKS scattered among the forest. Further in the distance, thick copses of WHITE BIRCH TREES, leading to and surrounding DINAH'S COTTAGE in the distance.

INT. DINAH FOSSIL'S COTTAGE - SAME

NATURAL LIGHT SHINES inside a one-room wooden shack. PAN the interior to find a wooden table, a lone stove and SHELVES lined with ENDLESS CLUTTER: shaman paraphernalia like animal bones, bundles of herbs, vials of medicine, big and small cork-screw jars filled with insects, animal parts, tiny plants, and human mandibles.

A black woman, DINAH FOSSIL, 45, holds out a piece of bread to her pet RAVEN who's perched on shelf. The bird CAWS, then eats.

DINAH
(smiling)
There's you go, Ebenezer. You
always play so hard to get--

The wind WHISTLES a little as Dinah picks up a brush, beginning to slowly brush her hair. She looks at her reflection in the mirror: beautiful. Telepathically sensing something, she lets she hair fall and slowly turns around, facing the door.

INT. / EXT. DINAH FOSSIL'S COTTAGE - SAME

DOOR OPENS UP -- Elijah, holding his lifeless son, lethargically moves towards her --

INT. DINAH FOSSIL'S COTTAGE - SAME

CAMERA TILTS UP to show a HAZY, BLURRED outlook: the door closing, shutting out the sunlight. Dinah and Elijah's body coming in and out of frame.

ELIJAH
Miss Dinah, he's all I've got!
Please!

DINAH
Elijah, what happened out there?

ELIJAH(O.S.)

Connolly was like a madman. It was like he had a fixin for us! Like he had a fixin for us all!

LATER

CLEAR IMAGE: The peaceful boy, drenched in blood, lies on a padded mattress on the ground. There's a GASH on his forehead.

Kneeling down beside him, Dinah places a vile to the boy's nose as the father disruptively begins to pace back and forth.

DINAH

Elijah, please.

Elijah stops the pacing.

ELIJAH

Miss Dinah, the boy is all I got.

Dinah focuses on the boy.

DINAH

Turn away, right now.

Elijah turns to face the door. There's something familiar about what Dinah is going to do.

INT./EXT. DINAH'S COTTAGE

Elijah watches a sudden WIND picks up, rustling the nearby tree LEAVES.

DINAH (O.C.)

Spirit firm and heart low. Find thy cause and do not go.

Elijah turns to face Dinah.

DINAH (CONT'D)

Spirit firm and heart low. Find thy cause and do not go.

The child starts to WILDLY THRASH back and forth, his body convulsing as a foamy spit begins to ooze from his mouth.

SFX: Dinah watches as a SPIRIT FORM -- a clear, ghost-like figure identical to the child -- levitates above the boy's inactive body. The spirit looks into Dinah's eyes and soon descends, SINKING INTO the child below.

GASP from the boy, who rouses from his deep unconsciousness, MOANING. Dinah, looking with compassion, rises to the ground while the awestruck father kneels by his son, taking his hand and beginning to cradle him on the ground.

ELIJAH

Son? Son?
(beginning to cry)
Dinah... thank you.

A LIGHT WIND beginning to blow Dinah's hair.

DINAH

Elijah, who else did Connolly hurt?

Elijah is at a lost for words. The wind in Dinah's hair pick up. A clairvoyant look registers on her face as she begins for the door, trailing the nearby flutter of a RAVEN.

EXT. DINAH'S COTTAGE - SAME

Dinah, ushered by the wind, goes deeper into the woods as she follows a raven. Dinah begins to break down, crying:

DINAH

Joshua? Joshua? No.

Joshua's spirit is on the move, disappearing into the woods.

EXT. CONNOLLY'S PLANTATION - SAME - HANGING TREE

Colebrook, rifle in hand, walks over to the hanging tree where JOSHUA FOSSIL dangles lifeless. Colebrook pokes Joshua's midsection with his rifle.

Connolly looks on in the distance.

COLEBROOK

This one is gone, Mr. Connolly.

CONNOLLY

Serves him right.

Connolly looks at the other slaves.

CONNOLLY (CONT'D)

Serves him right.

CAMERA PAN to Joshua's dangling torso and legs.

EXT. FOREST - SAME

CAMERA ON Dinah's legs -- She quickly walks among the birches, following the FLEETING APPARITION.

DINAH

Joshua? Please. Come back.

She suddenly stops as the CAMERA PANS to reveal the SPIRIT FORM - a TRANSLUCENT BODY identical to its human form - of her husband JOSHUA FOSSIL (45), who stands right in front of her. Emotional and confused, Dinah kneels down, beginning to wail. Her CRY echoes in the distance.

CUT TO:

EXT. COTTON FIELDS - SAME

A fleet of RAVENS darting from the forest over the empty the cotton field.

FADE TO BLACK

CAPTION: 1867 POST THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR - AFTER THE EMANCIPATION OF BLACK SLAVES

FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST - DUSK

Camera FOLLOWS the RACING LEGS of two African American boys, FLITTING through the dense underbrush soon hurtling over a FALLEN TREE TRUNK. PAN UP to reveal SAMUEL JOHNSON (13, thick curly hair) and JEREMY WILKES (13) rapidly moving holding an object in their hands. The two seem to be enjoying their adventure --

EXT. RIVER - SAME

BLACK LEGS running through the river SHOAL -- going deeper into the water, making huge splashes in the river.

Samuel and Jeremy, each using lye soap, wash their bodies in the river.

Beyond the water is a HAZE of THICK FOG.

EXT. ROSE'S SHACK - AFTERNOON

Modest ex-slave shack with a small stone-pit fire, a hand-drawn wooden wagon to one side and four bales of cotton stacked on the other.

Samuel lifts a bucket of water over to his mother Rose who washes and hangs clothes on a make-shift clothing line, running between two trees.

Samuel, sensing a LIGHT WIND, looks up to see three RAVENS SWOOPING across the sky.

SAMUEL

Ma, the ravens are back.

He admires the beauty of the birds while Rose looks at the creatures, a bit apprehensive.

ROSE

Why don't you go inside, Samuel?

INT. ROSE'S SHACK - SAME

A bare space -- a wooden case filled with different size jars and pitchers, wooden spoons, basket of herbs, various trinkets, and a FEW BOOKS. A padded bed in one corner and in another, an open doorway leading to AN ADJOINING ROOM --

Rose walks in with a handful of clothes, meeting Samuel who sits at round wooden table reading his scriptures for the morning. From the opened Bible:

SAMUEL

(quietly to himself)

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life --

Rose sits at the table, smiling at her son.

ROSE

I can't hear you, Samuel. Louder.

SAMUEL

Ma?

ROSE

You read much better than I can. I just want to yo hear, that's all.

SAMUEL

Why don't you send me to school
then?

ROSE

Make no sense sending a boy like
you to school where your own
teachers can't count to ten. Plus,
I don't want those white people to
think you're special... cause
you're smart.

A beat.

ROSE (CONT'D)

You understand me, don't you?

Samuel shyly nods his head.

SAMUEL

The Lord is the strength of my life
of whom shall I be afraid? When the
wicked, even mine enemies they
stumbled and fell...

SAMUEL (V.O.)

Though an army may encamp against
me, my heart shall not fear.

EXT. FOREST - EARLY MORNING

SUNLIGHT STREAMS through the tall canopies -- CAMERA ON
WALKING FEET of Samuel and Rose.

Rose and Samuel advance through the forest, holding brown
burlap sacks WHITE SACKS. Soon they join other BLACK COTTON
PICKERS (groups of families and friends) who trail up the
forest bank.

Ahead is a vast open CLEARING leading to the cotton
plantation (from the beginning). Among Pickers is Rose,
Samuel, Jeremy, and Jeremy's STOUT MOTHER, who he helps to
pull up the trail.

EXT. CARPENTER'S COTTON PLANTATION - DAY

CLOSE ON a BLACK MALE PICKER with HUGE SCARS on his back.
CAMERA PANS around to his ssuken face, to reveal him missing
an eye.

A few of the pickers have visibly scars.

Samuel, with his burlap sack slung across his shoulders, pick the BOLLS white the pods. He soon notices two BLACK GIRLS (5, 6) tottering down a row of plants, their hands fanned out playfully touching as many pods as they can.

JEREMY (O.C.)

Sam? Sam?

Samuel turns around to face Jeremy, who closes the gap between them while picking pods. Rose picks nearby.

Jeremy nods over to MR. CARPENTER, a scrawny, tobacco-chewing white man (50), who patrols their area with a RIFLE slung across his back.

JEREMY (CONT'D)

(slight smile)

Mr. Carpenter's new rifle.

Getting back to picking.

SAMUEL

Don't get any ideas, Jeremy.

JEREMY

What? I'm just looking.

(picking again)

Betcha, I could touch me one of those.

SAMUEL

Betcha you won't. White men won't ever let a colored touch a rifle. Only unless he's being shot by one.

Samuel takes a moment to look at the rifle, which gleams in the sun. He then notices his mother looking at him.

ROSE

Get back to picking, Samuel.

EXT. SOLOMON'S TOWN - DEVELOPED CITY - MORNING

A BUSTLING atmosphere as WHITE MEN and WHITE WOMEN traverse the urban landscape of sidewalks against rows of buildings lined up on each side of the street -- Farmer's Exchange, Planter's Store, Frank & Co., Saloon, General Store --

WHITES on wagons carry loads of barrels and a variety of merchandise -- sugar, flour, hay.

CLOSE ON TIMOTHY HIGGINS (32, white Union General) who rides in town on a brown mare.

He flirtatiously exchanges a look with a BLONDE WOMAN. FRAME WIDENS to reveal her sitting next to her WHITE HUSBAND --

EXT. UNION QUARTERS - SAME

Higgins' brown mare stands tied to a railing.

INT. UNION QUARTERS - SAME

Higgins, at a desk examining at a map of Solomon's Town, stands with two UNION SOLDIERS.

HIGGINS
(pointing at the map)
What's this area here?

SOLDIER 1
That's the Connolly's plantation.

HIGGINS
We know if he has active cotton pickers.

SOLDIER 1
Yeah, has the largest band of coloreds from Solomon's Town working for him.

HIGGINS
And whose side of the civil war was he on?

SOLDIER 1
Whose side you think, General Higgins?

HIGGINS
I expect he's on the list of Southerners I need to pay a visit then.

EXT. FOREST - SAME

CAMERA ON water-filled buckets, SPLASHING from side-to-side. CAMERA WIDENS to reveal Samuel and Jeremy each hauling two buckets through the dense forest.

A lone RAVEN watches as the boys pass.

JEREMY

I heard the sorcerer turned into flock of ravens and that's why we have raven season.

SAMUEL

You don't believe in the tale, do you?

JEREMY

Course, I don't. It's just a stupid story they tell to scare us.

SAMUEL

Seemed adults more scared than us when they hear it.

JEREMY

A bunch of ravens don't scare me.

Samuel laughs.

SAMUEL

You hollered and jumped around last week just from a lizard running cross your foot.

JEREMY

That was a big ass lizard.
(smiling)
You would holler too.

LATER

Samuel and Jeremy sit on the ground fiddling with sticks as they take a break. Samuel trails a raven flying in the sky.

SAMUEL

What about the town across the river? Don't you ever wonder about it?

JEREMY

Yeah, all the time. But I ain't no dumb nigga to go looking to see.
(a beat)
Heard the town is full of whites we ain't never seen.

SAMUEL

Like the ones in Solomon's Town?

JEREMY

No... much worse.