

Dec. 22, 1829 the Georgia legislature passed a new law: a slave or free black caught teaching another slave or free black to read or write faced punishment of a fine and/or whipping. One boy refused to obey and received an extraordinary reward.

Steal Away

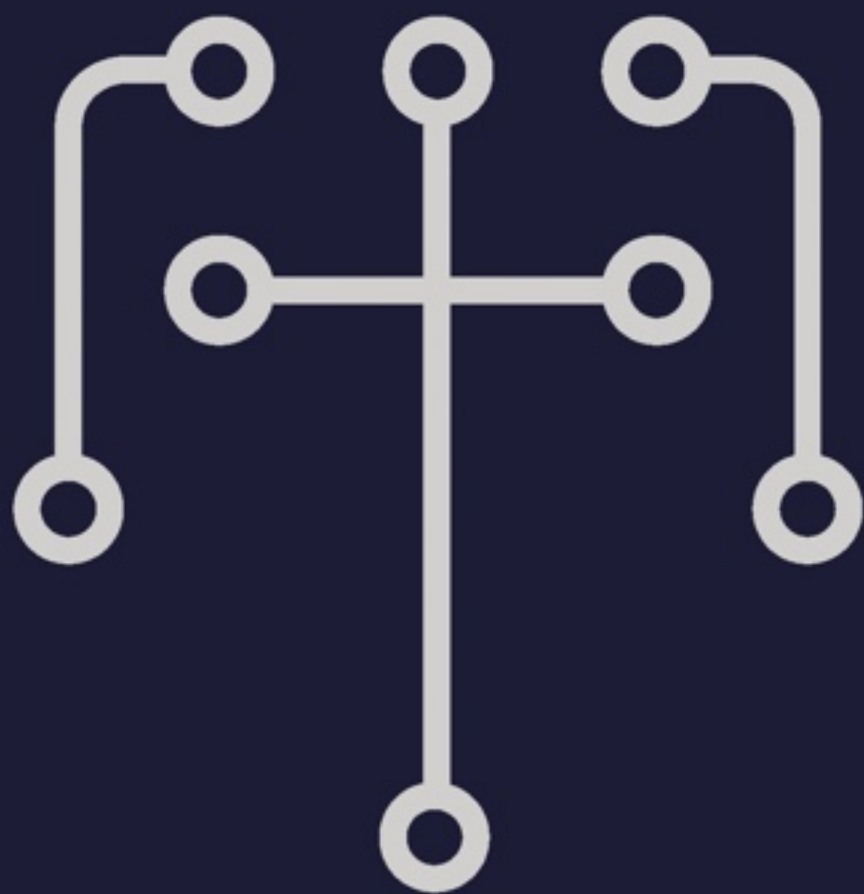
by Lance Levens

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STEAL AWAY



LANCE LEVENS

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ISBN: 978-1-64718-329-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2020

First Edition

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Chapter One

That stench!

Hooty crouched low behind plum bushes.

He was in the haunted woods, the Swane, where folks far away in their quarters' cabins heard screams, as if a catamount bewailed its own savagery.

He sniffed again. A rotting body. He dove onto all fours in the hot summer sand—and stickers.

“Ow-w-w!”

At ground level he saw through the bushes: two polished brogans, toes up and some desperate soul cutting the body's clothes off. Fast, too, zipping up and down.

His reading students failed to show. Lost their nerve, he decided. Who wouldn't after Mr. Gus's warning from the front porch of the big house?

“Now, listen up, all you Slackersby children, I don't want to see any of ya'll Bible reading or teaching Bible reading. The big-wigs over at Milledgeville who run this state have declared it a crime and the children of Gus Slackersby will obey the law.”

Old pussle-gut Gus. He had a merry Madeira heart, but he hated his darkies reading, no sir, don't want them to read Holy Scripture and find out who their real master is. That's revolutionary talk, Hooty Wells. Uprising talk. Like that Denmark Vesey over in Charleston.

He didn't blame his students. He'd have to give them some time to calm down. Other masters were worse. Marse Lashley and Marse Clapington beat one or two servants before their morning scrambled

eggs. Mr. Gus never beat his children--for any reason--and the other plantation owners made fun of him for it.

He recognized the slicer.

Legs! That pesky runt! Looked like a penguin, born with his feet attached to his torso. His gravestone teeth all wiggle waggle.

The runt bounced around and over the body. He sliced the clothes with that old-timey rose head nail he carried, razor sharp, mounted in a pinewood grip in his palm. Split your nose open and you're gully-washing blood before you know the little pissant's in your face.

Legs couldn't do a man's work. Had to tend babies or sew. The quarters' boys chucked rocks at him or spit on him or kicked him around like a toy. Hooty felt sorry for him, but the little devil had steel-strong arms! Power up into the pines or across the fields, a black jackrabbit.

Legs paused. He turned from side to side, his nose quivering. He looked and looked, then shook his head, as if to say: nothing out there.

"Doodledly dum dum dum, sing along, jing along. Gotta get a movin' on. Ooo-eee, if I say so myself, Mr. Legs, Esquire, you got you some quality duds. Doodledly dum dum dum."

Hooty giggled. Legs jabbered his tarradiddle talk and did cartwheels and clowned and play-acted all over the quarters. Even grown folks gathered round to watch him do flips and silly talk, "nobodydadabody knows a body no no no and ain't nobodydadabody knows me" or some other gibberish. But in a wink he'd be black widow wicked.

Evening tiptoed in.

"Shadows sneakin' up," Legs said. "Gimme some sunshine. Gimme some doh dum honey and some doh dum money and some doh dum sunny-sunshine."

Through the pines a hundred yards away, a two-man wagon lumbered in his direction. It creaked and groaned over a surface

pocked and bumpy with rock and palmetto and sand dunes. The Swane had no roads.

“Ooh, trouble comin’ down the pike. Got to scat-u-late!” With his arms full of cut-up cotton and corduroy, he bolted up into an oak and disappeared.

The ground’s rough dips and cuts wobbled the wheels.

Hooty wondered why any fool would bring a wagon into the Swane? Locals, black or white, would never. Too many tales of folks going in and never coming out.

A long oak limb, moss-covered, moved gradually away. A poplar stirred, too. The trees knew something was afoot.

The wagon pulled up. The driver wore a leather patch over his right eye and a heap of gut over his belt. His partner, Shorty, moved in jerks and tics and talked fast.

The driver lumbered down, tied the mule to a bush and peed while the animal’s elastic lips and long tongue plucked plums.

Hooty decided to watch. This could be interesting.

Shorty jumped down. “Perxactly. Body’s right where they said it’d be.” He went down on one knee to examine it, but the more he looked, the more he fretted. “Hell, Biggun, somebody done cut half his clothes off! My wife ain’t gon’ like this. She said this bird’d be sporting some fine duds.”

The one-eyed driver sauntered over with a stick. He pulled out a plug of tobacco and cut a slice with his pocketknife. His cheek bulged a stretched pale while he moseyed around the corpse, cocking his head, bending over, poking.

He gave the shoes a whack. “Wearing some fine brogans.”

The corpse was covered in leaves and twigs and dirt. Hooty wrenched his head around, but he couldn’t make out the face.

Using his stick Biggun turned the head from side to side. Satisfied it was intact, he spat a brown stream between his feet.

“Got your dice?” he said.

“Always got my lucky misters.”

Biggun pointed with the stick at the shoes. “Let’s roll ‘em,” he said

Shorty sat up on his heels and grinned at him. His left eye lid sagged, his lips were cracked and scabbed. “You sure? You ain’t won nothin’ in a month.”

“Got that ring offa that deputy sheriff.”

“That thing wasn’t worth a plug nickle.”

“So, you gon’ roll ‘em or ain’t you?”

Shorty pulled out his dice. They cleared a spot in the grass and while Hooty looked on, they rolled.

For thirty interminable minutes sweat trickled into his privates and his eyes. Ants crossed his arms and hands and bare feet and when he finally couldn’t stand it anymore and rolled over to scratch his crotch, he made too much noise! With each ant bite, he winced. A fine mess of greens, he thought. Lying here like a ball and chained prisoner, ants having a picnic.

The sweet smell of Shorty’s cigarette smoke and the honeysuckle around the oak trunks mingled with the stench of the body till nausea nibbled at his gut and throat.

Shorty won. He slipped off the prize and like a priest he held the shoes up and out in front and marched solemnly to the wagon, where he set them down on his side.

After they gathered the body into a gray, hole-pocked blanket, they swung it back and forth till the momentum lifted it high in the air.

Hooty got a quick look, the mouth ripped open, the chest blown apart. Flies and gnats and yellow jackets swarming the face.

Mr. Cudjoe, his Bible teacher!

Thump!

The body landed in the wagon.

Hooty's heart pounded.

Mr. Cudjoe!

For teaching slaves to read the Bible! The big wigs over in Milledgeville? Or locals? Not Gus Slackersby, but who?

Panic snatched him by the pants. Run! Run! No. No. Breathe easy now, long breaths, slow down, the way granny taught me, count, count got to keep that fit from coming on. One, two, three, four...

By fifty the panic was fading.

When he looked up again, the men had remounted.

Shorty tapped tobacco into cigarette paper, lipped the paper's edge, joined the two sides, and twisted one end. He struck a match on the side of the wagon.

"Heard they shot him on the jakes," he said, as he lit and threw his match into the bushes.

"Serves him right," Biggun said. After he untied the reins from the bush, he popped a plum in his mouth.

"But the jakes?" Shorty stared off into the trees. "Hell, the jakes is like church. That's where I do my best thinking. It's peaceful."

Biggun blinked at him. He brought the plums in the palm of his hand under the mule's mouth. The mule curled his lip back and swallowed them.

"Why you reckon he did it?" Shorty said. "I mean that's a fool thing to do."

"Do what?" Biggun gripped the wagon. As he hoisted himself up, he strained till the blood vessels on the side of his face pulsed red.

The seat groaned under the driver's big bellied weight.

"You ain't half listenin'. Why was he teachin' 'em how to read the good book?"

Biggun closed his eyes and rolled his head around. "Dang, I'm tighter'n a fence post."

Shorty turned, sniffed the body.

“What you sniffin’ at?” Biggun twisted back to see what his side kick was up to.

“You don’t reckon he’s a preacher, do you?”

“Since when do preachers give off a special smell?”

“My granddaddy said they do, and that man had an intelligent nose. I mean if he’s a holy man ...”

“What counts is what that bird at the college’ll give us,” Biggun said as he wrapped the reins around his hand and pulled the mule away from the plum bush.

“What’d he call us?”

“Said we was resurrectionists.”

“If this bird was a holy man,” Shorty thumped his cigarette into the bushes, “that professor ought to give us more. We ought to Jew ‘im up. If he’s holy and all. Jew ‘im up.”

The wagon creaked around until it faced the opposite direction.

“Why’s that?” Biggun asked.

Shorty squinted back at the corpse. “Dang, this bird’s got a big nose! Now, what you think a holy nose is worth—on the open market? Ought to be worth more than yours.”

Biggun glared at his friend. “You makin’ fun of my nose?”

“No, I ain’t, but now that you mention it, it’s lookin’ swell-up and red, like a lovesick bullfrog.”

“Now, that ain’t fair. I drink to drown my troubles. Since Sophy died.”

“That was two years ago. Now you tell me, I’m asking you. What sane white man can’t eat, don’t go out, two whole years for a dog?”

Biggun sniffed. “Sophy ...”

“Now, don’t start in. I meant to say a spiritual nose ought to bring more cash, on the open market. Gets down to dollars and cents. Always does.”

Blinking and wiping his eyes with his sleeve, Biggun said: “You mean like them folks in Europe payin’ good pocket money to lay eyes on a saint’s big toe?”

“Perxactly!”

“Goes to show,” Biggun said, pulling out a green-stained handkerchief and blowing into it. “We’re a heap more ad-vanced.”

Shorty turned one last time to check the body. “Still don’t make no sense.”

“What don’t?”

“Why this bird was teachin’ stone-stupid field hands to read the Holy Bible!”

Biggun popped the reins and yelled. “Kick it on-n-n-n!” He pointed back with his thumb to the body. “Well, I reckon you just answered your question.”

Shorty stared at him. He blinked hard. “Hell, no! He can’t be no holy man.”

“No sir, brother. Somethin’ un-holy ‘bout teachin’ field hands to read the word of God!”

Hooty watched the two men ease away into the darkness of the Swane. Across the river in Macon, where doctors studied medicine, they paid for bodies.

But they were taking Mr. Cudjoe without a Christian burial.

Darkness whispered into the trees. A fog rose and a chill rose with it that gave him goose bumps beneath his scratchy, wool pants. When he closed his eyes, images came of Mr. Cudjoe’s body, the flies, his mouth gaping open. No! Got to think straight now. Come on, son, he told himself. No time to be a scaredy-cat.

After fighting through tangled bush and green briars, he slipped down a dried creek bed into the slime of gluey leaves and stubbed his toe. He hopped around on one foot, pain shooting up his leg.

He glanced behind to see if anybody followed him.

There was the golden rod next to the creek; he was home. Beyond the water stood a row of unpainted clapboard cabins under a low layer of smoke, long and dreamily undulating. Smells of collards, cornbread and honeysuckle. As he crossed the fat log over the creek, holding his arms out for balance, a wagon clattered down the rocky road in front of the quarters. Two barefoot boys sat on the back, their legs dangling off. They waved at him and he waved back.

When he opened the door into his cabin, Granny turned around from the big kettle that hung in the fireplace, her hair wrapped in a bun on top. Piercing eyes and an alluring grin. Her face still drew the attentions of men, whatever their age or color.

She wiped her forehead with her apron. The streak-o-lean stuck on the point of her knife dripped grease onto the floor.

“Where have you been so late?”

“They killed Mr. Cudjoe.”

“What?” Her lips sagged. She put the meat back in the kettle.

“Shot him close up. I just watched two men haul his body off.” Granny closed her eyes and slipped her arms around him. “Baby, oh, baby. I’m so sorry!”

“Where were they taking the body?” she whispered, as she lead him to her cot.

“Across the river to that doctor’s school in Macon.”

His head stiffened, and his eyes glazed over as spittle spilled out of his mouth, long drooling threads, gluey and glistening.

“Oh, my Lord,” Granny said, slipping her arms under his. After settling him into her bed, she brought a clay vial from the hearth.

She held his head up so he could drink.

Lately, he'd grown a full head taller than her, his slender body muscled and trim, his over-sized head crowned with a thick shock of hair. Let it grow and it flopped about like a woman's, so he folded it into a linen wrap. On bad days, when the kids taunted him and threw rocks, the memories of abuse weighed his face down into long, grave lines.

His highbrow loomed large above small eyes that darted, a bird with stereoscopic vision.

Three fingers on his left hand coated with tough flesh, a hog's hide turning on a spit, brown and shiny, the fingers joined in a web halfway. Only the tips from the middle joint could grip nails or a splinter-laced, resin-sticky, pine log. His crab claw. As a five year old, he tried to chop it off, but the axe proved too heavy, and Granny too fast.

The ginseng tea mixed with camphor and chamomile eased his stiffness. Holding him as he lay rigid, she remembered the day they sold his momma and daddy away to New Orleans, the two chained in the wagon, as it pulled off, her only daughter and her daughter's husband, Hooty's father, both fine strapping workers, what Gus Slackersby called "muscle backs." Hooty stumbled after them, screaming, a child of seven, gyrating like a lunatic, flipping his maimed hand, grabbing the chain dangling from the back of the wagon. He held on tight as it dragged him, arms stretched out, down the hot, sand-covered road for nearly a mile. The driver finally stopped, dismounted and pried the child's fingers loose.

This fit was mild. Drowsy, still fuzzy-headed from the tea, he half-listened, as she sang their song. Always the same.

Steal away

Steal away

Steal away to Jesus

That night he woke up at peace. The memory of “Steal Away” brought to mind his Daddy, his huge, calloused hands. He put his thumb on Hooty’s head and stretch out his fifth Daddy finger until it touched Hooty’s pee-doodle and the boy giggled.

Hooty put his pieces in order, wood shavings and chunks and slivers from the shop where he apprenticed to Old Cupid, Mr. Gus’s carpenter. Starting with the small shavings, he arranged them in six rows, four pieces in each row. Next the larger slivers in three rows, seven pieces per row. Always the same. He worked fast until the patterns brought order and he breathed easy, his thoughts quieted down, and he lay back on his pallet.

“That’s how you put your mind at ease,” Mr. Cudjoe explained. “Some folks sing. Some folks fish. You put shavings in perfect rows.”

Before Mr. Cudjoe came into his life, he thought his need to put his shavings in a row made him a freak. That’s what folks in the quarters called him.

Under their window, which looked out onto the quarters’ road, Granny lay sleeping.

A catamount screamed as if an infant shrieked the dark to murderous bits.

Riders clip-clopped!

They moved in the space separating his cabin from next door, taking their time, holding up their pine knots, talking. A dozen, wide-brimmed hats, bandanas over their faces, musket barrels on their shoulders. They made their road rounds nightly, cabin by cabin, to dampen the spirits of would-be runaways. As they drew closer, moonlight glinted off a silver trigger guard.

Beggar Cease! Mr. Gus’s driver, his rifle’s silver trigger guard engraved in fine arabesques. The guard announced his arrival, along with his bragging about the Tennessee gunsmith who fashioned it, the personal gunsmith, he claimed, for Andrew Jackson.

Personal gunsmith, my hind foot, Hooty thought.

Mr. Cudjoe warned him: hatred destroys your soul.

He tried not to hate, tried to forgive Cease for beating Granny. She sassed the man—once.

“Let’s see what Mr. Gus says about that!” she said, after Cease gave her an order she refused to follow..

For that Cease tied her to a fence post, stripped her and lashed her forty times, but the Slackersby household could not do without Granny. Cease beat her so she had to lay out two weeks. Mr. Gus cussed the man up and back on the front porch, loud, so everybody that worked in the big house heard it. He demoted Cease to the syrup shed; but in two years, the man had climbed back up the ladder to the driver’s job.

When they passed in front of the Wells cabin, the riders slowed.

Cease dismounted, his burly, wide face, unshaven, fixed in a frigid grin. He cinched his black leather gloves tight, revealing his knuckles. A cat o’ nine whip was tucked under his belt.

Cease hated the Wells cabin. For one, it had a window. He had held three driver jobs in Georgia, five in South Carolina, thirty years: Not once had he come across a slave cabin with a window.

Moonlight shone on his new black slicker, still moist from an evening rain. With his pine knot held high, the driver tip-toed to where Granny slept with her back to the window. He peered in, cautiously, like a lover come to woo her away.

“Damn, Cease,” one of the riders cracked, “they’s whores in town.”

Hooty felt under his pallet for his “cracker jack,” the pine club Cupid made for him in the shop.

“Git from here, Ibo Joe!” Granny said.

Cease dropped his grin. “Evenin’, you Stygian witch. Just makin’ my rounds. Got to protect the massa’s property.”

“Huh! Only property YOU got is a big empty lot between your ears!”

He resumed the cold grin. “You keep talkin’ your big talk. One of these days you or your freak’s gon’ step out of line.”

Granny grunted. “Get on, get away from here!”

“Cease,” the rider said, “we ain’t done the Lashley place yet and it’s gettin’ late.”

The driver sucked his teeth and growled before he returned to his mount.

As the patrollers’ horses ambled away, Hooty went to his Granny’s side.

“Get me some water,” she whispered. She struggled to get up.

He scampered to the water barrel by the back door, dipped out a gourd full, and brought it to her. She raised up on one elbow, revealing the wrinkles of her upper arms. Thick silver-gray hair fell on one side. With her almond-shaped eyes and smooth copper-colored skin, she was still handsome.

When a trickle ran down her chin, she wiped it with the back of her hand.

“The good Lord gave us this water, son. He gave us this little cabin and the food in our bellies. He even gave us the air we breathin’. But Beggar Cease? No sir. He come from the Devil himself.”

Chapter Two

The hot sand on the road into town didn't burn his bare feet. His soles were tough as pinewood. Holding his granny's clay pot filled with ginseng powder, he saw Clinton far ahead. He bent his head down to sniff the smell he had known all his life. Mr. Parish at the general store sold it under the name of Good's Elixir. It sat on his shelves in bright yellow cardboard containers.

Old Cupid in the carpentry shop had given him leave to take his granny's herbs in for sale. Cupid knew they needed the little money they earned.

He tried not to think about Mr. Cudjoe. Granny had prayed with him last night and again this morning, so his mind was at peace—for now.

Peppermint candy on his mind. Granny thought he was so helpful, a good boy, taking her wares down to the general store. Well, he was helpful, an obedient grandson—who loved peppermint candy. He savored the tongue-tingling taste as he sat in the shade on parish's porch. A breeze always blew over him as he leaned his back against the front of the store. He called it his "people watching" time. Folks came in so many sizes and shapes. The business and government types always dressed up to go to Parish's. Shiny leather boots for the men, clean shaven, smelling of soap. Their ladies wore full, flouncy petticoats complete with parasols. The landowners brought a slave along to haul their purchases. The farmers were different, strictly business. Muddy shoes, rough, tanned hands and arms, clothes so crusted with dirt and mud they seemed made out of wood. The river people were another story. The men wore earrings and wrapped their heads in a turban. Most of them carried a long knife tucked under their belt. Some herded pine logs down the Ocmulgee to Darien; they were

tan and nimble and always full of stories about the strange, exotic coast. They sometimes brought squaw wives, stout, dark skinned Indians who sat sullen on the porch with Hooty and his peppermints. They never spoke but stared straight ahead, mad at the world.

He passed under an odd-looking object dangling from an overhanging pine limb. A coconut? He'd seen one once during a fall festival in town, the sweet, milky-looking juice when they cracked it open and offered free samples. But hanging from a pine limb? Surely, coconuts grew on coconut trees, not pines.

He turned around and walked back to the limb and looked up. Now he was five feet from the object.

Eyeballs dangled on optical nerve strings, shriveled marbles. Several teeth missing. And a sign:

Bibel teacher.

His breath left him.

Farm families passed by, on foot or in wagons, heading into town for coffee, nails, sugar. A few paused, stared at the head and passed on without comment.

He glanced around, scared someone would notice his reaction.

A sturdy farm wife lumbered by with a 10-year-old girl in a pink muslin dress. The girl reached for her mother. She pointed up. "Momma, that's scary."

The mother shielded her daughter's eyes. "Little girls shouldn't be exposed to such things."

Even though he had seen the body the day before, the head dangling shocked him. The killers wanted to scare him, anyone who was teaching slaves to read the Bible.

In the woods a twig cracked. Someone whispering? Were they watching him? His eyes moved from tree to tree. He succumbed to the panic and plunged into the woods.

He ripped through briars and crashed through low-hanging limbs. If I keep up the Bible reading and teaching, that'll happen to me. He fled until he reached the cabin where he threw some cornbread and raw cabbage into his croker sack, grabbed the strips of scripture he had just finished copying out that morning, and slipped out across the quarters road.

In twenty minutes, he was in the Swane.

That night he huddled under Salvation Rock, organizing dozens of pebbles into rows. Over and over he arranged them until the knot in his stomach relaxed.

Mr. Cudjoe was gone. The mantle had passed to him, a dangerous mantle. As Mr. Cudjoe's student, he never thought about it, but death had stalked his teacher. He recalled once Mr. C saying some local ruffians had pushed him around in town, but he didn't make much of it. He'd been hired on the up and up by the female seminary in Clinton to teach English literature and rhetoric, but the ignorant and illiterate didn't acknowledge the legitimacy of a Freedman. Mr. C tried to shop at Parish's general store, but Parish refused to serve him. The dentist refused to treat him. Even the blacksmith turned him away.

Hooty dozed off, mumbling "Help me ..."

In his dream, Addie Slackersby had him by the wrist, dragging him to the waiting trader's drove, a dozen men and women in chains in the middle of the hot, sandy road. The trader sat a horse in a wide, floppy hat, a thick, brown beard, and high, mud-smeared boots. He sliced tobacco that unrolled in a curl he stuffed into his jaw.

"Now let me get this straight, ma'am. You gon' pay me to take this little darkie off your hands?"

As she squinted up at the man, Addie Slackersby shielded her eyes from the sun.

Hooty dug in, pulling away. "I don't want to go, Mizz Addie!"

"That is exactly what I am proposing to you, sir. This is a slave trader's dream. I pay you instead of the other way around."

The trader shook his head. "Well, I'm plumb buffaloed, ma'am. Is he a thief? I have seen 'em steal your drawers and you standing there a-watchin' 'em."

"This child will not steal your unmentionables, sir, and I resent such crude language."

The man doffed his floppy hat. "I beg pardon, ma'am. My kinda work a man sometimes forgets the niceties."

He motioned for Hooty to step closer to the horse. Violently, the little boy shook his head.

The trader nodded at a tall man with a rifle standing guard over the drove. The man dragged Hooty over to the trader, who quickly spotted the hand.

"Ma'am, I'm mighty disappointed. You got elegant manners and refined speech, but here you are tryin' to pawn off a cripple on me. That's just downright un-neighborly."

He shook his head, tipped his hat and pointed down the road to his man with the rifle. The slaves moved on, slogging through the hot sand. One young mother, who looked longingly back at Hooty, waved goodbye.

When he woke up, the moon ran high through a lattice of lacy clouds. It seemed to say: "It's now or never, boy. You need help. Get up and do your work!"

He took off toward the cotton fields on the main road that ran in front of the big house. Keeping low, he crunched the fine white rock Mr. Gus imported to line his circular driveway. The light on the second floor, probably Mrs. Addie. Granny said the woman stayed up late. "Falls asleep with a book over her face like a tent and her droolin'"

He smelled the cotton fields ahead. After a half mile, the first one came into sight. The moon sat on top of it, fat and free of clouds. It illumined the fog that lay on the rows, a silver, shifting blanket.

He fell to his knees to dig. It was March; the dried stalks from the fall were still standing. The first scripture he planted was John 3:16. “For God so loved the world...” He moved around the field, digging and burying. In an hour, all but two were buried.

Tired and sweaty, he rested.

Inches away, where he just planted a verse from Romans, a tendril wiggled up from the dirt, a slimy finger. It sprouted; a light throbbed, a tiny human figure inside it. The figure grew into a winged angel knight who grinned and wielded a shining sword above his head. Around the field, other tendrils bloomed into knights until the night turned into day, a warm, loving glow. For the first time, since he encountered that dangling, dried-up head, he felt some hope.

In a long row, the angel knights pointed with their swords above to archangels, who circled in a ring of golden light and shyly crossed their wings; but their faces shone. Beyond these, still more illuminated the sky. Farthest away, receding, child angels filled the highest vault in a festival of color and light. There was no music for an unbelieving ear, yet music swelled within him.

Eyes closed, he fell to his knees. “Oh, Lord, thank you, thank you. Please help me to be the kind of man Mr. Cudjoe was.” But even as the words left his mouth, he knew that would never happen.

From the highest vault a small, timid angel made his way clumsily down to the ground. A gentle but mighty helpmate came with him, holding his hand.

When Hooty finished praying, there they stood.

The big angel, all white, tugged her small brown-skinned protégé away from her skirts. He giggled and grinned. His cherubic face glowed as he peeked out from behind her skirts, then hid again, a game of hide and seek.

“He’s shy,” the big guide said, looking down and pinching the little one’s cheek. “You’re his first assignment”

“Hello,” Hooty said. “I’m his assignment?”

The guide reached down. The child-sized hand she brought up, a replica of Hooty's, only three good fingers and the same gnarled shape.

"This is B," the guide said. "That's short for Hooty B."

"Hooty B?" Hooty whispered. "With a claw like mine?"

At the sound of his name spoken by the lips whose heart he was assigned to nurture and protect, little angel B smiled at Hooty and Hooty smiled back and felt a sudden kinship, as if he'd found a long, lost brother.

"He's my..."

"He's the soul of your soul," the guide said.

"The soul of my soul," Hooty said, his eyes fixed on the diminutive version of himself.

"You see?" the guide said down to her protégé, "I told you he would understand."

Shyly, B nodded up at her. He pulled her down to his level where he whispered in her ear.

"That's a splendid idea," the guide said.

B held out his unsightly hand. Hooty followed suit and they touched fingers.

"He doesn't say a lot," the big guide said, "but he has the Father's ear."

Hooty looked puzzled.

The big angel pointed up.

"That Father?" Hooty said, his eyes opened wide. He looked down at B and then up at the innumerable stars and beyond.

"Oh my," he said.

The big angel nodded. "Oh my, indeed."

Hooty watched as they returned to their seat high above. When they arrived, they looked down and waved. Hooty waved back and the heavens became an ordinary sky again, and the stars returned to their appointed places.

Tired, but reenergized, he thought: Soul of my soul. My personal guardian. Lord knows, I need one.

He had two scriptures left. He planted them near the center of the field when, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted an animal. The critter pawed at a spot where Hooty placed his first verses. Hooty raced toward it, digging his bare feet into the soft dirt. But as he drew close, he realized: Legs! The runt fled, powered by those bi-cep driven leaps that made him fly. But Hooty was faster. He snagged one of the dwarf's feet. Twisting and flipping like a fish thrown on the bank, Legs screamed:

“Lemme go, you Hooty Wells! Lemme go!”

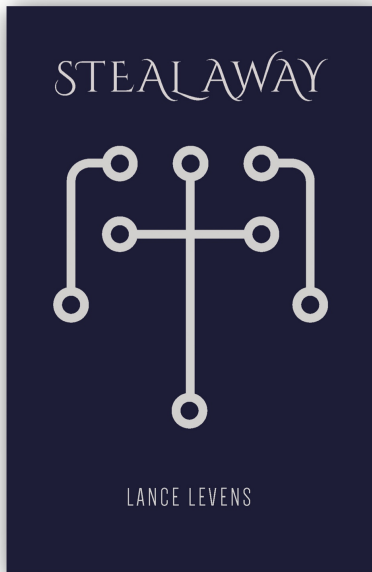
Hooty pinned him.

“Why are you digging up my scriptures?”

The dwarf sliced his left forearm with his wood block nail.

Hooty rolled over on his side. The blood from the jagged cut ran in twin streams off the tip of his elbow. When he grabbed his forearm, blood surged between his fingers. He squeezed to staunch the flow.

He searched the tree line. Legs was gone.



Dec. 22, 1829 the Georgia legislature passed a new law: a slave or free black caught teaching another slave or free black to read or write faced punishment of a fine and/or whipping. One boy refused to obey and received an extraordinary reward.

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by Lance Levens

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