

# *Handicapped Hearts*

By Ashwini Suriyaprakash

“Uncle, what you lookin’ at?” I inquired as I stepped into my uncle’s bedroom. Uncle Matthew held a paper in his hands as he sat leaning against a pillow on his bed. He looked up and beckoned me towards him as he slowly took off his reading glasses.

“It is a letter from your sister,” Uncle Matthew replied in his inimitable gravelly voice. I grabbed the paper from his hands and scanned it intently.

“I am glad she is safe, but I wish I could see her,” I sighed.

“Don’t worry son. Ann did what she thought was right,” Uncle Matthew reached up and patted me on the shoulder. I glanced outside the window.

“It’s getting dark. I better start walkin’ home,” I murmured. He got up slowly and ambled across the room as I followed him to the front porch.

“You can keep the letter. It’s up to you if your old man and mama get to see it,” he muttered as I waved and started back.

As I walked back home, I passed Mr. Jacob’s plantation. The wind was getting fierce. The trees were swaying. As the gray clouds drifted in the darkening Mississippi skies, so did my memory.

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It was seven years ago. We were standing in the midst of the cotton field near the house. It was scorching hot. The whip lashed against Sam’s back. Staggering, Sam grunted in pain and struggled to dig the soil. Ann stood leaning beside me with a hand on my shoulder. Each time

Papa cracked the whip, I felt her shuddering. Soon, I could feel her hand no more. I turned back and saw her walking haltingly back towards the house. Her walk - it's been like that since I've remembered. Her limp, the result of a disease that was partial to one leg, was noticeable even to the casual eye.

"Ann, what's the matter?" I ran and caught up with her.

"I gotta go study for school," she mumbled.

"It's about Papa, ain't it?" I prodded her as I pushed open the door to our home.

"Telling me ain't gonna hurt," I said as we walked in. She turned around and stared outside the open doorway. I could see that she was watching the dark figures moving hurriedly across the field hoping to avoid Papa's whip.

"It's not right," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see? They get beaten and whipped. They aren't animals. Even animals are treated better."

I scoffed, "Just forget it. Papa knows what he is doing. If he doesn't whip 'em, they won't do the work." Ann shrugged as she limped away.

"Doesn't she understand?" I thought, "We paid for these Negroes. We own them and can treat them as we please. They do what we tell them. It's no different than what other folks do."

A couple of days later, we were playing in the woods near school. "Ready or not, here I come," I heard George shout. As I peeked out of the cherry bushes, George surprised me from behind.

“Catch me if you can!” I escaped his grasp and ran as he hastened behind me. I turned the corner around a tree. Before I knew it, I crashed headlong into something and went sprawling to the ground.

As I got up and shook the dirt off my trousers, I saw him on the ground a few feet away and a pail of water spilled nearby. It was Jim, son of Sam. Why was he here? I was furious. The nerve of this Negro! Not only did he interrupt our play, he nearly broke my leg. Ann, who had been watching from under a tree, hurried towards us.

“What the heck are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to fetch water back home?” I yelled at Jim. Ann gave me a scorching look. She helped Jim up and gave him his pail.

I was livid! “Why are you helping him? You know what he is!” I screamed in agitation. Ann rolled her eyes and didn’t answer. She walked back to the tree and resumed reading her book.

Later that afternoon, as Ann and I walked home, neither of us spoke. I couldn’t bear the silence.

“I shouldn’t have yelled at you,” I whispered softly.

She paused for a moment and said, “No. You shouldn’t have yelled at Jim.”

“But he’s a Negro. He should know his place,” I retorted.

She sighed, “He is a boy like you. May be even your age. And it wasn’t his fault. You ran into him and spilled his water. He had to go another mile to fetch again.”

“That’s his job, ain’t it?”

She frowned disapprovingly, “Nathan, don’t you see? He isn’t as lucky as we are. He doesn’t get to go to school. He doesn’t have friends. He barely gets food and has to work all his waking hours.” We didn’t talk the rest of the way. I didn’t know what was right. All the folks I

knew treated Negroes the same way we did. We didn't do anything different than normal. From where does Ann get these strange thoughts? My mind couldn't dismiss it, though. I felt uneasy.

As we neared our house, I could hear Papa yelling hoarsely at the top of his lungs from the barn.

"Why are you so late! Were you just lazin' around like you all do?" Puzzled and frightened, Ann and I looked at each other and raced towards the barn. Papa was grabbing Jim's arm and was landing slaps on his face. I was torn. I stepped forward and firmly gripped Papa's arm.

"Papa, he got late 'cause of me. I tripped him up and spilled the water." The words spluttered out of my mouth faster than I could think about it.

Taken aback and surprised by my rare show of insolence, Papa let go of Jim and glared at me. "Know your place, son! Don't you ever cross the line again! I'll let this one slide. These Negroes ... you can't trust 'em to do anything right." Picking up the pail of water, Papa strode back across the field to the house. I looked back and saw Ann's gleaming eyes. Strangely, I felt good about what I did.

During supper, Mama and Papa spoke in hushed voices. I watched Ann as she silently munched on her potato slice. I was waiting for her to initiate our usual supper chitchat that never came. After finishing her food, she scurried off into the kitchen. I washed my hands and stepped outside for a stroll. In the orange haze of the evening light, I saw Ann hurrying across the field. Curious, I followed her at a distance. She went over to Jim, who was busy raking the dirt. She quickly took out a piece of bread from her pocket and pressed it on his hand. Jim hastily tore and swallowed the pieces. She turned back and was startled to see me.

"What are you doin'?" I demanded.

Before Ann could respond, I heard a familiar hoarse voice from behind yell, “What are ya’ little scamps doing here?” Papa was approaching us with Mama a few feet behind.

“You both are supposed to be inside. Nathan, I thought you knew better,” Papa stared at me.

“I just followed Ann here and saw her givin’ Jim some bread,” I volunteered reluctantly fearing the consequences.

Mama frowned, “Ann, you know we don’t have food to spare.”

“But, he’s been starving. And you will shoo him out if he comes into the house to get food,” Ann retorted.

“I feed him enough. Don’t dare go against me,” Papa said sternly, “We have to save what little we can. Can’t spare anything these days.” I could see the thunder clouds gather in the sky. As Ann walked towards the house, she turned and looked at Jim long and hard before she disappeared.

That night, I tossed and turned in bed. Why was Ann so concerned with Jim? Why can’t she let things be? I pulled my blanket over and closed my eyes.

The next day after supper, I stepped into Papa’s room and saw Ann leaning against Papa, who was signing some papers.

“What are you writin’?” she inquired while peeking closer.

“You’re a little too young to know, honey,” he replied.

“Papa, she is thirteen now,” I pleaded for her.

Surprised at my intervention on her behalf, Papa relented. “It’s rough times for our business. We ain’t been able to make enough bucks lately. We can’t feed the Negroes. So Mama and I have decided to sell Jim to a fellow in Alabama.”

“This was bad,” I thought. Ann’s face had turned pale.

Ann stuttered, “When will you send him away?”

“In five months or so,” Papa replied.

“He’ll miss his mama and papa.”

“Don’t worry. I might let Juda and Sam visit him once everythin’ settles down,” Papa comforted her. I could see that Ann hated this. I didn’t like losing a Negro, too. But if this was for the business, then Papa had to do it.

A few days later, Uncle Matthew came to stay with us. He had grown a beard since the last time we met him. I always looked forward to his visits. Ann loved him. Uncle Matthew was either very funny or very serious. Either way, things were always interesting when he was around. Somehow, he couldn’t quite get along with our neighbors.

The night he arrived, at supper, Papa started, “I’ve heard that some Negroes are disappearing. Even Mr. Jacob around the corner lost one.”

Uncle Matthew smiled, “Well rumors are that they are taken to the North through a secret passageway.” Ann looked up from her food. I could see that she was listening intently.

“The North!” Papa exclaimed, “They can’t do that! These Negroes are made to work! They can’t leave!”

“Well maybe it’s for the best,” Uncle Matthew said.

“Best for who?” Papa countered. Uncle Matthew did not reply.

The next few days, I saw Ann tagging along with Uncle Matthew. During the day they played checkers in her room. When the sun came down, they went for walks. I wanted to join them, but they usually left early when I was busy with Papa. During the weekends, Ann always

accompanied Uncle Matthew to town. Though I wondered what they were up to, I was happy for her.

A few weeks passed by without incident. One night, I woke up hearing a clang. It was dark. I looked around. My mouth felt dry. I got up to get a drink of water. I tiptoed past Ann's room. Her bed was empty. The window was half open! "Where is she at this time of night?" I thought. I frantically opened the door and ran outside. In the distance, I saw a figure, standing by the Negroes' shack next to the barn. As I hurried to the shack to get a clear view, the figure moved, and I recognized the halting walk.

I exclaimed, "Ann, what are you doin' here!" She turned around. A ring of glistening keys jingled in her hands.

She started hesitantly, "Nathan, I have to do this. I am leaving with Jim and his mama and papa."

I was shocked. She continued, "Uncle Matthew and I have set up things. Other people are going to help us. Don't worry about me."

"What has gotten into you? Papa and Mama'll be mad at ya'!" I shrieked worried what Papa and Mama would do to us, now that I was also here.

"I'm sorry Ann. But I can't let you do this."

"No one understands, Nathan! I know deep down you can see what I've lost. I can't move like you. I can't play like you. I can't dance or jump or skip ..."

It began to dawn on me. They are the same. Ann and Jim and Sam and Juda.

She paused and then said, "Jim has lost something too. In a way, we are both crippled."

I felt a lump in my throat.

"What about me?" I muttered.

“I have to do this. I don’t want to leave you. But I hope to see you someday,” she said softly.

Confused and terrified, my mind was racing fast. If I let them go, Papa’s business may not survive. But if I don’t, I’ll break up a family. Either way, I lose her. I made up my mind. The cold night breeze couldn’t stem the sweat streaming down my brow.

“I’ll pretend this never happened. Take care of yourself, Ann,” I said somberly as Ann flung her arms around me. I helped her unlock Jim, Sam, and Juda from the shack. She led them to a man in the distance standing with a lamp. He gestured them to follow, and soon, they disappeared into the night. I stood there for a while staring at the darkness.

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Whoosh! Thud! The crash of a tree branch a few feet away jolted me back to the present. I wondered what to tell Mama and Papa about the letter as I trotted along the dusty path towards home.