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## Pride

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The day began to come to an end as the sweltering afternoon heat gave way to the considerably cooler whispering breezes dancing through the country air. The corn tassels gently swayed back and forth creating mass ripples of vegetation slowly waving through the fields. As the warmth submitted to milder temperatures, this small Southern Indiana community began to let the pleasures of fraternizing replace the tensions of individual labors.

John was one who took advantage of these breaks from the monotonous trials of the day. He walked around from family to family talking and preaching about the rise of his people out of slavery and oppression to someday live out their dreams and watch their young ones prosper under the wings of God.

John was a large man, but not oversized. His waist and legs were strong from the long days of patrolling the fields, harvesting and maintaining the crops. His shoulders hunched over as his back broadened out. His skin was darker than the richest colored onyx. The hue set him apart from the others. He was passed by in the night many times because his flesh would blend with the cool noire of the southern summer evenings. His facial features were strong from his chiseled and curved jaw up and through the protruding angular bones above his eyes, causing them to set deep within his head. From within gleamed his most distinctive physical characteristic: green eyes. They flashed when he blinked, glared when he squinted, and blinded when he opened them wide. He drew people's attention when he spoke. They, along with his public dislike for the white man, set him apart from any other man in his community. He didn't only speak against the oppressive whites, but for black power, freedom, equality, and the ability of his people to move beyond their present state. His mouth probably should have been the end of him long ago. John's eyes seemed particularly bright this evening as he dazzled his people with encouragement. They gathered around him tightly, enclosing him in their interest.

"The white man in 'is robes an' hoods don't put no scare in me. You see, I know where I am goin'. That's the difference 'twinst me an' some of you. The good book say all things work together for good for those who love the Lord. Do you love 'im? Do you, Jimmy?" he asked as he rested his hand on the shoulders of a small child. "Enough to put all your trust in 'im, an' stand up for what is right? I do, an' I ain't afraid to hang. If the Lord want me to hang on that tree, then I just got to. But, I ain't going to not do what's right."

He pointed to the old oak off to the side of the road as the crowd broke their stillness with rhythmic swaying. Individuals throughout uttered "Amen" and "Alleluias" as he stared at the hanging tree. It had one large limb that could hold any weight. It had taken the life of many of his people, turning their eyes inside out and breaking their necks with one swift halt.

John continued speaking for a while, raising tired heads to attention. As he spoke his green eyes moved rapidly, and he saw what was taking place beyond. The whitehoods were coming around the corner of the road. Hovering on their

horses in clouds of dust, they numbered around twenty. Two large ones carried their sacrilegious burning cross. The flames flickered through the pre-sunset breeze. They held shotguns and clubs. With no concern for the element of surprise, they yelled obscenities and threats.

John's followers turned their heads in terror towards the pack of hateful whites. Then they split off in different directions. The women grabbed hold of their young ones and the men ran towards their hidden shotguns or whatever else could be used as a weapon in defense. The scene looked like a flock of birds scared away from rest. The only one left was John. He stared in indecision, pondering whether to hold his ground or run. Choosing the later, he dashed in the direction of the northern woods. Huffing and gasping for air he slipped on the loose dirt of the country road and fell face first in the dust.

As he lay there he saw some of the costumed men stop in the midst of the community. They jumped off their horses and chased a few of the departing people. One large white man clubbed a youngster in his ribs. The boy stumbled to the ground holding his side. In a quick burst the white man clubbed again, tagging the head and legs hard enough to hurt the eyes of those watching from a distance. When the blows stopped the boy squirmed, then became motionless. The hood turned.

"You're one dead green-eyed nigger," called one of them.

"Ain't no use in runnin'. You're going to hang tonight, boy," yelled another.

By the time John reached the woods they were almost on him. He plunged into the thick body of trees and shrubs, cutting his face and thrashing arms. The hoods stopped, jumped off their horses, and rallied into the woods screaming directions.

John didn't feel the cuts or the rolling of his ankles on the uneven forest floor. He just continued running. The sun was setting and it was getting darker. The trees were not distinctive, everything looked the same. His heart throbbed with energy as his chest expanded with the air surrounding him. He began to think not about what way to run or how to get away, but what would happen if he never came home again. Who would love his Lizzy and his kids? Who would be the one to pull the community out from underneath the White man's boot.

These thoughts left his mind as he now had to concentrate on every move. His legs were stiffening and starting to drag. He could feel himself getting weak and slowing down. The shadows began to separate and he could distinguish what he was going by or running in to. The hoods behind him were gaining. They yelled more orders. It must have been the anger within them that kept them from tiring as John did. Fear is a powerful aid, but it fades in comparison with hatred.

John splashed into the water, shooting sprays of the river everywhere. His clothes soaked through as the warmth in his body passed with the cooling of the currents. John stood still in the water. Thinking he could stay there to rest for a while, he submerged himself to his neck and listened as they approached. They halted at the river as if they knew the chase had just gotten more challenging. They searched the other bank, past the shallow beach and down in both directions.

"We know you're here, boy. You'd be better just giving yourself up."

The men walked the shore line. John had begun to move quietly downstream. He could faintly see the men hovering above him. He moved on until he was far enough away that he couldn't be heard when he breathed. He rested, but only for short periods. He knew he couldn't let down his guard for more than a few seconds. Before long he found himself studying the ripples of the river. They curled over the rocks, not breaking through to foam, but just gliding across. Looking up at the moon, he realized that going back home would be close to impossible now. He would only be endangering the community.

The stars in the sky were punched out of the blackness in disarray. They floated. He remembered stories his father used to tell him of the slaves following one of those stars to freedom. He thought to himself that it was no better for his people now. With laws of freedom written but not enforced, they were unprotected.

A splash! John broke his thoughts and focused his mind on what was entering the water just a few strides away. It was a hood, wading through the current, attempting to run into a scared green-eyed black man. John knew the man was getting too close, and that something had to be done. He readied his hands and studied the man's motions. He reached down into the water and found a fist-sized rock from the bottom of the river bed. He brought it out and held it to his chest. The man waved his arms in the dark water. He brushed up against John and, realizing he had found what he was looking for, grabbed with his outstretched hands. John cocked his arm and punched the hood in the side of the face with the open end of the rock. The face shattered, blood exploding everywhere. The action was too quick for the hood to say anything, but the sound was enough to draw the others. The man's limp body dragged down John's side as it sank in the ripples to the bottom of the shallow shore line.

"What was that? It came from over there," hollered one of them. They pounced on the dead body half floating in the river. Then, understanding, they turned their sight towards John's shadowed figure escaping out of the water and penetrating the woods once again.

He ran now with his original strength, dodging and avoiding branches differently than he had the first time. Though the hoods moved as fast as they could, they were losing him in the thickness of the plant life. Hatred is a powerful, but it fades in comparison with divine aid. John could reel them getting farther behind and began to think about resting again. He came across a small ditch or burrow of some kind and squeezed his way in. The fallen leaves on the forest floor made a cushion. He covered himself with branches, leaving very little showing.

As he rested, he came to the realization that the community could never be his home again. He knew the only way he would see it was with a noose around his neck. He remembered the old men taking the bodies and burying them right after. Hanging didn't scare him as much, however, as the thought of his children and dear Lizzy looking on. He saw Lizzy losing her mind in sadness. The

children would cry themselves to exhaustion, while the community stood by watching in helplessness. He couldn't let this happen.

The white men would catch him. They were not ones to give up a chase. By morning word would be out to every community within fifty miles. There was nowhere he could run. The dogs would come and that was the beginning of the end for a runner. The only remaining alternative weighed heavy.

John closed his eyes and brought his hands together. Praying a soft and silent prayer, he began to cry. The tears trickled from his squinting eyes like honey. He was not a man to cry willingly.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small cutting blade. It caught the moonlight and sparkled. The blade slowly dragged along his arched wrist, shaking as his hand rattled with pain. The blood flowed much quicker and easier than his tears. His movements became slow and studied. The blade fell in the dirt. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but his conscience would not let him. Even though he knew there was no other way, he couldn't help but feel guilty. The moonlight got blurry as his attention lessened. He couldn't hear the soft noises of the forest anymore and his mind was clouding with dizziness and wear.

In his last intentional movement, he glanced towards the stars. They seemed to be blinding bright. The image engraved itself in John's soul as it danced out of his body and upward. He looked down at himself and wondered what his father would say to him when he arrived there. Would he be angry, because John had taken away the precious gift of life twice in one night? Or would he understand and associate it with the gift of pride that he'd given John?

On that night God received John into his community and returned him to the family who had come before him. They all had pride. Many had welts from the repeated slashing of the whips. Some had bullet holes torn through their bodies. Still others had rope burns around their crooked necks. No one looked any differently on John with his open wrists and oddly colored emerald green eyes.