

PROMPT #3: Looking through old family photos, multiple generations back, you notice there is a cat in almost every group photo. The same cat — color and pattern: the cat that is currently purring on your lap.

Slave to No Man

by **Tom Fortner**

Grief. Grief and pride. “Yes,” he thought. “I’m certain he would be proud.” Pride at what he had accomplished with the plantation, yet grief that his father wasn’t there to see it. He leaned closer to the portrait. Maybe if he did he could catch a whiff of his father’s cigars, even his mother perfume. All he got was the scent of wet paint; the portrait had returned from a touch up less than an hour ago.

He swallowed the clump of heartache rising in his throat. It had been five years since his parent’s passing, yet he still missed them immensely. He still remembered what his father had said to him on his deathbed as clear as the bay window he would play under as a child. “Don’t be a slave to no man, boy. No man but yourself and God.” Then he slipped away, overtaken with fever. His mother, consumed with grief, had a stroke that night and passed away the next morning. He became the head of the plantation overnight, a boy forced into manhood by death. He was young now, just 21, but already he a grown his father’s plantation into a behemoth of cotton and tobacco production.

Today was the anniversary of his parent’s death, and in a way, of his new identity. He was sentimental today, nostalgic, and he spent the morning gazing at their portrait. Occasionally, he would cast a glance towards the other portraits in the room, his ancestors back to his grandfather’s grandfather who had all lived on this land, cultivated it, raised children on it, died on it, but his attention was set on the faces of his mother and father. Pride came rushing in as he looked at their worn visages, knowing that he was living the life they had worked for their entire lives.

He felt something brush his leg and stooped to pick up the cat, placing it at eye level with its painted counterpart in the portrait. “Look! It’s you!”

“Scuse me Sir, we all waitin on ya.”

He snapped to attention; all evidence of sentimentality erased from his stern face. His face matched the cat’s: haughty and full of disdain.

“Yes, of course. I’ll be right out,” he said coldly. How could he forget? Every year he had the slaves gather as a memorial for his parents; he would give a short speech reminiscing about his mother and father, then send the slaves back to their daily tasks.

He placed the cat on the floor where it stretched and settled, fat and languorous. Had he not been in a fog of reminiscence, he would have noticed that the same cat he was currently holding appeared in every single portrait, not just his parent’s. He did not.

He stepped out onto the porch. The emotional man in the room was left behind; he was now the owner, the master, the head of the plantation.

He held his hands aloft and addressed the crowd:

“Good morning to you all, and God bless each and every one of you.”

A pause.

“Many of you know what day it is, some of you don’t. Well, I’ll tell you. Five years ago today...”

As he spoke it seemed to him that heaven itself opened its fiery gates to admit his speech of remembrance for his ancestors to hear; clouds parted and the sun spewed forth onto the earth, making all creation fraught with the heaviness of the air and the weight of being, enraptured by existence and freedom, doing as God had made them to do; soar, grow, run, leap, eat, love, climb, laugh, protect, build, worship, and in this moment he felt completion in all those godly tasks and he saw his father and mother stretch down through the clouds and wrap him up in an embrace of reassurance and love, saying: “This is our child in whom we are well pleased”; and as the tears rolled down his face he caught a glimpse of those standing before him, listening, and for the first time he felt affection for these... people? Yes he supposed they were, and with this newfound perspective he ended his speech with: “...and you all may take a day of rest with no work or toil. Thank you for your time.”

He turned and entered the house, oblivious to the eager chatter of those behind him. He felt light, like he had suddenly been rid of a burden he’d carried for so long. Freedom was the word that leapt to his mind.

As he closed the door he noticed the cat. Swooping it up in his arms he noted the drastic change in its shape and size. What had used to be an obese, lolling feline had become emaciated and shifty, eyes darting to and fro with the paranoia of a guilty child who had just stolen a cookie from the jar.

Alarmed, he cried out for the housekeeper to bring some milk, but there was no answer. He raced through the rooms, calling all the while, but found no sign of the woman. Baffled, for she had been a constant in his life from the moment of his first breath and rarely left the house, he found refuge in a chair by the window.

Cradling the cat, pondering the situation.

Dark movement through the window caught his attention and he left the house to chase down the slave.

“You there! Boy!” he shouted. The cat purred in his hands. Had he been paying attention, he would have felt that with each step he took he felt heavier and the cat grew stronger.

The man turned around as his master slowed down and stopped before him. “Yessah?”

“Have you seen Nance? She isn’t anywhere in the house.”

“Can’t saya ave sah, I’m sorra.”

“You don’t have any idea where she might be? Or know anybody who would know?”

The man shifted his feet and looked at the ground. “No sah, I dunno wha she gone.”

The cat hissed and swiped at the man.

He looked at the cat, then closely at the slave, and said quietly: “You know where she is.”

The man let out a squeak and shook his head vigorously. “No sah, NO sah! I swear by God Almigha, no SAH!”

He glowered at the man standing before him. He knew something was going on. Knew but didn’t know why. And it seemed to him that heaven shut its gates and the world became cold and dark, wind whipping through the soul of creation, snatching light and warmth from his hardening heart, and he remembered how he had thought earlier that those who worked for him were people and he realized he was wrong; in that moment he bore all the shame and pain and rot that inevitably comes from owning others into a single fist that sliced through the air and connected with the face of his property, sending it crashing to the ground.

Dropped in the process, the cat was poised in attack position, fangs bared at the man on the ground, his body thick and sinewy.

A dove landed on his shoulder.

He was so surprised that his second swing paused in midair. The dove cocked its head, looked at him with eyes that seemed vaguely familiar, and began to sing. First one shrill note, then a melody, playing with precision and beauty. So enthralled was he by the bird that his fist dropped to his side, his muscles loosened, and it felt like the gates of heaven were...

SMACK

The dove was gone.

The cat looked up at him, feathers in its fur, blood in its stomach, and hissed.

As he beat the man into the ground, so hard that the man's head was driven into the soft earth and became level with the dirt, and as the cat pranced around him, almost egging him on, he thought of his father and was overcome with a sense of pride.

As he left the man in the ground, the cat eating his face, to gather a hunting party for Nance, he thought of his grandfather and felt a sense of duty deep in his bones.

As he released the hounds to hunt his slave, the cat, spry and muscular, leading the charge with the poise of a hardened veteran, his soul radiated with a sense of belonging.

Much later, after he had bought a new housekeeper from town, he lounged in his chair before the fireplace, stroking the once again lazy and fat cat, thinking of what his father had told him. "I'm no one's slave, Father," he said happily.

The cat purred.

The cat smiled.