

# PART ONE



*Faith Plantation, Barbados*

1830

# 1

I MIGHT HAVE BEEN TEN, ELEVEN YEARS OLD—I CANNOT say for certain—when my first master died.

No one grieved him; in the fields we hung our heads, keening, grieving for ourselves and the estate sale that must follow. He died very old. I saw him only at a distance: stooped, thin, asleep in a shaded chair on the lawn, a blanket at his lap. I think now he was like a specimen preserved in a bottle. He had outlived a mad king, outlived the slave trade itself, had seen the fall of the French Empire and the rise of the British and the dawn of the industrial age, and his usefulness, surely, had passed. On that last evening I remember crouching on my bare heels in the stony dirt of Faith Plantation and pressing a palm flat against Big Kit's calf, feeling the heat of her skin baking up out of it, the strength and power of her, while the red sunlight settled in the cane all around us. Together, silent, we watched as the overseers shouldered the coffin down from the Great House. They slid it rasping into the straw of the wagon and, dropping the rail into place with a bang, rode rattling away.

That was how it began: me and Big Kit, watching the dead go free.

His nephew arrived one morning eighteen weeks later at the head of a trail of dust-covered carriages driven directly from the

harbour at Bridge Town. That the estate had not been sold off was, we thought at the time, a mercy. The carriages creaked their slow way up the soft embankment, shaded by palm trees. On a flatbed wagon at the rear of the caravan sat a strange object, draped in canvas, as large as the whipping boulder in the small field. I could not imagine its purpose. All this I remember well, for I was again with Big Kit at the edge of the cane—I rarely left her side in those days—and I saw Gaius and Immanuel stiffly open the carriage door and extend the step. I could see, at the Great House, pretty Émilie, who was my age, and whom I would glimpse some evenings dumping the pans of wash water into the long grass outside the scullery. She descended the first two steps of the verandah and, smoothing out her apron, fell still.

The first man to emerge, carrying his hat in his hands, had black hair and a long, horselike jaw, his eyes darkened by heavy brows. He raised his face as he descended and peered around at the estate and the men and women gathered there. Then I saw him stride back to the curious object and walk around it, inspecting the ropes and canvas. Cradling a hand to his eyes, he turned, and for a frightening moment I felt his gaze on me. He was chewing some soft-textured thing, his jaw working a little. He did not look away.

But it was the second man, the sinister man in white, who seized my attention. This was our new master—we all could see it at once. He was tall, impatient, sickly, his legs bending away from each other like calipers. Under his three-cornered white hat a shock of white hair burst forth. I had a sense of pale eyelashes, an uncooked pallor to his skin. A man who has belonged to another learns very early to observe a master's eyes; what I saw in this man's terrified me. He owned me, as he owned all those I lived among,

not only our lives but also our deaths, and that pleased him too much. His name was Erasmus Wilde.

I felt a shudder go through Big Kit. I understood. His slick white face gleamed, the clean white folds of his clothes shone impossibly bright, like a duppy, a ghost. I feared he could vanish and reappear at will; I feared he must feed on blood to keep himself warm; I feared he could be anywhere and not visible to us, and so I went about my work in silence. I had already seen many deaths: I knew the nature of evil. It was white like a duppy, it drifted down out of a carriage one morning and into the heat of a frightened plantation with nothing in its eyes.

It was then, I believe now, that Big Kit determined, calmly and with love, to kill herself and me.

# 2

ALL MY CHILDHOOD I'D HAD NO ONE; ONLY BIG KIT, AS SHE was known in the cane. I loved her and I feared her.

I was around five years old when I angered the quarters-woman and was sent to live in the brutal hut below the dead palm tree, Kit's hut. On my first evening there, my supper was stolen and my wooden bowl cracked; I was struck hard on the side of my head by a man I did not know, so that I staggered and could not hear. Two little girls spat on me. Their ancient grandmother held me down with her talons biting into my arms and cut my handmade sandals from my feet for the leather.

That was when I first heard Big Kit's voice.

"Not this one," she said softly.

That was all. But then some monstrous charge of dark energy, huge, inexorable as a breaker, poured towards us and picked the old woman up by the hair as though she were a boneless scrap of rag, tossing her aside. I stared, terrified. Big Kit just glared down at me with her orange eyes, as if disgusted, and then returned to her stool in the dark corner.

But in the morning I found her squatting beside me in the pale light. She offered her bowl of mash, traced the lines in my palm. "You will have great big life, child," she murmured. "Life of many

rivers.” And then she spat in my hand and closed my fist so that the spit ran between my knuckles. “That is first river, right there,” she said, starting to laugh.

I adored her. She towered over everyone, huge, fierce. Because of her size and because she was a Saltwater, a witch in old Dahomey before being taken, she was feared. She would sow curses into the dirt beds under the huts. Rooks would be found eviscerated, hanging in doorways. For three weeks she forcibly took food from a strong smith’s apprentice each morning and night and ate it in front of him, scooping with her fingers from his bowl, until some understanding was reached between them. In the smouldering fields she would glisten as if oiled, tearing up the wretched earth, humming strange songs under her breath, her flesh rippling. Some nights in the huts she would murmur in her sleep, in the low, thick language of her kingdom, and cry out. No one ever spoke of that, and in the fields the next day she would be all scorched fury, like a blunt axe, wrecking as much as she reaped. Her true name, she once told me, whispering, was Nawi. She had had three sons. She had had one son. She had had no sons, not even a daughter. Her stories changed with the moon. I remember how, some days, at sunrise, she would sprinkle a handful of dirt over her blade and murmur some incantation, her voice husky, as though overcome with emotion. I loved that voice, its rough music. She would suck air through her teeth and squint up her eyes and begin, “When I was royal guard at Dahomey,” or “After I crush the antelope with my hands, like this,” and I would stop whatever task was at hand, and stand listening in wonder. For she was a marvel, witness to a world I could not imagine, beyond the reach of the huts and the vicious fields of Faith.

Faith itself darkened under our new master. In the second week, he dismissed the old overseers. In their place arrived rough men from the docks, tattooed, red-faced, grimacing at the heat. These were ex-soldiers or old slavers or just island poor, with their papers crushed into a pocket and the sunken eyes of devils. Then the maimings began. What use could we be, injured so? I saw men limp into the fields, blood streaming down their legs; I saw women with blood-soaked bandages over their ears. Edward had his tongue cut out for backtalk; Elizabeth was forced to eat from a full chamber pot for not cleaning the previous day's thoroughly. James tried to run away, and to make an example of him, the master had an overseer burn him alive as we watched. Afterwards, in the embers of his pyre, an iron was heated and we filed past the charred horror of him, one by one, and were branded a second time.

James's was the first of the new killings; other killings followed. Sick men were whipped to shreds or hanged above the fields or shot. I was still a boy, and cried at night. But with each new death Big Kit only grunted in grim satisfaction, her orange eyes narrowed and fierce.

Death was a door. I think that is what she wished me to understand. She did not fear it. She was of an ancient faith rooted in the high river lands of Africa, and in that faith the dead were reborn, whole, back in their homelands, to walk again free. That was the idea that had come to her with the man in white, like a thread of poison poured into a well.

One night she told me of her intention. She said we would do it quickly. It would not hurt.

"Do it frighten you?" she whispered, where we lay in the hut. "To be dying?"

“Not if it don’t frighten you,” I said bravely. I could feel her arm draped protectively over me in the dark.

She grunted, a long, dark rumble in her chest. “If you dead, you wake up again in your homeland. You wake up free.” I made a little shrug of one shoulder at that, and she felt it, and turned my chin with her fingers. “What is it, now?” she asked. “You don’t believe?”

I did not want to tell her; I feared she would be angry. But then I whispered, “I don’t have a homeland, Kit. My homeland here. So I wake up here, again, a slave? Except you won’t be here?”

“You come with me to Dahomey,” she murmured firmly. “That how it works.”

“Did you ever see them? The dead, waked up? When you in Dahomey?”

“I saw them,” she whispered. “We all saw them. We knew what they were.”

“And they were happy?”

“They were free.”

I could feel the day’s exhaustion descending on me. “What it like, Kit? Free?”

I felt her shift in the dirt, and then she was gathering me in close, her hot breath at my ear. “Oh, child, it like nothing in this world. When you free, you can do anything.”

“You go wherever it is you wanting?”

“You go wherever it is you wanting. You wake up any time you wanting. When you free,” she whispered, “someone ask you a question, you ain’t got to answer. You ain’t got to finish no job you don’t want to finish. You just leave it.”

I closed my heavy eyes, wondering. “Is really so?”



She kissed my hair just behind my ear. “Mm-hmm. You just set down the shovel, and you go.”

WHY, THEN, DID she delay? The days passed; Faith grew harsher, more brutal; still she did not kill us. Some presentiment, some warning perhaps, stayed her hand.

One evening she led me out into her little vegetable garden, where we were alone. I saw the sharp, rusted blade of a hoe in her hands, and started to tremble. But she only wished to show me the little carrots beginning to sprout. Another night, she woke me and led me silently out into the darkness, through the long grasses to the dead palm tree, but this too was only to instruct me not to speak of our intentions. “If any hear it, child, we be separated true,” she hissed. I did not understand why we waited. I wanted to see her homeland, I told her. I wanted to walk in Dahomey with her, free.

“But it must be done right, child,” she whispered to me. “Under a right moon. With right words. The gods cannot be summoned otherwise.”

But then the other suicides began. Cosimo cut his own throat with an axe, Adam punctured his wrists using a nail stolen from the smithy. Both were found bled out in the grass behind the huts, one after the other, in the mornings. They were old Saltwaters, like Kit, believers that they would be reincarnated in their ancestral lands. But when young William, who had been born on the plantation, hanged himself in the laundry, Erasmus Wilde himself came out among us.

He walked slowly over the lawns in his dazzling white clothes, an overseer trailing a few steps behind. The overseer wore a tat-

tered straw hat and was pushing a wheelbarrow. The cradle of the barrow held a wooden post, a tangle of grey sacking. They crossed the grass in the harsh sun, pausing just at the edge of the cane, where we had been assembled. In the hot, bright air, the new master studied us.

I could see the flesh on his face and hands, waxen and bloodless. His lips were pink, his eyes a very piercing blue. Slowly he walked the line of our bodies, staring at each of us in turn. I could hear Big Kit breathing roughly above me and I understood she too was frightened. When the master looked at me, I felt the scorch of his gaze and lowered my eyes at once, shivering. The air was stagnant, redolent of sweat.

Then the man in white gestured behind him, to the overseer. That man twisted the handles of the barrow, dumping its load in the dirt.

A murmur passed through us, like a wind.

Sprawled there in the dirt, in a heap of grey clothes, was William's corpse. His face was a rictus of pain, his eyes bulging, his tongue black and protruding. Some days had passed since his death, and strange things were happening already to his body. He looked corpulent, bloated; his skin had become mottled and spongy. A slow horror filled me.

The master's voice, when at last he called out to us, was calm, dry, bored.

"What you see here, this nigger, killed himself," Erasmus Wilde said. "He was my slave, and he has killed himself. He has therefore stolen from me. He is a thief." He paused, folded his hands at the small of his back. "I understand that some of you believe you will be reborn in your homelands when you die." He

looked as though he might say more, but then he fell silent and, turning abruptly, gestured to the overseer at the barrow.

That man crouched over the body with a large curved skinner's knife. He reached around and cupped his callused palm under William's chin and began to saw. We heard the terrible wet flesh tearing, the crunch of the bones, saw the weird, lifeless sag of William's body as the head came away.

The overseer stood and raised the severed head in both hands. Then he walked back to the barrow and took out the long wooden post. Hammering it into the dry earth, he drove William's head onto the sharp end.

"No man can be reborn without his head," the master called out. "I will do this to each and every new suicide. Mark me. None of you will ever see your countries again if you continue to kill yourselves. Let your deaths come naturally."

I stared up at Kit. She was peering at William's head on its spike, the bulge of its softening flesh in the sun, and there was something in her face I had not seen in her before.

Despair.

# 3

BUT THAT IS NO BEGINNING. ALLOW ME TO BEGIN AGAIN, for the record.

I have walked this earth for eighteen years. I am a Freeman now in possession of my own person.

I was born in the year 1818 on that sun-scorched estate in Barbados. So I was told. I had also heard it said I was born in a shackled cargo hold during a frenzied crossing of the Atlantic, aboard an illicit Dutch vessel. That would have been the autumn of 1817. In the latter account my mother died in the difficult birth. For years I did not privilege one origin over the other, but in my first years free I came to suffer strange dreams, flashes of images: Tall, staked wooden palisades, walls of black jungle beyond. Naked men yoked together and stumbling up rotted planks into a dark brig. Was it Gold Coast I dreamed of, the slave fort at Annamaboe? How could that be so, you ask? Ask yourself what you know of your own beginnings, and if your life is so very different. We must all take on faith the stories of our birth, for though we are in them, we are not yet present.

I was a field nigger. I cleared the cane, only my sweat was of value. I was wielding a hoe at the age of two, and weeding, and collecting fodder for the cows, and scooping manure into cane holes

with my hands. In my ninth year I was gifted a straw hat and a shovel that I could scarcely lift, and I had felt proud to be counted a man.

My father?

I did not know my father.

My first master named me, as he named us all. I was christened George Washington Black—Wash, as I came to be known. With great ridicule, he'd said he glimpsed in me the birth of a nation and a warrior-president and a land of sweetness and freedom. All this was before my face was burnt, of course. Before I sailed a vessel into the night skies, fleeing Barbados, before I knew what it meant to be stalked for the bounty on one's scalp.

Before the white man died at my feet.

Before I met Titch.