

ABRAHAM'S PROMISE

by

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EXT. SOUTHERN PLANTATION - NIGHT

A cold rain sweeps across the night sky. The moon tries to peek out from behind dark clouds, fails.

SUPER:

"NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA - DECEMBER  
1860"

INT. SLAVE CABIN - NIGHT

A fire burns low in the fireplace, threatens to go out. Sparks fly as ABRAHAM (early 30's) tosses on another log.

NYA (early 30's) kneels by the bed. She wraps a blanket even tighter around young ISAAC (5). Isaac COUGHS, restless.

A look passes between Abraham and Nya.

NYA

He'll be put to work this Spring.

A solemn nod from Abraham.

NYA

This talk about Lincoln, about him  
setting slaves free... you think  
it'll really happen?

Abraham doesn't answer, his eyes fixed on Isaac.

Nya turns away. She picks up small HOMEMADE DOLL from above the fireplace, straightens its makeshift clothing.

ABRAHAM

If it comes down to it, we'll run.  
I'll see to it that we're free, one  
way or another.

Nya faces him, frightened and hopeful.

ABRAHAM

I promise.

Abraham takes his wife in a strong embrace. Nya returns the embrace, still clutching the doll.

INT. PLANTATION HOME - STUDY - NIGHT

DEMPSEY CANTRELLE (late 60's) sits bundled in a luxurious chair, a roaring fire at his feet. His burly overseer, SETH (early 40's), stands at his side.

Cantrelle reads from a NEWSPAPER. With a snarl, he CRUMPLES the paper and HURLS it into the fire.

CANTRELLE

Bastards, Seth, the lot of them.  
Think they can tell me what to do  
with my property, do they?

He throws a look at Seth. Seth knows better than to answer.

CANTRELLE

Moore was right. They're felons.  
Felons who have the audacity to  
deny me my rights. My rights!

Seth remains obediently silent.

CANTRELLE

Got those damn niggers believing  
they'll go free. And what happens  
to the plantation then, Seth? What  
happens to the people, the  
families, who depend on my crops?

A pregnant pause. This time, Seth risks an answer.

SETH

Ruined, Mr. Cantrelle.

CANTRELLE

Ruined. That's exactly right. And  
we can't let that happen, can we?  
We need to stand up for our rights.

Cantrelle smolders. A dark GRIN creeps into his features.

CANTRELLE

But what good is it for an old man  
to sit bitching and moaning to an  
empty room? If I want to make my  
voice heard, I need to send a  
message, now don't I?

SETH

I suppose you do, Mr. Cantrelle.

(CONTINUED)

CANTRELLE  
Damn right I do.

Cantrelle's eyes, gleaming with malice, settle on the fire.

CANTRELLE  
I'll kiss the Devil's red ass  
before I let them take my property.  
That, my boy, is a promise.

EXT. PLANTATION FIELD - DAY

Abraham and Nya work the field side-by-side. Little Isaac follows close by his mother's side.

SETH (O.S.)  
Abraham!

Abraham and Nya both look up. Seth stands at the edge of the field. Abraham's eyes flit to the CART WHIP in Seth's hand.

SETH  
Come with me.

Abraham and Nya exchange a look. Seth unfurls the whip.

SETH  
Now, boy!

ABRAHAM  
Yessir.

Abraham leaves his wife and son in the field as he follows Seth toward the plantation home in the distance.

INT. PLANTATION HOME - DINING ROOM - DAY

Cantrelle dines alone at an enormous table. Seth enters with Abraham in tow.

SETH  
The slave you asked for, Mr.  
Cantrelle.

CANTRELLE  
Thank you, Seth. Abraham is it?

Cantrelle's tone is gentle, welcoming.

ABRAHAM

Yessir.

CANTRELLE

Come closer.

Abraham obeys. Cantrelle dabs at his mouth with a napkin, then pushes a nearly full plate of food aside. He rises to face Abraham.

CANTRELLE

No doubt you've heard of Lincoln's plans to put an end to slavery?

Abraham hesitates, nervous and afraid.

ABRAHAM

Yessir.

CANTRELLE

And you have a young boy? Isaac?

Abraham glances at Seth. Seth's grip on the whip tightens.

SETH

Answer him.

Abraham faces Cantrelle. Unable to find his voice, he nods.

CANTRELLE

Excellent.

He turns his back on Abraham, picks up a glass of ICED TEA.

CANTRELLE

What would you say if I told you I'd like to set him free?

Cantrelle drinks deep. Abraham is too stunned to reply. Cantrelle turns, amused at the look on Abraham's face.

CANTRELLE

I'd like to set an example for other plantation owners, to send a message. I can't go getting rid of a bull like you, not without risking my crops, but your son... I could send him on his way to show our Northern aggressors what kind of men we are here in the South.

Abraham swallows, hard.

(CONTINUED)

CANTRELLE

Now, I know I don't need to ask your permission, but it's important to me that the boy's father be given a say in the matter. If you say yes, your son will never work those fields. If you say no, I'll send you back to work and have Seth here find me another father to speak with.

Cantrelle drinks deep again, never taking his eyes from Abraham's. He savors the drink, savors the moment.

CANTRELLE

So what will it be?

INT. SLAVE CABIN - DAY

Abraham enters to find Nya sitting on the bed with Isaac. Nya jumps to greet her husband, wraps her arms around him.

NYA

You were gone so long, Abraham. I thought they-

When he doesn't return the embrace, she pulls back. He doesn't see her, his eyes fixed on Isaac.

NYA

What is it?

ABRAHAM

They want to set him free, Nya.

Nya's eyes drift to her son. Isaac plays with the homemade doll, oblivious to the gravity of the conversation.

ABRAHAM

He asked me if I was okay with him setting our boy free.

NYA

He asked you?

ABRAHAM

He asked me, and I said yes.

The silence that settles between them contains years of joy and grief, compressed in a single moment.

(CONTINUED)

NYA

How soon?

ABRAHAM

Tomorrow morning.

Nya is overcome. She sits down on the bed, picks up her boy, and cradles him close to her breast. She refuses to cry, a bittersweet smile on her lips.

EXT. SLAVE CABIN - DAY

A SMALL CROWD of slaves has gathered to see Isaac off.

They march together in silence toward the plantation home, with Abraham and Nya leading the procession.

Abraham carries his son.

EXT. PLANTATION HOME - DAY

The crowd approaches the plantation home, and Seth comes to the road to greet them. Cantrelle stands on the front porch, between two enormous pillars.

No invitation to come in today.

Seth reaches out for the boy. Abraham kisses his son, as does Nya. Abraham hesitates, then forces himself to hand his only child to the overseer.

Seth turns his back to the crowd, walks toward Cantrelle. Isaac watches his parents over Seth's shoulder, confused.

Nya takes a step forward. Abraham squeezes her hand, the tendons standing out on his arm. Nya steps back.

Seth places the boy at Cantrelle's feet. Cantrelle smiles down at the boy. Isaac doesn't smile back.

Cantrelle pats the boy on the head. He motions for Seth to take Isaac inside.

Cantrelle affords the small procession a brief glance. His eyes meet Abraham's, but Abraham can't read what's behind them.

Cantrelle disappears inside. The crowd disperses.

Abraham and Nya are left alone, facing the plantation home, still holding hands.

EXT. PLANTATION FIELD - DAY

Abraham and Nya work side-by-side in silence.

They risk an occasional glance toward the plantation home, but they never glance at one another.

INT. SLAVE CABIN - NIGHT

Abraham and Nya clean themselves up before dinner. A KNOCK at the door.

Abraham answers, finds Seth waiting for him.

SETH

Mr. Cantrelle wants to see you.

Abraham glances at Nya, but she doesn't meet his gaze.

ABRAHAM

Yessir.

Abraham follows Seth without another word.

Nya picks up the homemade doll and sits on the bed. She tears a swatch of cloth from Isaac's tattered blanket and fashions a new shirt for the tiny figure.

INT. PLANTATION HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Abraham enters to find Mr. Cantrelle enjoying another EXTRAVAGANT MEAL. Abraham eyes the food hungrily.

CANTRELLE

Abraham, please come in.

Abraham cautiously obeys. Cantrelle gestures toward the opposite end of the table.

CANTRELLE

Have a seat.

Abraham looks to Seth, who gestures toward the open chair. Against his every intuition, Abraham sits.

Cantrelle enjoys a bite of STEAK. He gestures, and a SERVANT GIRL brings a plate to Abraham. She doesn't make eye contact.

STEAK, GREEN BEANS, CORNBREAD... Abraham is stunned.

(CONTINUED)

Cantrelle sets down his silverware, drinks deep from his wine glass, then locks eyes with Abraham.

CANTRELLE

Eat.

ABRAHAM

Mr. Cantrelle, I shouldn't-

Seth SMACKS Abraham in the back of the head with the whip.

SETH

Eat.

Abraham picks at the cornbread, then the beans. He tries to be respectful, but he's so hungry. When he takes a bite of steak, a feral GRIN appears on Cantrelle's face.

Cantrelle takes another bite of his own steak. He talks with his mouth full.

CANTRELLE

I didn't want you to go to bed tonight wondering how little Isaac was doing. I made a promise, and I'm a man of my word. Isaac is free.

Seth removes the cover from LARGE SILVER PLATTER, revealing Isaac's SEVERED HEAD. Surrounding the head are more STEAKS, prime cuts of young Isaac.

A SCREAM catches in Abraham's throat as he VOMITS instead. Amused, Cantrelle takes another bite of steak.

CANTRELLE

As a matter of fact, he's quite delicious.

Abraham's world turns RED as RAGE overtakes him. He scrambles, growls, lunges for Cantrelle.

Seth CRACKS Abraham's head with the whip handle again, this time hard enough to send Abraham sprawling. Cantrelle's voice is suddenly ice cold.

CANTRELLE

You're property, boy. You're cattle. You and your folk are mine to do with as I please. I want you to take that message back to the rest of them.

(CONTINUED)

Cantrelle nods to Seth. The overseer begins to beat Abraham mercilessly beneath Isaac's lifeless gaze.

CANTRELLE

I'll be goddamned if I let a  
Northerner tell me what I can and  
can't do with my property.

As Seth continues to beat Abraham, Cantrelle savors another bite of young Isaac.

INT. SLAVE CABIN - NIGHT

The door ERUPTS inward. Seth tosses Abraham's battered body to the dirt floor.

NYA

Abraham!

Nya rushes to her husband's side. Seth sneers, then leaves, not bothering to close the door.

Abraham tries to speak. Nya fights back tears.

NYA

Hush now. Don't talk.

ABRAHAM

Isaac...

Nya freezes. Abraham tries to speak again, but he barely manages a whisper.

Nya leans down, her ear against Abraham's bloody lips. She stares out the open door into the darkness as her husband's words sink in, her ANGER growing with his every word.

It takes all of his strength, but Abraham lifts a hand to Nya's cheek. He turns her head so that they're eye-to-eye.

ABRAHAM

I promised him, Nya. I promised, I  
promised...

His words fade into shallow breathing as he passes out.

Nya gently lays Abraham's head on the floor. She stands, walks to the door.

She stares with unbridled HATRED at the plantation home in the distance before she closes the door.

INT. SLAVE CABIN - LATER

Abraham lies moaning in bed, his wounds dressed.

Nya reaches beneath the bed, produces a small LEATHER POUCH. She chants under her breath as she spills its contraband treasure onto the dirt floor.

A dried frog. A coin. A carved stone. Tiny bones.

She picks up what could be a FINGER BONE and traces arcane patterns in the dirt. She continues to chant.

Her eyes roll back in their sockets.

The HOMEMADE DOLL watches the scene from its resting place above the fire.

INT. PLANTATION HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Cantrelle lies alone in a king-size bed, drifting to sleep. Nya's chant carries on the wind, faint and distant.

Cantrelle grimaces, stirs.

INT. SLAVE CABIN - NIGHT

Nya sits on her knees, surrounded by a series of overlapping SYMBOLS carved in the dirt floor. She sways as her chant increases its tempo.

Above the fireplace, the doll SHUDDERS.

INT. PLANTATION HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Cantrelle tosses and turns. His hands drift toward his belly.

His grimace contorts into an expression of PAIN.

INT. SLAVE CABIN - NIGHT

Nya stands and shuffles her feet. A pattern emerges as her movements meld into a dance.

She chants faster, faster, faster.

INT. PLANTATION HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Cantrelle CRIES OUT.

He sits up, clutching his gut. He swings his feet over the edge of his enormous bed and tries to stand.

He stumbles, then falls to the ground. Hard.

He rolls on his back, writhing in agony.

INT. SLAVE CABIN - NIGHT

The fire in the hearth dances along with Nya.

Faster, the dance. Faster, the chant. Faster, the shuddering doll. Faster, faster, then...

Stillness.

INT. PLANTATION HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Cantrelle SEIZES, every muscle rigid.

His breathing is ragged, shallow, as the muscles relax. Then, his breath catches.

A CHILD'S HAND erupts from his belly, TEARING the skin open. A CRIMSON GEYSER spurts from the open wound.

Cantrelle tries to scream, but the scream won't come. He tries to pass out, but he fails there as well.

Another HAND emerges from the wound. The hands turn outward, trace the edges of the rupture, and PUSH. The fissure in Cantrelle's belly widens.

Tears stream down Cantrelle's cheeks as he stares at the ceiling. He pulls his chin to his chest, peers at the bloody mess that was once his stomach.

A HEAD appears from the wound. A boy's head.

Isaac's head.

Isaac extends his arms above his head. He brings his hands down to the floor, finds purchase, and forces the rest of his body out of Cantrelle's gut.

Naked, covered in gore, five year-old Isaac stands over the ichor-spattered body of what was once Dempsey Cantrelle.

(CONTINUED)

Fading, Cantrelle looks up into the boy's face. The boy returns the gaze, smiling down at Cantrelle with a child-like innocence.

Cantrelle's eyes stay open as death finally steals him away.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLANTATION - NIGHT

Isaac emerges into the night.

He runs across the lawn in front of the plantation home, illuminated by the moonlight.

He finds the road and runs north, away from the plantation.

INT. SLAVE CABIN - NIGHT

Nya's eyes return to normal. A soft smile touches her lips.

NYA  
Run, Isaac. You're free.

CUT TO BLACK

ON BLACK

NYA (V.O.)  
You're free.