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Opening extract from

Buffalo Soldier

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Two covered wagons are heading out into the open, slow and steady, like little ships afloat on the ocean. Axles are greased, wheels barely creaking. The oxen are well groomed, their hides glossy as polished wood. Gaily coloured ribbons are tied to their horns and silver bells hang around their necks.

The faces of the people driving them are freshly washed, their clothes starched and pressed. Crisp linen shirts; pretty flounced dresses. Blue-eyed women with hair of dazzling blonde; square-jawed, clean-shaven men; and the children – rosy-cheeked and plump – are just as cute as they come. Smiling brightly, their hearts are full of courage, their heads full of hope. They're planning on settling down in the wilderness, carving a homestead out of nothing, making a little piece of heaven right here on earth: it's their destiny. The Almighty has given them the vast, empty land of America just as surely as he gave Paradise to Adam and Eve.

Only the land isn't as empty as it seems.

Whooping screams rend the air, chilling the blood and freezing the marrow. War cries.

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Indians! Savages!

A dozen painted warriors, naked save for their loincloths, come riding bareback on spotted horses, feathers in their hair, tomahawks in their hands, scalping knives at their waists.

They circle the wagon and the settlers are fighting back but there are too few of them and too many Indians. One of the men takes an arrow in the chest. Falls. His wife runs to him. He dies, his head cradled in her lap.

The savages' blood is up now. Their yelling gets wilder. Ear-piercing shrieks, going on and on and only stopping when all the men are slaughtered.

And now the Indians are coming for the women. As they leap off their horses, terrified mothers shield their weeping children behind their skirts. They're all looking at a fate worse than death.

But then a bugle sounds. In the blink of an eye panic shows on the savages' faces. They try to run. Too late.

The cavalry are riding in on snowy-white chargers, uniforms of deep blue with scarlet neckerchiefs, buttons polished, boots shining, sabres gleaming. Soldiers slash at the Indians until every one of them is lying dead.

The cavalry ride a lap of victory. Once, twice, three times around the wagons while the rescued women and children cheer and jump for joy. Then they're pulled up onto the horses. Away they all trot, back through the curtained entrance and out into the darkness.

Where a stablehand is waiting in the shadows to lead the horses quietly back to their stalls.

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1.

I guess Ma died. Or she was sold. I don't know which. By the time I got around to wondering there was no one I could ask. All I got from her was a name. Charlotte. Darned fool fancy thing for a slave girl. Didn't no one never call me that.

If I felt her loss I have no recollection of it. My life began in the cook-house. Seemed I'd just grown there, like a seed from a crack in the floor.

Child's heart got to attach itself to something. Mine attached itself to Cookie, winding around her like bindweed on a post. So long as she was there I could stand tall. When she was gone I was left sprawling on the ground helpless, twisting and twining every which way, not knowing how I was ever gonna get up on my own two feet.

Me and Cookie was the property of Mr Delaney. His plantation was three miles outside of town, but it could

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have been three thousand. Until the war come, I never set one foot off the place. My world was the cook-house, the attic above it, the bare earth yard around it, the vegetable garden beyond it: that was all. I never got as far as the fields, even. My only aims in life was pleasing Cookie, not getting noticed by the master and avoiding Jonas Beecher. That boy was three, maybe four years older than me: the overseer's son, with a streak of mean running through him that was wider than the wide Missouri. Seemed the sole purpose of his life was to make mine a misery. Punchings and kickings was the very least of it.

When I was around about eight years old I got me another aim in life: not offending Miss Louellen.

Master must have been close to forty years old when he got himself a wife. Miss Louellen arrived in a carriage with her mammy, followed by a cart stacked high with trunks all shapes and sizes. She was a dainty slip of a thing: dark-haired, white-skinned, blue-eyed, pretty and delicate as a piece of painted china. The belle of three counties, she was sixteen years old and as empty-headed as they come. Ham told Cookie there wasn't nothing much running between her ears but notions of balls and parties and where her next dress was coming from.

If Miss Louellen been left alone I don't suppose me and Cookie would have hardly noticed she was there: it was just another mouth at the big house table was all. But one fine day Mrs Beecher pay her a visit. After that there was

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all kinds of ideas in Miss Louellen's head causing us a heap of trouble.

The first we know of it is when Miss Louellen starts yelling for Cookie one morning. She come out of the house all on her own, her big old hooped skirt swishing, sweeping grass and leaves aside as she storm across the yard. She carrying a pen and ink and a pocket book and she come right into the cook-house. Suddenly she got a bee in her bonnet about how every darkie on the plantation was a lazy good-for-nothing who been cheating the master for years.

"I know what's been going on," says Miss Louellen. "And you can't fool me. I'm the mistress here now and things are going to be different. I'm going to be keeping a close eye on you all."

She give me a real particular look, though I don't know what for. I surely ain't done nothing to offend her. Not that there needed to be a reason. Existing was enough.

"Now, I have a fancy for some gingerbread," she says to Cookie.

"Yes, Miss Louellen," says Cookie.

We was both expecting her to go back across the yard to the big house and leave us to it, but she don't. Miss Louellen just stands there. "You better tell me what you need to make it."

Cookie's keeping her eyes on the floor. "Well, Miss Louellen," she says slow, "first I needs some flour."

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"Flour," says Miss Louellen. "Where's that?"

"In that jar. Shall I fetch it down?"

"Yes. Put it here. Now, how much do you require?"

"Three cups."

The mistress takes Cookie's old tin cup and scoops out the flour. There's a set of scales in the cook-house, rusting in the corner. Cookie never weighed nothing in her life – all her baking is done by hand and eye and feel. But Miss Louellen weighs the flour, real careful. She does the same with the butter and the sugar and the molasses. She does it to the eggs and the raisins. She even weighs the buttermilk. She writes down all them numbers in her little pocket book and adds it up. Takes her a while. Her ivory-white forehead goes crinkling into lines with the effort. Finally she says, "I'll be weighing the gingerbread when it's baked, you hear me? I'm not having you stealing, no siree. You're not thieving so much as a raisin from me."

It was the middle of summer and the cook-house was hotter than hell. Sweat was already making dark circles under the arms of Miss Louellen's dress. She didn't stay around to watch us do the baking. Calling for Kissy to bring her some lemonade, she went to sit on the porch.

Cookie starts beating up the butter and the sugar, working real fast to get it creamy-white before it melts, her wood spoon pounding so hard against the sides of the bowl it seemed both would break. She sets me cutting up raisins, taking seeds out, dusting them with flour.

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I'm scraping them seeds into a pail for the hogs when a thought hits me hard in the head.

"Should have seeded them before she left. Cookie, they gonna weigh less. She gonna be mad at us."

Cookie frowns. "You right, child. Better save them. Heap them up there, so she can see we ain't eaten nothing."

So I pick them seeds back out of the pail, every last one. When I break the eggs I save them shells too, just in case.

When everything's together in that bowl Cookie starts up beating again. She whacking that mix around and I'm watching that arm of hers, wondering if mine will ever be as strong. I see the sweat coming up into beads on her brow and the smell of them spices got me drooling like one of the master's dogs.

When the beating was done Cookie adds in the raisins, then scrapes that bowl out clean. Every last trace of that mix goes right into the tin and that tin goes right into the oven.

But there was just one itty-bitty smear of molasses left on a spoon. Looking over her shoulder to check Miss Louellen wasn't watching from the yard she give me a wink and, without saying a word, pop it right in my mouth for me to lick clean.

That sweetness is so good it's making my head spin. I'm thinking I've died and fetched up in heaven. Then I hear a whooping and a voice piping up, "Nigger's licking a spoon. I seen it! I seen it!"

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Jonas Beecher been hiding all this time, watching from the branches of the cottonwood tree, waiting, just waiting for me to do something I shouldn't. I see a flash of his golden curls catching in the sunlight as he shins down and streaks off across the yard, yelling his head off. And then all I see is Miss Louellen. She come in a whirl of skirts, fussing and fuming. She cussing Cookie and *slap! slap! slapping!* me across the face.

My head was still pounding by the time night come. That dainty slip of a thing had hit me so hard with the back of her hand the rings on her fingers cut into me. My blood gets smeared on that dress of hers. I got me diamond-shaped holes punched into my cheek. And me and Cookie, we got ourselves a whole new heap of rules we had to abide by. Didn't matter none that the gingerbread come out weighing right. As far as she was concerned neither of us was to be trusted. That suits Jonas fine. I see him standing, leaning against the cottonwood. I hear him laugh: a high-pitched squeal that bring to mind a hog at feeding time. I see him mouthing, "Got ya!"

But Jonas is the least of my problems. Miss Louellen ain't finished yet. She says, "I want you to whistle."

"Whistle, Miss Louellen?" Cookie can't believe her ears.

"That's what I said. Whistle. I want everything weighed. Everything accounted for. Any time you're cooking, I want to hear you. If you're whistling you can't

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be eating." She looks at me. "You too. And every time you're carrying food across to the dining room, I want to hear you." She gives me a prod with her little white finger, jabbing it so hard into me she breaks the nail. "I'm watching you. I can have you sold any time I choose. Don't you forget it."

The thought of being sold – of being sent off someplace without Cookie – just about makes my knees give up on me. My head is filled with fear. It squeezes out every thought. Every thought but one. Her finger's bleeding where her nail broke. A streak of her blood is smeared across her dress right next to mine. Ain't that strange? Can't tell whose is whose.

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