Sample Text from the novel

Orphan of Creation

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She walked along the rows of the burned-over field, her bare feet crunching on the rain-soaked clumps of charcoal. The fire had been here; the men had brought it here deliberately to clear the jungle back and make a field for growing crops. The planting had been done, and the rains had come, and now the field was a raw sea of churned-up mud and dissolving charcoal. The sullen earth fairly steamed in the cloying humidity of the hot day, turning the field into a grim place of lurking mists beneath the steel-gray sky. Not all was harshness: the ugly browns and blacks of the field were set off here and there with the delicate, hopeful, transparent greens of the next crop.

But she saw none of that, and only looked straight down at the ground as she walked, pausing to stoop over and yank out the robust weeds that constantly threatened to overwhelm the tiny, fragile shoots of the food crop. If she had been set instead to pulling out the crop seedlings, leaving the weeds behind, she would not have known or cared.

She worked quickly, her stubby-fingered hands surprisingly graceful at their task. Most of the weeds she shoved into a bag that hung on a strap around her neck, but, now and then, she would pop one of the choicer stalks into her mouth and crunch it down to a digestible size before swallowing it.

The field was large, wide and long, but at last she came to the end of the row. She stopped, brought her head up, and stared, straight ahead, at the solid wall of trees and undergrowth that leaped up from the very edge of the field. She listened to the sounds, and smelled the scents, of the jungle and the wild places.

She stood there, a few leaves of a bamboo shoot quivering at the side of her mouth as she chewed, peering out into the jungle, as if she was searching for something in the forest. Then, suddenly, the overseer shouted. She jerked around, startled, and turned back to the field, obeying the sound of the man's voice rather than the words.

*As the day wore on, the endless cloud of insects seemed to thicke*n

about her. Most of them she managed to keep off by waving her arms, but a few got through. A mosquito landed on her flat nose, and she brushed it away. Another tried to land on her chest for a meal, but instead got entangled in the hairy thatch of fur between her teats. She swatted it without looking down and went on with her weeding, leaving the tiny corpse squashed flat on her skin.

There was another weed. She stooped, pulled it out and examined the roots hopefully. She spotted a pinkish grub between the root tendrils. Making a low, happy noise, she caught it between her fingers, popped it into her mouth, and crushed it between her massive jaws. Today was like every other.

Her world was very small.

NOVEMBER

Chapter One

The house was old. Seven generations had trod its floors—through plantation times, Rebellion and Reconstruction, through carpetbaggers and cross burnings, through two world wars, through segregation and civil rights marches. Gowrie House had stood since the days of King Cotton, its lands shrinking from square miles down to a few acres as the generations of owners sold off what was no longer wanted, and its dominion of fields that stretched halfway to the horizon had retreated to a few garden plots of solemn, decorative flowers.

Dr. Barbara Marchando sat perched at the edge of a dusty chair in the attic of Gowrie House, surrounded by things that were heavy with that eventful past, things that felt *old*.

That the ages hovered here, no one could deny. But still somehow it was strange for her to think of this place, of *any* human place, as old. Barbara was a paleoanthropologist, a student of the past who worked in millennia, in millions of years, spans of time so great that the century and a half this house had existed were meaningless; flickering moments so small they could not be recorded in the scales of geologic time.

Still, time and history could be felt, hanging heavy, in this place. Innumerable events and memories were entangled in the web of the so-brief decades that measured this house. Barbara's family had owned this house for a long time, in the human scale. Twelve decades before, the *house* had owned her family, until the Slave had taken the Master's place, and started legends in doing so.

Now, it was Thanksgiving again, and for the hundredth time since she was a little girl, Barbara was seeking refuge from a loud and festive gathering downstairs by sneaking up to the attic. She loved to

sift through the mysterious amalgamation of family treasures and debris there, to breathe in the fragrance of faded linens and the dry, somber scent of wooden rafters cooked by the attic heat of so many summers past. Perhaps it was in searching through its secrets that she had found her vocation. Certainly she had always loved this place.

Always, when she came up here, she dreamed of finding the prize, the jewel beyond price, that has to be hidden in this place. Now, with the last of the Thanksgiving dinner plates being clattered back into the cupboards downstairs, she decided to search in the one place she had never dared look as a child: the locked steamer trunk that had waited for her so long. She knew to whom it had belonged: the initials *Z. J.* were painted over the hasp and picked out with dusty gold leaf paint.

This trunk had belonged to Zebulon Jones himself, her great-great-grandfather, the legend-maker of her family, the bold defier of slave owners and rebels, carpetbaggers and the Klan.

As a skinny young man, he had escaped Colonel Gowrie's plantation in 1850, at the age of 25. He went North, earned his way however he could, taught himself to read while staying alive as a stable boy in upstate New York, finally owning his own stable and tavern, proudly gaining himself the franchise in 1860, just in time to vote for Abraham Lincoln. Denied a chance to join the Union army, he instead earned his fortune during the War by breeding, brokering, and selling horses for the Union Cavalry.

He returned home to Mississippi a wealthy man, in the headiest days of Reconstruction. Some crafty Northerners had meantime succeeded in forcing the bankruptcy of the Gowrie homestead, and had sought to bamboozle Zebulon and relieve him of his money in a complex phony land deal, but they found the tables turned when they learned how much law their mark knew.

Zeb bought his old master's plantation out from under them, and nailed the deal down tight in court. He settled in to plant new crops, and establish his own family. He twice shot Klansmen dead from the portico when they came to lynch the uppity colored boy and burn the place down.

He stood for Congress, and won, and served two years in the early 1870s, before the white man stole the ballot box and the promises of Reconstruction away from the supposedly enfranchised blacks.

Zebulon Jones. The family jealously preserved the heritage of his character: Every child and grandchild, unto the latest generation, knew the stories and legends of Zebulon, and all had a fair share of his gumption and pride, his courage and determination.

Knowing the trunk had belonged to her great-great grandfather made its secrets all the more alluring to Barbara. Her whole life long, even long before she was born, the trunk had sat in the attic, keeping its treasures locked away. Throughout her childhood, every time her parents had visited the family homestead, she had come up here to stare at it, endlessly. Each time she would try the sturdy lock, to see if it had yet given way to rust and decay—but she had never dared try to force it open, and always the lock was solid still.

The key undoubtedly was lost long ago, forgotten in the keepsake chest of some aunt or another. As a child, Barbara had imagined the secrets that might be locked in the trunk, and thought of the archaeologists and grave robbers from her picture books, opening Pharaoh's tomb. She had never dared try and force it open.

But now, today, finally, it was too much for her. She could not say why, precisely, but today the temptation to look inside was too great, and the pressure to stay away much weakened.

Maybe it was that she was still angry with her husband Michael, and could take it out on a poor helpless antique steamer trunk. They had separated not long before, and Michael blamed the separation wholly on Barbara—another of his endless denials of responsibility, a big part of what had driven her away in the first place. He was back home in Washington, stuck working the Emergency Room for most of the holiday weekend.

Maybe it was that she had opened tombs a hundred times as old, and her professional detachment had finally driven the sin out of broaching the old trunk.

Maybe she was silently rebelling against the relatives downstairs who still insisted on treating a 32-year-old Ph.D. like a clever 15-year-old.

Even as she invented all the rationalizations, she knew none of them mattered. Plain and simple, her curiosity had at long last gotten the better of her, and she was no longer able to resist the mystery and challenge of this forgotten family relic.

She got up off her chair, raising a cloud of dust as she moved.

Sighing, she carefully brushed every speck of the dust off her green sheath dress. She was a tall, slender, dark-skinned black woman, her oval face graceful and expressive, her startlingly honey-brown eyes wide and lovely. Her sleeveless dress showed her arms to be surprisingly well-muscled, thanks to endless hours working a shovel on innumerable digs, her hands strong and firmly callused. She patted at her carefully coifed shoulder-length hair, worrying about having to shampoo the dust out of it.

But that was for later. She prowled around until she found an old fireplace poker that had probably been retired to the attic well before World War II. She jammed the pointed end of the heavy iron bar between the hasp of the lock and the frame of the trunk, gave one good pull on the poker, and was rewarded with a loud crack and a clanking thud as the hasp fell clean off the trunk. Apparently, the wooden trunk was less well-preserved than the lock had been.

She set down the poker and knelt before the trunk, took hold of the lid, and pulled up on it gently. It resisted for a moment, and then popped silently open, puffing out a faint cloud of the dust that had lain undisturbed for generations. The hinges squeaked slightly, feebly resisting their unaccustomed movement.

As the lid swung open, she felt a half-dozen emotions flutter through her heart, like a flock of birds chasing each other through a narrow byway, one after the other.

She had felt that way many times before—on a dig when the tomb was opened, when the fossil was uncovered, when she opened the envelope holding the lab report that would confirm or collapse her theory. Excitement, anticipation, a dream of the wonderful things about to be discovered, a faint disappointment when the mundane reality was not as marvelous as the possibilities, a gentle self-rebuke for forgetting her scientific detachment, a hopeful reminder to herself that wonders might *still* be hidden if she looked a bit further.

For there was nothing in the trunk but the sort of things she should have expected—personal items and old clothes for an old man, possessions stored away with great reverence, memories redolent with the smell of old mothballs and attic-baked air, things no one could bear to throw out when the family patriarch died. A silk shirt, a pair of gold wire-rimmed bifocals in a worn case, a lacquered wooden hatbox with a browning straw boater in it, a grey woolen suit that

must have been hot and scratchy in a Mississippi summer. A wizened corncob pipe, and with it a gnarled and much-smoked briar, still bright and gleaming from its last polishing sometime in the previous century.

Carefully, gently, she lifted each item from the trunk. Under the hatbox was a stack of elderly books. She picked them up one by one and riffled through the pages. A bible—not a big family bible, but a small pocket volume that a man might keep by him when he traveled. *A Tale of Two Cities*—a handsome book with a hand-tooled leather binding and illustrated with color plates, printed in 1887. *History of the Negro Race in America* by George Washington Williams, 1886. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, no printing date given. All the volumes were well-thumbed, much read. These had to be the books Zebulon Jones had kept by his bedside; the best-loved books—old friends he had visited often. Barbara felt it a shame that they had been packed away with the other relics, stifled in the darkness instead of being put in a place of honor in the library. Books, especially such favorites of Zebulon's, should have been put where they could live, where the family could see and touch and read the words their much-honored ancestor had loved. She set down the *Sojourner Truth* and looked back in the trunk.

There was one more book there, smaller and more worn than the others. She took it out, examined the spine and binding. There was no title anywhere. Barely daring to think what she had found, she opened it, turned a page or two, and her heart skipped a beat.

The carefully scripted legend on the first page read:

ZEBULON JONES
A JOURNAL, DIARY, AND MEMORY BOOK
of Current Occasions
and
Times Past
1891

Barbara smiled excitedly as she read the words. *This* was the prize, the jewel beyond price. No one still living had known that Zebulon had even kept a journal. *This* would have stories to tell. She touched the book to her face, breathed in its fragrance, opened it to the first page of narrative, and marveled at what she had in her hands.

Beyond any question of how one measured time, the book was old, and rich with experience. The pages were limp, worn, darkened by time. Precise, angular handwriting marched across the unlined pages with the same certainty and confidence with which it had been set down, nearly a century ago, but now the once jet-black ink was faintly brownish in places. The leather binding, softened by much handling and long years, exhaled the scents of the decades it had survived—the musk of sweaty hands, the faint hint of tobacco after being jammed in the same pocket with a much-smoked pipe, the flavor of mothballs and old wool, testimony that the book had spent many years in the old trunk with the stored-away clothes.

"Barbara? Child, you up there again?" A deep, resonant voice echoed up from the stairwell, breaking the spell of the moment. It was Barbara's mother, Georgina Jones, a solid, no-nonsense, matronly woman.

"It's me, Mama. What is it?"

"I knew you couldn't stay out of that dusty attic when the aunts started gabbing. Come on down here. The touch football game is over and they're setting out the desserts. Better hurry, or you won't get any of Cousin Rose's apple pie."

Barbara smiled in spite of herself. "Coming, Mama." She put everything but the journal back in the trunk, closed the lid, balanced the hasp back in place, and put the fireplace poker back where she had found it.

She went down the stairs, carrying Zebulon's journal book, back toward the family gathering below. She stopped off at the little corner bedroom Great-aunt Josephine had put her up in, and hid the journal away in the top drawer of the wardrobe. Sooner or later, she'd have to admit to her crime of trunk-cracking. On the other hand, the discovery of the journal would serve as a great defense against sharp tongues—but she wanted a chance to *read* Grandfather's Zeb's words before anyone else could. She had always liked finding secrets—and liked knowing them when no one else did.

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But Rose's apple pie first, and Clare's brownies, and George's pecan pie, and three kinds of pumpkin pie and two of shoo-fly, and the little children racing around. The oldsters were settled into their overstuffed chairs, comfortably close to each other—and to the buffet table laid

out specially for the occasion in the living room (which the Southern branch of the family insisted on calling the parlor), with their grown children bringing them their desserts and coffee. It was not just the food, of course. It was the family, the closeness, the love, the constant recollection of a proud past, a confident eye toward the future—and a real Thanksgiving celebration of a contented and comfortable present.

Barbara waited in the buffet line and got the second-to-last slice of Rose's pie, and generous helpings of two or three others of her favorites, and laughed and smiled and chattered away with everyone, and even managed to find a whole chair to herself in the crowded living room. When everyone was settled down with a plate of six kinds of dessert and all diets forgotten until tomorrow, Great-aunt Josephine led yet another grace, thanking the Lord because so many loved ones were there, because those who had "gone on ahead" (as Great-aunt Josephine delicately put it) were still honored and remembered, because those separated by distance or duty were happy and well (though Barbara had a little trouble thinking of her absent and soon-to-be-ex husband Michael as "happy").

There was a chorus of loud Baptist "amens" and the noise level suddenly dropped as everyone dug in, finding just room enough for dessert.

Afterwards, the men wandered out onto Gowrie House's wraparound porch to start playing pinochle and bridge and dominos by twilight and lamplight. A few of the more daring younger men actually snuck upstairs to get up a poker game, leaving their less rash cousins to mutter in admiration at their brazenness. Gambling, for money, right there in Aunt Josephine's house! The children raced off to play who knows where, and the women started cleaning up after the meal. Each group went to its place and activity without anyone being told what to do, or even any of the women objecting—for today, at least—about being stuck with the dishes. It was part of the expected holiday ritual, the tradition, and Barbara found something comfortable about being in solely female company, carefully washing and drying the good china and the best silver as the women shared the latest gossip about this or that absent relative, boasting about how well the nieces and nephews were doing in school. Afterwards, the women had coffee and nibbled on the last of the desserts as they talked around

the big table in Josephine's roomy, museum-piece kitchen, a room exactly as it had been when Barbara had been born.

The evening wore on toward night, and Barbara slipped away from the bright-lit table, collected her sweater from the front hall closet, and went outside for a stroll in the cool night. She stepped down off the porch and went out into the calm darkness, the laughter of the card players faint and close in the freshening breeze. She walked down the winding paved driveway that led to the county road.

It had been a clear, perfect, blue-sky day, but now the last traces of sunlight went sliding beneath the western horizon and steely clouds rolled in from the south, blanking out the first stars of night even as they appeared. A distant rumble of thunder growled, a strange sound to come from a November night. Barbara stopped a few hundred feet from the house and looked back the way she had come. It was a big old place, and every generation had added onto it, the exterior of the original house nearly lost under a century of remodeling. Solid old oak trees had been planted to shade the house long decades past, and now their uppermost branches swung back and forth, thrown about by the strengthening wind.

Ghosts lived in Gowrie House, Barbara thought to herself, friendly spirits that taught the ways of family and love and remembrance. There was a comforting presence and strength in the place.

She heard a fluttering noise and a slight commotion from the porch, looked to see what it was, and smiled. The wind was starting to blow the cards about, and the bridge players were retreating inside, just as the women were finally coming out to join the men. It was the cue to wrestle the card tables into the parlor and form up into new foursomes. She walked back to see if she could get into a game.

Chapter Two

It was close on midnight before the last rubber of bridge was done and folks started thinking about turning in. Barbara returned to her tiny bedroom and changed for bed.

There was just room inside the little corner room's flocked wallpaper walls for a small dresser, a night table, and one narrow bed, but that suited Barbara just fine—with so many visitors in the house, she was one of the very few who wasn't sharing a room that night. She realized how used to sleeping alone she had become. Even before the recent split, for most of the last few months, Michael had been on the overnight shift at the hospital.

Back in Washington, Barbara usually wore something along the lines of an old T-shirt to bed, but somehow that seemed too frivolous and undignified to wear in Zebulon Jones's house. She always wore a full-length nightgown to bed when she was at Gowrie, and now, as always, she was careful to cover even that with a ladylike robe as she went back and forth from the bathroom.

A few minutes later, she maneuvered herself into the narrow bed, her face scrubbed, her teeth well-brushed, and her hair combed out. Settling into the too-small bed in the doll-sized room, with the thunder rattling the windows and the rain suddenly coming down, with Zebulon's journal in her hand and the room lit by the cozy yellow light of the lamp on the nightstand, Barbara felt as if she were a child again, secretly reading her Nancy Drew books under the covers with a flashlight after Mama had tucked her in.

And Zebulon's journal was as fine a secret as she had ever found. At last alone with no chance of being disturbed, she opened the book and began to read as the rain splattered down on the windowpanes.

The handwriting was fine, proud, and precise, clearly an old man's hand, but the hand of an old man still sure and confident, the phrases couched in the formalized dignity of the 19th-century educated man.

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I was born a Slave, [it began] and spent the first twenty-five years of my life in that monstrous condition. A quarter-century of such an imprisoned existence left its plain mark on the rest of my life, which I have spent in a search for all the things denied a slave—freedom, dignity, education, prosperity, property, control over one's own destiny, the chance to provide for one's family and people, the leisure to treasure the beauties of God's world.

In these endeavors, I believe I have in some small way succeeded. I am now approaching the end of a useful life, and I feel that I have made myself ready to meet my Maker. I will not dying willingly, for life is a precious gift none of us dare deny while it is offered. But I strive to be an obedient servant of the Lord, and will go when He at last calls me home.

If my life has not been Faultless, neither has it been so Blameful that a just and merciful God should deny me entrance to His kingdom. After lifelong battles with His enemies—the Slavemaster, the Lynch Mob, the Klansman, and all the other agents of Hate—I am at peace with God. I have done my duty to him, and to myself. It only remains for me to recount, as best I can, the events of my life, not as a Monument to myself, but as an Instruction to those not yet born as to what it is possible for one Man to do.

In that connexion, and with the same admonition that what follows is not a Boast, but an Example, I must commence by relating the difficulties ranged against me.

For a man to say he was a Slave, to say that he was denied a right or that he was treated inhumanely because he was a Negro, is to report so much in so few words that nothing at all is said.

To be born a Slave in Mississippi in the Year of Our Lord 1824 or 1825 (I confess that I have never known the exact date of my own birth) was to be

born not merely into ignorance and poverty, but ignorance and poverty ruthlessly enforced by law, violence, murder, and terror; enforced by the forcible sundering of families, enforced by the fears of the Master and the lies told to the Slave.

I lived out my childhood sleeping on a pile of filthy rags in a dirt-floor shack, eating out of tin cups and wooden bowls, never with spoon or fork, but merely with my hands, ignorant not only of reading and writing, but even ignorant that such skills existed. I had no playmates, for we were toilers in the cotton fields, and there was no play from the moment I could walk and speak, but only endless work.

As a child, I was savagely beaten many times—beaten for such grave flaws as laughing, or being afraid, or failing to lift a bale of cotton as large as myself. And yet I was never beaten out of anger, but always in a skilled, calm, scientific manner, nicely calculated to produced the desired results—as a blacksmith might pound a horseshoe on an anvil, bending the iron to his will without anger or emotion, without a thought that the metal he worked upon could possibly feel pain or fear or want.

I believe that I would have *preferred* to have been beaten in anger. Better the furious punishment of an enraged Master than a calm man methodically forming a tool to suit his needs. Not only in the way they beat us, but in the way they fed us, housed us, clothed us, our former Masters treated us not as men and women, not even as dumb creatures, but as objects—tools to be used up, patched up if it seemed worthwhile, but otherwise discarded without a care or thought.

Yet I also believe that, when the War came, and Emancipation came, and the end of the "Peculiar Institution" came, slavery had cost the Master far more than it had cost the former Slave. It had cost the Master his Soul.

How crippling to the heart and soul for a young white child to be raised and trained and schooled to believe that a human being could be less than an animal. How vile, to force oneself to believe that pain did not hurt, that cruelty was blameless. How evil to learn—and then to teach—the techniques of stripping a fellow man of all dignity.

How horrible to know at the back of one's mind that all one's wealth, all one's peace and prosperity, had its foundations set on Blood, on the Lash, on barbarity carefully hidden from view beneath the most elaborate civility and courtliness. Guilt hung like a heavy, funereal shroud over the white man's plantation.

Perhaps it was for pity's sake, then, strange as that must seem, that while all Slaves hated their servitude, hardly any hated their own Masters, and even after Emancipation, many former Slaves stayed on in service to their old owners, those owners for the most part much reduced in circumstance by the War's privation.

To this day, it is with a strained and muted, and all but embarrassed affection, an affection not untinged with hatred, that I recall my own master, Colonel Ambrose Gowrie. No Slave of his household ever felt the lash from the Colonel directly, and his presence was sure to mitigate the severity of any beating. If the White man was debased and brutalized by Slavery, then Colonel Gowrie was far less polluted than he should have been. He retained far more of his humanity than he should have.

Perhaps that is why I hate him even as I recall him fondly. The owner of such an enquiring, open, brilliant mind should not have been so closed to the evidence of his own senses. Unlike so many of the White men in and about Gowrie town, he could not claim ignorance or stupidity as a bulwark for his beliefs and actions. He, of any of the Masters,

should have realized that the Negro was a man and brother. But, of all of them, none was so certain of the Negro's inferiority. He was a barbarian, sure and certain that his own vile prejudices were the law and word of God.

So much and no more will I write concerning the general condition of my own background. Much has already been written by more skilled hands who came from similar circumstance, and it would be in vain for me to attempt any improvement upon such accounts.

I shall instead relate the unique experiences of my life, which I believe have no model in the written word, for I have been many other things than a Slave, and done many other things than bale Cotton.

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Barbara smiled at that, and closed the book for a moment. On an impulse, she threw the covers back off, got out of bed, drew on her slippers and robe, and stepped out into the upstairs hallway, taking the book with her. She still knew the secret children's folklore of this house, legacy of the many times she had sneaked downstairs after hours with her cousins. She knew her way around the house in the dark, knew which boards creaked, knew the quietest, safest way to go downstairs without alerting the grownups. With no other light but the far off, flickering lightning, she made her way downstairs by the old servants' stairs. Zebulon himself must have trod these stairs, in the old days before he bought the place out from under Colonel Gowrie.

She opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and found herself in the kitchen, now spotlessly clean after all the day's good cooking and eating. She went through the doorway to the dining room, out into the foyer, and through the wide entrance of the front parlor.

There was the portrait, over the mantel, dimly seen in the flickering gloom of the storm. She flicked up the wall switch, and the darkness was thrown back by warm yellow light.

She walked to the center of the room and regarded Zebulon's face—a good, strong, lean, dark-skinned face, solemn without seeming stuffy. The portrait had been made in later life; his thick

shock of hair was snow white, the face weathered and mature. He was dressed in a trim frock coat and waistcoat that showed a form still slender and vigorous. His right hand held the lapel of his coat, and his left was holding a book. The artist had captured well the power and grace of those long-fingered, work-hardened hands. This was the man.

She reached up and touched the frame, the edge of the painting, then turned and sat down on the stiff old claw-foot sofa and continue her reading in the presence of the author's image. She opened the journal, flipped the pages back and forth, a few words here and there jumping out at her as the phrases fluttered past her eyes. *The fire in the cotton field burned for two terrible days . . . Though Gowrie prided himself on keeping a slave husband and wife together, he thought nothing of selling their children . . . I was twelve before I wore a pair of shoes, and those were crude, splintering wooden clogs cast off by another . . . certain strangely formed Creatures appeared on the Gowrie plantation*. . . . Barbara stopped at that last, frowned, and read it again. Creatures? She started again from the beginning of the passage.

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. . .One of the strangest episodes in my life as a Slave began in what I now suppose to be the summer of 1850 or '51 (at the time I was almost wholly innocent of dates and calendars). It was at that time that certain strangely formed Creatures appeared on the Gowrie plantation, supposedly to serve as a new breed of Slave.

I made no sense of the incident at all when it transpired, and could not understand why these Beasts were brought to us, but now I think I understand what was happening: the old slavers, the cruel men who carried their miserable cargoes of captured Africans across the horrible Middle Passage of the Atlantic, were making one last attempt to revive their gruesome trade.

For centuries, as many Negroes died on those voyages as survived, and at length, the traffic was banned by all civilized nations. In 1808 the United

States made the importation of slaves illegal (though of course not in any way alleviating the situation of the Slaves already imported, or born here). Many thousands more slaves were of course smuggled into the South from Africa since '08. Still, the trade was illegal and risky—and that cuts into the profits. These Creatures were a stratagem to get 'round the slavery importation law. Since these Creatures were patently not Human beings, therefore, in a lawyer's logic, they were not Slaves, and therefore they were legal to import.

The slaver who imported the Creatures, and the men (including Colonel Gowrie) who purchased the beasts, made a d**ning but unknowing admission by taking part in this effort to circumvent the law, for behind the transaction's claimed legality, based on the assumption that importing non-human Slaves was legal, hid the backhanded admission that Negro Slaves *were* true men and women, not animals. In spite of all their protestations otherwise, as they bought up the Creatures, the Masters were discarding their sheltering sham belief that the Negro was not a Man. Perhaps that is why I recall the incident so clearly.

Yet it would be impossible to forget the day Colonel Gowrie brought home his new charges. Stranger creatures I have not seen before or since.

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Creatures? Barbara hesitated over the page as the lightning flickered outside the parlor wall. She skipped ahead to find if Zebulon had described his "creatures," and quickly found the passage.

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They were much of the same form as men and women, their similarities to humans accentuating rather than disguising the vast difference between our kind and theirs.

They stood erect, and had well-shaped hands (which were not so graceful or clever as those of a

man, however). Their heads were quite misshapen, and they were weak-chinned, with such bulging jaws and large fierce teeth that they offered an altogether ferocious aspect that was in marked contrast to their timid behavior. Until they became used to us, the smallest child could startle them quite out of their wits.

They could not speak, but they could convey their wants and desires with astonishing clarity, by means of pantomime, hoots and grunts, grimaces and faces.

As I have observed, their heads were most strangely misshapen, with a large shelf of bone above the brow, and a sort of crest along the center of the skull, running from the highest point of the skull toward the back.

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Barbara read further, fascinated. It sounded very much like some of the local gentry had taken to importing gorillas, or perhaps chimps, as farm labor! Zebulon must have revised their appearance in his memory, made them seem to look and act more like humans. None of the great African apes were well known before the 1800s, and the gorilla wasn't described until 1847. They would not be well known on a sleepy Southern plantation, especially to an uneducated slave.

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Their bodies were dark-skinned, and covered rather sparsely with coarse black hair. They wore no clothes willingly, and when the White men would try to force them to cover themselves decently, they would tear the rude shirts to shreds and insist upon their lewd nakedness.

These were the Creatures, the animals, that the latter-day slave traders would present to Gowrie and his friends as the equal of the Negro in all things—intelligence, ability, skill. I have said that the importation of animals to circumvent the slave import laws was a tacit admission that the Negro Slave was indeed human. How doubly d**ning then,

how hypocritical and two-faced, for those same White men to expect us to live with and accept these Beasts as our equals, in huts next to our own, as if it was nothing more than housing a donkey alongside a horse. And how foolish. The Negro Slaves, needless to say, were, all of us, every man, woman and child, disgusted and horrified by these unnatural creatures, beasts in the form of men. I remember well the first time I saw them. I worked as a stableboy then, and it was as the cart brought their cage up from Gowrie Landing . . .

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Barbara suddenly felt as if she were no longer simply reading this story. Some part of it gripped her soul, as if she were seeing it, *living* it. It had happened to her a thousand times as a child. She felt again the sensation of being drawn down into the tale, the words transforming themselves into sights, smells, sounds. As the words marched in front of her eyes, with the stern countenance of the writer staring down at her, with his very blood coursing through her veins, with the wild storm chasing itself madly around the darkened landscape outside, the images of those elder days flashed before her eyes. She *knew* how it must have been . . . .

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Young Zeb looked on the beasts in outright terror. They seemed huge, monstrous, the denizens of a nightmare. They were perhaps no larger than a grownup, but their shrieking, screaming, maddened yelling, the wild way they flung themselves at the bars of their cage, the banging and clanging of all the bars and locks that set the cart to bouncing wildly about, all this made them seem far larger than they really were.

The pair of horses drawing the cart were just as fearful, snorting and whinnying, pawing the ground in their fright, the well-muscled sinews rippling beneath their perfect chestnut hides. Zeb found himself staring at the horses instead of the beasts, for at least the horses seemed real, normal, of this world.

But real or not, the horses too were terrified, and it

was all the ostler could do to keep them from stampeding. The cart was backing and starting, threatening to pitch over on its side altogether. Finally, the drayman, adding to the chaos with a stream of shouted curses, brought his team to a full halt, and leapt gracefully down from the rig and stood at a respectful distance. At least the horses suffered themselves to stand still, wild-eyed, with their nostrils flared, their flanks twitching and flecked with foam. Zeb didn't know where he got the courage to step in and hold the leads, but he did, and stood between the heads of the frightened horses, speaking soft soothing words to them as he watched the proceedings at the back end of the cart.

Gowrie himself was there, a tall, rangy man with a small black goatee and a fierce enthusiasm of expression. He was standing by the rear of the cart, grinning wildly, looking over his new chattels with great pleasure. "Joe, Will, let's get that cage open and welcome our new friends," he said, holding out the key to the cage and gesturing to two of his slaves.

"Massah Gowrie," Will said in his soft plantation creole, "This ain't no time to let them things out." Will worked in the stables and barns, caring for the farm animals, and knew a lot about most live things. "Let 'em set a bit, calm down a mite. They's scared half to death from the ride, and someone sure to get hurt if they come out now—else they just go over the horizon in a flash."

"Will, I said to open the cage!" Gowrie growled. "You fixing to get whipped?"

"No suh. But I'd druther be whipped than bitten and clawed. Them things is *fierce* right now!"

"Joe—get up there and—" Gowrie began, but Joe just shook his head. "Damn you both, then!" Gowrie shouted, and leapt up on the cart bed. He set the key in the lock—and two hairy arms reached out for him. He suddenly found himself thrown to the ground, his

clothing ripped and the flesh in his arm badly scratched. He was shocked, infuriated, swore incoherently. He got up, grabbed a whip from the drayman, and lashed it savagely against the bars of the cages, setting the beasts into new paroxysms of hysteria, panicking the horses anew. Zeb was almost thrown off his feet and trampled before the drayman came to his rescue and helped calm the animals.

"To the devil with all of you!" Gowrie thundered ineffectually, flinging down the whip. "Leave them there caged up on the cart overnight, then, and see how they like it!" He stormed off, leaving the ostler to chase after him, protesting about having his cart standing idle all night.

Will, Joe, and Zeb chocked up the cart and gingerly got the horses out of harness and into the stable to be fed and watered.

The beasts they left to themselves, and the air that night was filled with an endless, terrifying hooting and calling.

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The lightning flickered again, and Barbara came back to herself with a start. She had a vivid imagination, and had always managed to scare herself gleefully half to death by reading ghost stories. She read on, trying to keep her imagination in check if she could.

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Gowrie had had a slave hut newly fitted with stout bars and a locking door, though none of the other Negro huts had a door of any kind—an irony that was hard to miss. The night in the open seemed to soothe the beasts somewhat, and Gowrie managed to get them out of their cage and into their new quarters without much incident.

In the days that followed Gowrie started to work teaching them their duties. New shipments of the creatures arrived, every other day or so over the space of a fortnight, a pair at a time. Gowrie worked them all as hard he could, but in spite of all his

efforts, all his coaxing and cajoling and threatening and whippings, he still could get but little work out of them, and that only after such endless training that it would have been less bother to do the job himself.

And, after all that effort, the creatures did not last long. Three were dead in a month, of influenza.

Gowrie House Plantation had (and still has, for that matter) a small plot of ground that served as a graveyard for the Slaves. Of course, not a grave there had a proper headstone, but the survivors would fashion a wooden cross out of picket fence staves and place it over their loved one's grave, and perhaps add a smooth, round, whitewashed stone. The place was most carefully tended and maintained, and if any one thing on Earth could be said to belong to Gowrie's Slaves, it was that graveyard, held as joint and common property by all of us, the final resting place of those who had finally died under the lash.

And it was here that Colonel Ambrose Gowrie proposed to inter those three dumb beasts, laying them beside the honored and ancient bones of our grandparents and the remains of children lost in infancy. If Mississippi had ever been close to a slave revolt, it was on that day. . . .

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Almost unwillingly, Barbara let the story steal over her again. She could *see* the Colonel in the midst of his predicament—the fear in his heart, the anger of the mob around him.

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Ambrose Gowrie himself stood with the reins in his hands, the cart stopped dead right where the main plantation road intersected the path to the slaves' burying ground. None of the white overseers had been willing to do the job, and even his own sons felt it was foolhardy to try this thing. Behind him, on the bed of the wagon, lay the three wooden boxes, packing crates renamed as coffins for their final service. Black men

and women, his own slaves, surrounded the flat-bed wagon, a straining, silent, surly, dangerous mob. Gowrie thought of the lash, the bullet, and realized with a sudden, sick feeling in his gut that such things would be worse than useless.

The sky was steel, a flat sheet of sullen grey that murmured with the rumblings of a nascent storm. The wind tossed the cotton plants about and lashed at the trees surrounding the plantation house, and a loose shutter on an upstairs window banged angrily.

Behind him, silent in their boxes, lay the causes of all his troubles. His slaves had hardly ever offered a bit of difficulty, but they had been close to open revolt from the first moment those accursed creatures had arrived. This now-dead trio of beasts had done nothing for him but cost him money, effort, and pride.

Gowrie did not dare to so much as glance back at his cargo as he thought about the dead creatures. He could not risk looking away from this roiling mob. He felt a trickle of sweat slide down his face, and suddenly realized his armpits and back were soaked with the perspiration of fear, his hands clammy in the reins of the cart.

With a conscious effort, he drew himself up and shouted, almost screamed at the crowd. "The corpses must be buried! Make way and let me into the graveyard, damn you! Make way or you'll live to regret it!"

The crowd did not move. Fearful and uncertain, he sat down in the driver's seat and swallowed hard. From the rear came quiet mutterings, the briefest flickerings of movement. The press of bodies inched forward slowly, quietly, until the closest of the myriad solemn faces were only a foot or two from his own. Gowrie suddenly found himself making calculations of how far he could get if he ran.

But he had to do this thing, get those bodies below ground before they began to rot . . . and yet that was

impossible. He might drive the cart into the graveyard, but how could he possibly dig the graves and move the heavy crate-coffins into the earth by himself, with this mob about him? He realized with a wrenching knot in his stomach that they weren't afraid of him. What were they capable of if they weren't afraid?

The rear of the cart suddenly bucked and swayed, and Gowrie let out a wild yelp. They were overturning the cart! They were going to tear him—

He looked behind to see a number of the burliest black men pulling the packing crates off the cart. Shovels and picks appeared from somewhere. The earth sprouted holes by the crossroads. Shallow graves suddenly gaped open.

Gowrie sat in the cart, powerless, speechless. Will came up to him, and that little stable boy Zeb trailed behind. "Them dead will rot and smell same's any other, Massah Gowrie," Will said solemnly, "and they mus' be buried—but not in our place. Not in *our* place."

Gowrie watched in silent, fearful awe as his slaves openly, willfully, jointly disobeyed him. Even if their revolt was in the form of a compromise, burying the corpses near their graveyard, and even though all his slaves quietly returned to their tasks the moment the last shovel of dirt was atop the graves, he had witnessed the beginnings of something—the primordial act of peaceful, determined defiance.

He had seen how fragile his control was. And he saw the changes coming, saw that his world would never be quite the same again. This moment would be at the back of his mind every time he gave an order.

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So the first of the creatures died and were buried. The rest soon followed. Some number more were lain to rest in that small crossroads. A few escaped and terrified the vicinity until they collapsed from illness, privation, or the gun. The remainder died, in secret and quiet, at the Negro's hand, the bodies

never to be found. They were animals, we were not, and we did not suffer lightly being equated with them.

Colonel Gowrie was much affected as well, and from that time on, he would never willingly speak of the creatures that had cost him so much. As the town's leading citizen—and the owner of most of it—he also saw to it that few others spoke of them again. The Negroes who traveled to town on errands reported to the rest of us that what should have been the grandest story and scandal of the day was scarce ever mentioned.

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Barbara closed the book and sat there for a long moment. Even then, no one had known. Today, the secret of those unmarked graves was as dead as the corpses within them. The secrets of that story had waited a long time for her. She rose and looked out through the flickering lightning toward the slaves' old burial ground. The creatures, the gorillas, were still waiting out there, bones moldering in the ground, proof of a brief, peculiar, and never chronicled sub-chapter in American history.

She looked to the sky, and saw a star or two flicker to life on the horizon as the storm clouds retreated. Tomorrow would be clear.

Those bones would not have much longer to wait.

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They locked her in at night with her kind, in the strongest, best-built hut in the village. She lived with the others in squalor and filth inside the well-made walls and solid roof. It kept the night out, kept them out of the night.

She wanted to be free. That much was in her, a solid sure thing, a part of her. Endless times she had tried to escape; endless times they had stopped her. The hut was made as well as it was, thanks to her.

Perhaps she should have been no more aware of her bondage than a fish is aware of the water it swims in. Bondage was her element, the old and only heritage of her line, back through the mists of all half-remembered times. She and her kind had never known anything else. But fish can *sense the water—the currents, the smells, the temperature. And she sensed and resented her enslavement, knew it to be wrong, even if she could not understand it. She had no idea but* away, *no plan but* now, *no real awareness that time had a past, a present, a future, that today and tomorrow were different. She had only slowly developed the craftiness that taught her to wait until she was unwatched before she tried to run, that made her bide her time, that forced her to scheme and be secret in her efforts to be away.*

Tonight, she would try the door again. It was a heavy wooden thing, made of vertical logs set close together with only the slightest of gaps between, hung on stout leather hinges and held shut with a series of thick leather straps firmly tied off from the outside. In the pitch blackness of the cell, she groped for the door, found it, and started chewing at the leather straps.

Part of her knew it wasn't going to work, that dawn would come long before she finished, that the overseers would see what she had done and beat her again. She didn't care. She closed her eyes and worked her massive teeth over the salty leather.

Away. Now.

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Roger MacBride Allen was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut on September 26, 1957. He graduated Boston University in 1979 with a degree in journalism, and published his first novel in 1984. From that time to this, every work of science fiction that he has completed has been published. He has written seventeen novels to date, (three of which were New York *Times* bestsellers) and a modest number of short stories.

In 1994, he married Eleanore Fox, an officer in the U. S. Foreign Service. In March 1995, they moved to Brasilia, Brazil, where Eleanore worked at the embassy. In August, 1997, Eleanore's next assignment took them back to the United States. Their son, Matthew Thomas Allen, was born November 12, 1998. They live in Takoma Park, Maryland, just north of Washington, D. C.