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The Hill, Named after some White Man

By O'Shane Elliott

The dusk is settling in, as it usually does this time of day, the sun just barely peeking over the crest of the hill, named after some white man I can't remember. The sky glows a wistful orange, purple, red, melting away to the darkness creeping from the eastern sky. The air is cool and chills the sweat that runs across my face, my forehead, my back. I'm not really sure what day it is but I'm very glad it's over. I can only guess by the silence of the crickets and the freezing water I use to wash the labor of the day off my hands that it's nearing the end of winter. I remember the stifling cold a few weeks ago numbing my ears and leaving my fingers unbearably stiff. But I'm glad the weather is warming up; it gives me hope that this world of torture isn't stagnant but constantly changing.

"Polly? Polly? Are you 'round there?" says a voice coming through the air from the other side of the big house.

"Yea, I 'round here, who might be fixin' to know?" I strike back, truthfully certain that neither the overseer nor Master Haile was the voice calling for me. I know if it were either of them, their response would not have been as kind. I see a tall shadow growing across the ground from beyond the corner of the big house.

"The one who helped bear your pickaninny," the voice jokingly says.

"Now, you know you ain't done bear the weight of nothing but cotton since you were a babe. I sure as know, as I know that the sun will rise tomorrow, I was the only one who had bear dem pickaninny. I say from the pain in my back to the tenderness of my breast."

"Now woman, if only you find a bit of laughter in my words we could get on without much fuss," the man rejoins. I now see his tall lank figure clearly as he emerges from beyond the

corner of the big house. Bob, the man that fathered my children. Not incredibly good looking, but handsome enough. Not at all the hardest worker, but strong enough. I wouldn't dare express to him the almost hideousness of his singing voice, but he could tap on rhythm. He was warm and had a sense of humor that I couldn't understand, but the way he showed his love made it a worthwhile experience.

"If I fussed any less, I wouldn't be with you," I mutter. He looks in disarray, and he gestures as if to say something but retracts his hand. Probably in fear I'd snap back. I had been known to be almost unbearable to the men on Master Haile's plantation. I suppose I scared them away. But Bob was too foolish to care.

In response to my comment Bob merely pulls up his dirt-crusting trousers, as if he was being rowdy with them boys again, and buttons the single button on his dingy, sweat soaked plaid shirt. I put my hands up on my hips and give him a look before he makes a twitch of realization.

"Follow me, we haven't much time left." I think for a moment – *we haven't much time for what?* Almost without warning Bob grabs me by the wrist and pulls me across the yard. I barely have time to grab my favorite hair scarf from the edge of the well. By this time, the lights of the big house are on and the overseer is dismissing the rest of the negroes to the quarters. My feet are tender from having my foot tramped over by a cart a week ago, so I am not in the most pleasant mood being pulled. Then I remember that tonight is a new moon! It is here – the day we had been planning for.

"You know I'd almost forgotten today was the day," I say in excitement.

"I'd told you it would be 'round soon." Bob says in between his breaths. We pass the porch of the big house, painted white yet sparsely decorated but for a bell and two rocking

chairs. You could tell it was not in the best shape from the creaking it made when Master Haile settled his weight on each step while gripping the shaky handrail that provided no support for the feeble frame.

“What is left to be done?” I beseech him as we make it through the rows of cotton plants, when a trampling of hooves arrives on our right.

“Hol’ on there boy,” a man growls, striking with an abrupt boot to Bob’s head. Overseer Jacobs sits on his horse, settling himself after the kick. Bob clutches his head, which shows a small cut.

“Where you off to in such a rush, boy?” Overseer questions Bob.

“I is going nowhere sir,” Bob says.

“Then why you leaving the field before I dismiss you?” Overseer inquires.

“I is already been dismissed sir. I’d be the one who’d been working on tying down the sacks in the barn but only few minutes ago,” Bob says, with his face down to the ground. I knew that wouldn’t be the end. You see Overseer, a white man with an overly aggressive beard and untrimmed nails, who dressed as if he had no one to press his clothes or wash them for that matter, loved creating problems among the heap of us, even if there weren’t none.

“Boy, you talk back to me?” he menaces.

“No sir, never sir,” Bob says. The overseer changes his vision to me.

“And where you going?” With a look of disgust on his face, I could tell he was in a bad mood.

But before I could speak, Bob bursts out, “She making tea. I’ve been mighty ill,” gesturing toward his stomach.

“Boy, ain’t no one asked you nothing.” The overseer jumps off his horse, landing on Bob, who had fallen to the ground with his hand clutched over his head. I shriek and stumble back with no courage to speak.

“Sorry sir.” Bob yells.

“Shut your mouth boy!” the overseer grabs his shotgun and puts it to Bobs head.

“You gonna learn the respect them yankees don’t have for us hardworking people down here.” The overseer jabs the butt of the gun into Bob’s side over and over and over again. The others on the plantation look on in horror, their faces expressing pain but reluctance. Bob grits his teeth and bears the blows, until the bell on the porch rings. I look toward the house to see Master Haile standing there beckoning the overseer with a wave of his hand.

Breathing heavily, the overseer says, “Next time don’t fix yourself to be so lucky.” He gets back on his horse and rides toward the house leaving a waft of dust in the air. I fall on my knees to help Bob up and can see a number of dark purple and black bruises already blotched across his brown skin and blood running down his forehead. A friend of mine, whom we call Noel, runs over to help walk him to the quarters.

The sun by this time has fully set beyond that hill, named after some white man I can’t remember, and only the stars decorate the night sky, providing only enough light to see the whites of a nigger’s eyes and their grin.

This is the night we will leave for the north. We didn’t have too many stories on this plantation other than the woes of our day, but a story that slaves were free in the north and worked for themselves became big talk around here. One man, Fido, who left a number of moons ago and never returned, they say is now free and working in some place called “Filadelfa.” I

want that – I want that for my pickaninny; I want that for Bob; I want that for myself. I ain't never known what not working for some white people feels like.

“Polly you ready?” Bob says from the other side of the small stable-like quarter we live in at night.

“Yea, I just need to wrap the bread and pack away the skunk cabbage.” I had already dressed the pickaninny and packed the sack. All we were doing now was waiting for the call to move. Noel would knock when the overseer was on the other side of the planation. I could tell Bob was nervous. I could see him trembling. He would say it was because it was a bit chilly but I knew he was nervous.

“Well come on now.”

I move over to him and he reaches out to hold me. I can feel his heart beating on my face, his chin settling on my head, and the warmth of his entire body. This is the place where I feel safe and content. Like standing on that hill, named after some white man I can't remember, receiving the warmth of the sunset, playing in the colors of the sky. The purples, yellows, oranges, and reds wrapping my brown skin like the cozy feeling of a fire on a winter evening.

There's a tap at the door. The voice behind the door speaks in a muffled tone, “Bob, you've got to move now!”

Bob snaps up and whispers, “It's me and you. Stay close and be ready to run.” I jerk up and grab the pickaninny, and we line up at the door. Bob pushes it open carefully, peeps out, and then disappears in the dark. I follow behind, dragging the pickaninny behind me.

“We splitting behind the quarters and 'cross the river, meeting a man 'bout two miles out from there where tracks cross the road,” Bob whispers.

We slide past the quarters and it's a straight shot to the river. The water is cool and dark. We wade through the water that rises to right below my breasts and Bob carries the pickanniny across. The night is still and I can feel tension in the air. When we step on to the other bank, I can feel a certain sigh of relief.

The pickanniny shivers. I tell her, "Now you squeeze out your dress and keep your head up, we got a bit more ways to go"

She replies in her trembling voice, "Yes mama."

We get to walking but steadily bounce through the bush and shrubs. I can feel my nagging foot pain me again and due to the darkness stumble over a fallen wood and bump my knee.

Suddenly, I hear barking. Master knows we're out.

Bob hushes us and says, "We have to move."

We pick up the pace and I'm searching for the skunk cabbage to knock the dogs off our scent. I'm limping and lagging behind. I look back and can see the lights between the trees. My anxiety is undeniable. The woods are still dark before us, and we struggle to dodge trees and push aside branches. I know that they are on top of us but I don't know what to do. I hear the pickanniny crying and I can't think straight.

Then it happens. A hound speeds down and snags on to my dress. I fall forward and drop the sack.

"Polly! Polly! Are you alright?" Bob yells.

"Yea," I reply. I'm too exhausted to keep running. Bob helps me take the first couple steps, but the sound of horses fill the air, and we huddle together. The glow of the lantern is closer than ever and I know we're caught. I feel the pickanniny trembling so much, and I realize

that I'm trembling too. As the lantern gets closer, all I can hear is laughter and the barking of the hounds.

"Get 'em into the wagon alive," I hear a voice say.

"Yes sir" a couple of voices respond.

Then something hard slams against my head and I go unconscious.

I wake up to the warmth of the sun and feel a heaviness on my wrists and ankles. I feel the bump of the road like I'm in the back of a cart then notice Bob next to me. I pick up my head to see two men driving the cart, none that I recognize, not Master Haile or Overseer.

"Now you relax. I'm gonna be your new owner. Call me sir," one of the men says. At that moment, I knew we weren't going back to the plantation. That hill, named after the white man I can't remember, gets smaller and smaller as the sun rises from behind the crest.