

DIAMONDS AND MOTHS

Short Stories by
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Every Man Has His Hour

RIVERS, THE OLD AUCTIONEER, sauntered past the slave pens and whipping posts in what whites called Lumpkin's Alley and blacks called the Devil's Half-Acre. He entered the auction house, a low, white-washed room with worn, dusty flooring. He walked on past a dirty lithograph of two horsemen galloping upon sorry nags. One of the horses had cast its shoe; his companion had a bandaged, greasy fetlock. On the lithograph's crude frame were inscribed the words "Beware of what you are about." Rivers' stone gray eyes took them in. As his thin lips curved down, a snicker burst forth. That raised a few eyebrows from middle-aged buyers who'd done business with Rivers in the past. They made eye contact with each other, incredulous. Rivers was usually dead serious, and this was the closest approximation to humor he'd ever displayed at a public event.

The room buzzed with mostly white voices. By the open door hung a wooden pole with a large red and white poster that provided information on the lot to be sold. "Fifteen likely negroes to be disposed of between half-past nine and twelve—five men, six women, two boys, and two girls." An enormous, sweaty man in a tweed suit called out, "Rivers, you can read, can't ya? It's nearly 10 o'clock already. We're not going to wait all day for you to decide when to start."

Eyes turned his way. He was six feet tall and three feet wide and must have weighed close to 500 pounds. His britches were cut so wide a tailor could've made an entire suit for most any man from them; even so, they barely met around his body.

Rivers didn't move a mite faster. He just looked up and down at the man. "I've been an auctioneer since before you were born. I know my business. We've got to walk them up from Shockoe Creek and get them cleaned up. They smell like shit from those chicken coops they're held in."

"I get it," Big-tweed said. "You're oiling them down. Shaving whiskers off the faces of old men and coloring their hair with a blacking brush, so they'll look younger and fetch more money. You can't fool us. We know your tricks."

“Don’t need tricks to fool a fool, even a fool of truly vast and prodigious proportions. And, by the bye, you can stop flapping your tongue now. We’re ready to start.”

The buyers moved in a single body to cluster like bees around the auction block, leaving only a self-contained passage by the rough wooden planks. Here a dignified white-haired slave was made to pace up and down for buyers to note his movements, as they’d do with a horse. This proved satisfactory. So did an examination of his teeth. The bidding started low. One of his eyes had a cloudy white cast and some doubt was expressed as to his ocular soundness. A gentleman unceremoniously fixed his thumb into the socket of the supposed good eye. It must have stung; tears started flowing from it. The gent lifted a single hair in his other hand and asked the slave to state the object in front of his face, but the operation must’ve pained him. He couldn’t make it out even way up close.

The bids dropped at once.

“Fool a fool? Who’s the fool now, Mr. Rivers?” Big-tweed chortled. “Good slave that. Good for nothing. Come to think of it, maybe he’d make a good fart-catcher.”

The cloudy-eyed soul cost almost nothing. He stepped off the block and departed with his new owner. Lucky for him, the man owned a tobacco-pressing factory in Richmond.

The negroes waiting to be sold gathered into an anxious little group to watch the proceedings. Meanwhile, the buyers lit fresh cigars and fiddled with their catalogues, marking with pencils the slaves they might purchase. They huddled in tiny, diligent colonies like ants seeking nectar.

Outside the wind howled. It’d started to rain and the room grew close with heat and the smell of cigars and human sweat. Now a young girl sweet as buckwheat honey was to be auctioned off. Rivers started the bidding with a little patter. “I want to sell this girl if anybody will bid anything like a fair price. I wish particularly to draw your attention to this girl, gentlemen: she is young, very pretty, and has beautiful teeth.”

She walked back and forth. Men stopped her occasionally to examine her teeth. As they made to take off her shoes and stockings, she wiggled her bare feet, laughed, and acted very merry during the proceedings. Bidding was

brisk. The buyers showed her none of the harshness they'd displayed with the old man. A smart girl, she knew house slaves had it easier than field hands.

When that round of bidding ended, a second male slave stood up. His black head stood out well against the whitewashed interior of the room. He was a remarkably good-looking man, with a finely-formed head. His forehead was broad and upright, and his features utterly flawless. The bidding started at \$800. Rivers repeated the number over and over, as fast as humanly possible, until a higher bid was made. He started again with the fresh bid, gesturing wildly until his face reddened and his breathing quickened. A higher bid not forthcoming despite his exertions, he told the negro to sit down.

Rivers smiled—if you could call narrowing your lips and spreading them across your face a smile. His small hard eyes, with flabby pouches beneath them, appraised the men in the hall. He didn't give them a simple once-over, oh no. He gave them a considered examination, especially Big-tweed.

“Let me tell you about this fella. When I first saw him I thought to buy him myself. Mate him with one of my negro girls. A pretty girl like that filly I just sold. But he said he wouldn't give life to a jailed infant. I said ‘why are you talking so crazy. No one puts a little baby in jail.’

“He just looked at me. ‘I see you don't understand. Say you and I was sitting in a bar. On the bar counter in front of us were some slops—wine, beer, and biscuit crumbs. A couple of flies were feeding upon them when you said what you just said, that babies don't live in jails. This'd be how I'd answer you. I'd instantly turn a tumbler glass down on the counter. Two or three of the flies'd be imprisoned under it. I'd point with my finger to the glass in which the captured flies were buzzing about.

“‘Why don't those flies continue to eat and drink as before? There's plenty of food. Enough to last 'em a week, but they won't eat or drink. Why? ‘Cause they've lost their liberty. And without that, nothing's of value. You remember what Jesus said about little children? He said let them come to me in Heaven. For it belongs only to people who are free as children.’”

“I says to him, ‘You think I let a child be imprisoned like those bugs? And do you know what'd happen if I lifted the glass? Sure you do. They'd up and fly away.’”

“‘But you, old man, wear traces of brimstone.’” Rivers paused.

“Well, let me tell you, that raised my bristles but good. ‘You want to wear the prints of my knuckles on your face, keep talking to me like that,’ I told him.”

“The fella nodded. ‘You’re right. I oughta follow the example of my heavenly father. He makes the sun rise on the just and the unjust alike, without distinguishing betwixt them.’”

“Boy, them’s pretty big words. Where’d you learn to talk like that?”

“Then he smiled at me, a wide open grin. Never saw the like from a slave. ‘You think that’s unusual? Give me a cup of water and I’ll show you something that’ll make your eyes pop out of your head.’ So I gave him the water and he looked down into it for a minute or so. Then he handed it right back to me, and I’ll be damned if it hadn’t turned into wine! And not bad tasting wine, either. How many slaves you know who can do *that*?”

“Balderdash!” Big-tweed shouted, red-faced like a baby about to cry.

“We don’t believe you—show us!” shouted a man with a nose like a shrike’s beak and crazy-wild hair. If you happened to be a bird, his head would’ve made a great place to nest.

Rivers nodded to the slave, who’d been handed a tray of glasses filled with water. About thirty glasses in all, and he handed them to the nearest bidders, including Big-tweed and Crazy Hair. As the slave went around the room, the sun came out. Tiny, almost microscopic particles of light struggled in, trying like the dickens to coalesce into visible beams. The sound of humming became audible as the buyers looked up and around, sensing a new tension in the room. When they looked back down at their cups, the water had been changed, just as advertised.

A prudent man might have dropped the cup and ran out then and there. But these weren’t prudent men, so they took a sniff, decided it smelled like wine. They drained the cups in a single gulp. A couple of the men made faces, but most seemed to think it tasted all right. Big-tweed especially. He licked his lips and asked for another cup. It seemed like he thought it was the best wine he’d ever tasted.

“This nigger must be Jesus Christ hisself,” said Crazy Hair in a voice richly marinated in sarcasm, or perhaps bourbon.

“Oh sure, it’s nothing special. Anyone can do it.” Rivers’ kept his tone calm and even. But his eyes told a different story. They kicked up such a powerfully poisonous look of disdain Crazy Hair might just as well have keeled over on the spot.

Big-tweed didn’t listen to any of this. Something danced in his eyes, inspired by a whole lot of thirst and a right big bushel of greed to match. So it wasn’t remarkable that he tripled the bidding price. He looked around, practically daring anyone to try outbidding him.

No one did.

Big-tweed bought the slave, a beatific smile on his face. He didn’t notice Rivers whispering to a shadowy figure.

“Follow the fat man. He’s not from around here. Never saw him before. Find out where he’s staying, and the slave. We’ll want to pay them a visit.”

The figure winked. A lot of people in Richmond, white and black, liked to earn a little extra cash.

The rest of the bidding followed, Rivers mechanically reciting bids until, one after another, he’d disposed of the slaves. His mind was far away, thinking...*Not many places to stay good enough for a man with that kind of money. He’s probably at the Exchange Hotel. A new moon tonight, it’ll be a cinch.* Before the final bidding ended, his hired man had confirmed their location.

Late that August night the heat remained extreme, making the evening a black, dull void. Rivers walked over to 14th and Franklin, the Southeast corner. His confederate met him there with two other men. Rivers paid them and they walked into the hotel. It could’ve been a dangerous job, but Rivers knew the rat-faced night clerk. The clerk gave him an intense look. He knew something bad was about to happen and he knew he couldn’t stop it from happening and that it’d be stupid to try. He simply handed Rivers an extra key to Big-tweed’s room and told him where the slave slept shackled to a cot.

They walked up the steps to Big-tweed’s room. The large man slept lightly. He popped out of bed and asked in a trembling voice, “Who is it?”

He never found out. The men did their work quickly and without malice. Rivers stood gazing down at the blood pooling around Big-tweed’s head and stepped back. One of the men knelt and tied his shoes. As they turned to

leave, Rivers stopped for a moment. “Sometimes it requires more than a bit of sagacity to fool a feather-brain. But it’s only worthwhile when there’s a lot of money to be made.”

The men freed the negro Jesus, or whoever he was. Rivers took his arm and they walked out together. The night clerk pretended not to see them.

Once outside, the slave stopped, hesitated. “The fat man...”

“Not to worry, just gentle persuasion. You know, maybe we should take a vacation. Go to Natchez. We could do this again there. But you never told me how you pull it off. That water/wine thing.”

“You promised...”

“To free you?” Rivers cackled. “You’re way too valuable.”

As the sun rose, filaments of light circled the head of the slave. They grew dense as beaten gold, brightening in the blemished sky.

River’s feet stopped; his breath, suddenly ungovernable, caught in his throat. His smile vanished so completely it might have been burned right off his face. A look of shock replaced it.

Horror or liberation. No one will ever know.

Plant

WHAT DOES PLANT BELIEVE in the deepest roots of her being? That life, if given the chance, presses backward into the perfect uniformity of plant-hood. That the final spurt of growth resolves itself in her upturned branches and sky-soaked, oval leaves that tremble with the slightest of breezes.

Plant understands she is remarkable, for her true life force is underground. Her roots lie hidden under the earth until there's enough sunlight. Then the roots sprout up white things called trunks that then leaf off green things called leaves.

Plant is perfectly happy with her life until one fateful day when she sees a boy catch a glimpse of his mother, the Czarina, waving from an upstairs window of their country estate to the south of St. Petersburg. The unfamiliar gesture seems to disturb him, as if it is some mysterious farewell. Next to her stands the peasant from Pokrovskoe smelling of goat. Long, stringy hair curls past his shoulders. The boy watches. He holds onto a terrace railing, his knuckles white and his arms, too, as if they had no blood in them. As white as his shirt, his shorts or his tall socks, which rise almost to his knees. The youth turns away. He passes through an alley of ornamental oaks back to the house, retreating to the many windowed, walnut-paneled dining room, and Plant wonders at her sudden feeling of bereavement, a yearning of the heart for a new kind of communion such as she has never felt.

She tries telling herself Alexi is only a boy. She has seen humans before, but never has she experienced this terrible hidden significance. Never has she been drawn to the innate necessity of understanding human pain and loneliness. She is shaken to the leaf, trunk, and root of her being.

Plant sees them again the next day, mother and boy, lining their baskets with mushrooms, so careful to ignore the poganki, or poisonous mushrooms, which they recognize by their caps. When unsure, they cut or lick the stem, knowing if it tastes sour it is probably poisonous. Plant watches them through the sun-flecked leaves casting overlapping patterns of greenery.

Their gestures take her breath away. She so envies their freedom of movement!



Autumn comes, oddly warm this year; but with an entirely new palette of colors: red maple leaves on brown loam. Plant grows restless. For the first time she realizes her trunk is stiff, cold and heavy, as unbreakable as the great dacha itself. She longs to see the boy, but he comes out less often, so she calls to a modest little butterfly, a garden white with the gift of wings, and bids her go to the boy and lure him out to visit her. The little pierceida flies into the dacha and up the stairs to the boy's red and blue room, just as Plant wished her to do. The hours pass. Plant's prayers and wishes do nothing to speed them up. Her love is unrequited, she thinks. The day creeps past like a shadow that cannot break into sunlight.

Impatient, Plant calls to a bee, asking him to find the butterfly and learn what happened. The bee answers the summons. He, too, flies into the dacha and up the stairs, but he returns quickly with a look of horror on his face.

"You will not believe what I have seen! The boy captured the white butterfly in a net. He pinched her thorax between thumb and forefinger, slipped her in a bag, brought her to the kitchen, and deposited her in an icebox, smiling and humming as he walked. As if it were his favorite sport—the murder of butterflies."

"What will he do with her?" Plant's voice shook.

"I have seen this before and I know," said the bee. "When she is frozen stiff, he will pierce her thorax with a pin between her wings. He'll force her wings down to make sure the needle goes through her body smoothly. Then he'll pin down the wings and antennae with paper strips to avoid touching them and rubbing off her scales. When he's done he'll store her in a box. With his other specimens."

Although it was not windy, the bee quaked and buzzed uncontrollably. "There is nothing more cruel than a beloved child," he concluded. "Men's hearts are dark and clouded. Nature suffers when touched by them!"

But Plant knows better. The laws of nature will not change. The wasps will dance against the windows until the barriers fall. Ten days will shake the world. The bell will ring, proclaiming liberty throughout the land.

The Reds will sweep away the nobles on a dustpan.

Judith

FROM THE CORNER OF MY EYE I see Judith, my newest student. Tiny, barely four feet nine inches, she has brown eyes that stare from large sockets, a wide nose, and thin lips. Judith's a singularly odd presence even in an art workshop for physically and developmentally disabled adults. She's not the only student with Down Syndrome, but she's the only one that dresses to please herself, with a sense of style. She's wearing a beaded hat, a purple scarf, and a tiny purple vest over a black and white checkered shirt. She sits at a distance from the rest of us.

Perhaps she's shy.

Today we're doing needlepoint, but Judith looks bored. Her mouth opens and out curls her tongue. Her eyes dart around the room and fix on a box of sticks in one corner. Quietly, she steals over to the sticks and picks up a handful. She returns to her seat and starts to wrap them in yarn, ignoring the rest of us. She's clearly incapable of following instructions. She's also deaf.

I walk among the other students, praising their work, discussing color choices, and helping them stitch correctly. I'm pretty well-known. My work's been in numerous exhibitions and collections throughout the United States and Europe, so I don't have to teach here. But I love to see the joy in the eyes of my students. Adults with Down Syndrome often have difficulty expressing themselves through spoken language, but they can communicate, sometimes eloquently, through the creative arts. Besides, their excitement reminds me of my own enthusiasm when I first worked with textiles, long before I earned an MFA and opened my own studio.

Judith pulls beads off her hat and weaves them into her bundle. She stops what she's doing only long enough to walk over to a closet and get a wire hanger. She bends it into the shape of a long flower petal. Gradually, an irregularly rounded cocoon sheathed in bright-colored yarn emerges. It's a bundle of mystery beyond comprehension. Or perhaps it's a present...but whose?

Now, I see abstract sculptures that incorporate textiles all the time. But this is different, vital in a way I can't explain. I want to hold it, pat it, somehow interact with it, to make associations with this strange bundle that's wrapped, enfolded, sheltered, clothed, enveloped, and bandaged. This tough thing I have no words for—that's raw, knotted, and controlled, woven from accretions of found materials, much as a spider encases a fly in her web. Images from science occur to me: nests, circulatory systems, neural wiring. And then there's her sense of color. Orange, red, and black yarn overlap, seep into each other in a molten way, like lava.

I wonder if I'm seeing the birth of a new craft: weaving without looms, knitting without needles. Meanwhile, Judith looks up at me with a slightly askew expression and a glint in her eyes. She brushes her hands together, gives the work a pat, and looks to go on to something new.

Need I say I was envious? I'd been perfecting my craft for years, honing my skills. I'd had my share of success. But this tiny woman who could barely speak, who had been deemed uneducable, was a truer artist than I'd ever be. She lived in a world I could only imagine, feeling the rhythmic repetition in wrapping, the sensual pleasure of yarn gliding through her hand. She lived without an audience and without deadlines. Undistracted by thoughts of what others would think, or fears that her work wouldn't be good enough to get into a certain show.

Judith's years of confinement in a state mental institution for the severely disabled had left their mark in her habit of stealing small bits and pieces, of hoarding things, of being suspicious of strangers and isolating herself.

She had no prior artistic training. Where had this unearthly talent come from? Could it be that her incredible ability to persevere and sustain her focus—to hear her own inner voice—came from those years of being alone in a crowd of men and women, utterly deprived of hope?

We sat on opposite sides of the room, teacher and student. Which one was I? The thought didn't exactly quell my shaking hands.

Then I had a horrifying but exhilarating thought, as though I were plummeting and flying all at once. What if I stole her art and exhibited it as my own? True, the medium was completely different than my own classically abstract landscape paintings of rolling hills with palettes of burnt orange and

green. I imagined myself as an appropriation artist, plundering and pillaging—not objects but *art itself*. I imagined what I would say to a critic who examined the work. “I avoid trying to pin down anything as elusive as meaning. Instead, I let the work speak with its own voice.” The critics would love that. They’d natter on about its haunting ambiguity and laud me for striking out in a bold new direction.

I looked at Judith. It would be so easy to fool her. But then I thought, better to fail as yourself than succeed as a fraud. I smiled wryly, thinking it possible that if I paraded her work as my own, critics might consider it something a helpless, wounded child might produce, not a professionally trained artist.

The work was intimately tied to the diminutive but powerful soul who battled to give it form.

Judith could not be scrubbed out of it, certainly not by the likes of me.