

## THE WHITE BABY - 002

Jabe hadn't gone on the tour with the others that summer because of Jubah.

When the others worried him about going, Jabe said that he wanted to put in some extra work for the Higher the following term and so he would remain home.

So his mother had taken Kay and Canby, and they had gone for their trip around the islands. Jabe wondered if Canby felt the same way as he did about Jubah, but he didn't think so, because after all, Canby was only thirteen.

Jubah always remained when the others went for their trip in the hot season: to do for Mr. Ross. Mr. Ross was paunchy and stout and grizzly in patches, something at the bank.

All day long, as soon as Mr. Ross had left, Jabe had followed Jubah about the house, watching her cooking and washing and sweeping and spreading beds. All day long Jabe had wanted to put out his hand and touch the smooth, dark skin covered with fine hairs of Jubah's long, rounded arms. But Jabe didn't touch her, because Jubah had a way of making a lot of the white of her eyes show when she looked at him.

Jubah was dark, smooth and dark like a worn penny. Jubah had lots of black, coarse hair, oiled and twisted under her servant's cap. Jubah's brow, in repose placid as a secluded, shaded pool, puckered sometimes when she glanced at Jabe, so that her thick eye-brows merged over her nose. And her nose, Jubah was proud of her nose. Her nose was not flat and broad like her mother's, but high with tiny nostrils. At times Jubah

felt she wouldn't have minded a little more fat on her face; she didn't like the feel of her cheek-bones so near under her skin when she felt them with her finger. Jubah didn't know, but she was beautiful.

Jabe watched while Jubah jockeyed the clothes up and down on the washboard. Jabe's eyes strayed up Jubah's long, resilient thighs, along the fallow bounty of her hips, and rested where the front of her apron swelled high as with two sudden hills. Jabe cleared his throat, and hoped Jubah wouldn't know what had caused the hoarseness in his voice when he said:

"Oh come on Jubah. We'll have a heck of a time, What're you afraid of?"

Jubah stopped jogging clothes, wiped the sweat from her face with her sleeves, then she said:

"An' hev a good time et what may I ask, Mistuh Jabe?"

"Oh cut the stalling, Jubah," said Jabe. "Bet you didn't know I spotted you last night in the car. Say that I didn't see you last night with that man who does gardening for the Bigburys. Deny it, Jubah."

"Mebbe you did, Mistuh Jabe, or mebbe you didn't. I ent arter denyin' you got a seemin' good pair o' eyes in yo' head. But what ef it is, Mistuh Jabe ?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing. Only you're trying to kid me. Trying to kid me with the innocent stuff."

After a time Jabe said:

"Come on in, Jubah."

Jubah said:

“Come on in way when I’s got so much work to do Mistuh Jabe? I ent comin’ in noways fo’ I’s ready to cook dinnah.” Jubah raised her voice, straightening from the tub: “An’ say help me bless, ent you goin’ leave me in peace Mistuh Jabe? Ent you got nothin’ else to study all day long? Ent you got lessons or somethin’ study Mistuh Jabe?”

“It’s no good studying with you on my mind, Jubah.” said Jabe, coming closer and letting the back of his hand brush Jubah’s thigh.

Jubah paused in her work and turned her head, showed Jabe the whites of her eyes, then went on washing.

When Jabe tried to stroke her hip Jubah flung off his hand and went on jockeying the clothes harder.

After a time Jabe said:

“I haven’t gone on the tour with the others because of you, Jubah. Gee, think of all I must be missing because of you, Jubah.”

“An’ whose door you’ll be wantin’ put it et, Mistuh Jabe? Is Jubah evah says to you: ‘Don’t you go ‘pon no tour with yo’ Ma an’ brudder an’ sistah Mistuh Jabe? Is I evah says thet to you, nuh, nuh young Mistuh? I ent evah says none o’ the sort to you what I kin remembah Mistuh Jabe, speak the Gawd’s trute.”

Jabe put his hands in the tub and started to wash them so that they would touch Jubah’s. Jubah stopped washing and watched him until he took them out and wiped them on his trousers.

Jabe felt his heart pounding like a riveter's hammer in his chest and when he held up his hand and looked at it the fingers were trembling. Jabe made saliva from his dry glands and swallowed to moisten the tightness in his throat. Jabe said:

"What's wrong with me, Jubah? Aren't I as good as Blaine? Blaine gets drunk and sometimes you see him in the gutter. I saw him on the race pasture the other day, drunk, drunk, drunk: drunk as a fish."

"You leave Blaine alone, Mistuh Jabe," said Jubah. "You leave Blaine alone. Every one o' us hev our weaknesses. There ent like none o' us perfec'. Mebbe Blaine teks to' much o' what's bad fo' him now an' agen. Well, that's his weakness, an' there's many o' us what does worse. But leave Blaine alone."

Jabe put his hands in his pockets and looked down at his feet and crossed one leg over the other. Jabe tried to laugh easily, but his voice broke and rasped in his throat and the sound was hard to come. Jabe said:

"Feel here Jubah. Feel here. Feel what you've done to me."

"I ent feelin' noways Mistuh Jabe. I's hev plenty work do an' the day partly nigh gone. I ent got time fo' no foolishness Mistuh Jabe."

After a time Jabe said:

"Blaine's not good enough for you, Jabah. Blaine's a drunken rotter."

"An' what you know about Blaine now Mistuh Jabe?" said Jubah. "What you know about Blaine? You tek yo' tongue off Blaine fo' me please Mistuh Jabe."

Jabe was near Jubah. So near he could smell the coconut oil in her hair when she straightened from the tub to wring a piece of clothing dry.

Jabe thought:

I'll get her out of that. I'll give her a bottle of what Kay uses with her hair.

Jabe went behind Jubah and slipped his hands under her arms when she bent over the washboard. Jubah jumped away from the tub and Jabe as if he had burnt her.

Jubah said, planting her hands akimbo:

"None o' thet Mistuh Jabe . None o' that fo me please. How many times since I's tol' you I ent thet sort o' gel?"

Jabe looked at Jubah and Jubah looked at Jabe.

Jabe thought:

Gee, I wonder what it's like. I'll bet it's not as wonderful as the others at school say. I'd like to do it, just once. But she's so bally touchous. No—virtuous. Virtuous, that's the word. Virtuous, and a damned nigger. A damned nigger virtuous. But gee, she looks swell standing there mad at me with the white of her eyes turned out and the top of her apron looking as though it would burst and her hips so big to her waist. I'd like to hold her and squeeze all the rot out of her until her strength was all gone and she had to cling to me to save herself falling.

Jubah thought:

Ent he tall an' strong an' young an' clean same like a sapling. Ent the hair black and sleek 'pon his head though he ent use a scrid o' oil. Ent his nose fine, an' his eyes blue like the watah when I's put the blue-rag in it fo' the firs' time fo' I starts washin'. Chris', won't I like a beby like him though. But I ain't arter doin' thet to Blaine. I won't do that to Blaine fo' a thousan' white bastards like him.

Jabe moved away from where he was standing so that Jubah should come back to the tub. But Jubah didn't come back to the tub. Instead, she went to a window of the penthouse and looked out, her hands folded on her bosom.

After a time Jabe went over to the window and stood beside her. Jubah stiffened like a colt preparing to shy and eyed him through the whites of her eyes.

Jabe said:

"It's money you want, Jubah. Look, I'll give you more money than what you'll get in a month, Jubah."

Jubah said:

"I ent wantin' no money nor nothin' Mistuh Jabe, s' long's you'll lef' me in peace. Say help me bless Mistuh Jabe, Gawd hev his mercy, how about leavin' me in peace like now Mistuh Jabe, or hev I to be thinkin' arter gettin' work someways else or mus' I be tittle-tattling to yo' Dad ?"

Jabe noticed that Jubah's eyes were level with his own when she looked at him. Jabe let his eyes fall first, played with his hands in his pockets, then turned and lounged from the penthouse, dejected and surly, like a chased-back hound.

When Jubah came out to go home the evening was far gone. All brightness had drained from the sky, and here and there the stars were beginning to hold conference in the heavens. Jubah was glad, because she knew that by the time she reached the wood it would be altogether dark, so that she would not see Blaine propped against the tree until she was a few feet away, or saw the glow of his cigarette.

Then she would run to him with the lightness of wind, and she would smell the tobacco in his breath, and feel the stark, rabid hunger of his body.

When Jubah reached the wood Blaine was not there. Jubah rested her basket on the ground and sat upon one of the tree roots in the darkness.

Jubah waited for Blaine. Jubah waited for Blaine until long after the moon came up and started its slow, bawdy trek across heaven, and the darkness in the wood turned to patches of moon light and shadow. Jubah waited for Blaine, but Blaine did not come.

And as Jubah waited, she got to know deep down in her bones that Blaine's love for her was cloyed, that he would perhaps keep tryst with her no more.

At last Jubah took her basket from between the roots and, getting to her feet, passed out of the wood onto the road, with listless steps and sober, dropping hips, her heart broken within her at her ill-starred love.

Mebbe to-morrow then, Mistuh Jabe, Jubah, thought as she walked, mebbe to-morrow then ef you's still so set on 't. Mebbe then et leas' sometime I'll get a white beby.