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Sweetness and Light

Linda Pinkham

Sweetness was locked in his room every night by his Papa because of past troubles. These troubles always seemed to happen at night while everyone but Sweetness slept. He actually went to sleep every night when Papa clicked that lock into place, but he only slept for a few hours. The crushing stillness of the house would press him awake and he would jimmy the window and slip out into his favorite world: he dark, secret time, night.

He loved to run through the fields, especially on a night like tonight. There was the blessing of a light breeze against his face; a pale moon shed just enough light to allow him to find his way without falling. He used to fall a lot, but his feet seemed to know where to put themselves down now. The woods were a secret place of deep shadows and stabbing silver swords of light filtering through the pines and hardwoods. Sweetness liked the extra damp night smell of the woods. He liked to stand in a shadow, stock still, then pass his hand through a sword of light. Sometimes he thought he could see through his hand, that he became invisible at night. He could see them, but they couldn't see him.

It baffled him why all the others slept during the finest part of the day: the night. During the day he liked the wildflowers, all those colors, but at night there were thousands of colors you couldn't find during the day. There were dark blacks and light blacks, dark grays and light grays, but his favorites were the blues. Thousands of blues. The blues were magic at night. He liked to find a blue patch in the woods and lie down in it. He would look straight up through the pine needles. Sometimes he pretended he was alone. Really alone. The farm wasn't there. Mama, Papa and Ginny Mae gone. The Wilsons and the Gwaltneys weren't there. Just him, alone with all that blue magic. The blue light would tickle his brain and speak to him in voices he could almost hear. Sometimes it gave him the shivers, but he would lie still and let the blue light whisper its marvelous secrets to him under the cover of the tree shadows.

He ranged at will, running a mile and walking a mile. Sometimes he could feel the blue magic caressing him as he ran. At those times, he would stop suddenly. The blue shadows would speak. He could hear them, but he couldn't quite make out the words. He just knew they made him feel special. He knew intuitively that the blue light spoke only to him. He ran chuckling through the darkness.

Sometimes his throat constricted with fear when he thought about what Mama would do if she found out. She would tell Papa. Then Papa would take him behind the barn and beat him again across his bare buttocks with that board. Last time Papa had beat him so hard he had not

only had red streaks but blue bruises the next day. Papa swore at him in biblical hate. He bellowed and raged, "God will punish you. He will strike you down. You will burn eternally in damnation forever in God's sweet wrath. Jesus can't love you if you're in hell..." He had tried to get away but Papa was strong. Sweetness hadn't meant to kill the kitten. He couldn't just sit there and let the cat scratch him all over. Besides, how was he to know that you could only hug a small cat so hard and no harder.

After Papa beat him, Mama put alcohol on his cuts. She cried and prayed and begged him not to send himself to hell by breaking God's laws. He promised her, sobbing, that he would never do anything wrong again. And he didn't. For almost a week.

The only thing that continually prayed on his mind was what Mama said. "God sees you. No matter where you are, God sees you."

He looked quickly now out in the shadowy woods, "God, are you there?" God was the slickest person. Mama said he was everywhere, but Sweetness had never seen him. At least, as far as he knew, he hadn't seen him. He hadn't met any strangers in years. He wiped his grubby hands down the front of his jeans all the while looking around for God. He felt creepy, like God was standing behind him, and each time he turned around, God hid. Why would he hide? Sweetness shuffled toward home trying to assume an air of nonchalance. He detoured by the creek to wash up, but he kept a sharp eye out for God.

He was a strange, but talented boy. His strangeness was inexorably tied to his father's past, and that of his father before him. His talent was inescapable. It rested now, silently waiting in the darkness encased in the blue light.

Later that night he slipped back into the house through his bedroom window. He laughed under the sheets. They hadn't missed him. They would never know.