



*Maxville and Back:
A Reparation Story*

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It was our evening walk to Portersmith Dock when Sebastian, my owner, first expressed unhappiness with the reparation. He was drunk on cheap lemon bubbly. He beat his hand with his pole then jabbed me once for no reason.

Why? I asked him.

Because I'm fed up.

The path from Pebbleton House was covered in

slush. The dark landscape, patterned by streetlight, stretched in all directions, a vast winter swamp. Sebastian saw that I was shivering and reached into the wartime canvas sack he used as a pageboy in the war and gave me a heavy gray scouts' blanket to wear over my shoulders.

At the dock he ordered me to sit, so I took the blanket from my back and threw it down onto the slush and stared upward into the black heavens. I felt small, like a slave. Sebastian kicked me once, lightly, and said that he didn't come here to watch me stare into space. Then he pulled from the bubbly and told me that he changed his mind. He wanted me to stand. I grabbed the heavy blanket from the ground so I could put it back over my shoulders and he told me to drop it. So I stood without the blanket and stuffed my fingers into the dainty pockets of my Tunisian trousers.

You're a lucky man for not needing a wife, he said. Not needing a job. You've got all those cushy rooms. All you have to worry about is that Tunisian glass, or

whatever. Did you know there was a time when a slave had nothing? You worked for me and didn't expect to get paid. That's the way it should be.

What you're talking about is the classical school. Now we call it exploitative labor.

He snorted. You're born with money, so nothing's important anymore. He took the disciplinary pole off his belt and waved it around, kicking and hollering like a child playing martial arts. This went on for some time.

I could push you into this ice water, he said.

Why would you say that?

Because it's true. He clicked the pole back on his belt loop. And I don't care. My life's falling apart. There's this slave of mine who should be saving me money like they used to. Reparation doesn't do a damned thing. You can't help me save five cents.

Sebastian took a breather and a pull of bubbly. Some guys I know from the plant have been talking about a guy who wants to make things change. They've been

talking about a fellow named Chris Bru.

So if you pushed me into the water. Drowned me, I suppose. How does that help?

That would break up the pattern. He was satisfied and watched me for a reaction. When he saw there was not one he ordered me to get moving back. Our slave/owner excursion was over. Our dark and quiet homes awaited us.

When Sebastian returned to Pebbleton House for our next session he was so drunk that instead of looking at me when he spoke he talked to my collection of glass. A light snow fell outside and the shoulders of his flannel were powdered. I was frightened, so I jumped to my feet and asked if he needed a drink. Tea. Mint or peppermint. Chai. Vestuvian blend. Milk. Pebbleton House never kept lemon bubbly on the premises.

No. Get your coat on. We're going up to Maxville for a bit. I'll drive. All you have to do is sit. Sit and have your thoughts. Except now you'll be in my car and you won't have your Tunisian glass, or whatever.

I can't go to Maxville, I said.

Maxville was not pleasant. A city populated by factory workers, like Sebastian, and their warehouses of poorly made necessities. During the war my companions and I used to venture to Maxville for paper and soap. Now it was a wasteland of near-poverty.

Pehari, yes, and even Lipschitz. But Maxville is outside of the effective radius. As well, you're drunk.

Sebastian stared. He flexed his arms as if he might lift, say, my dining table, carved from sturdy winter solid. I bowed my head to him. Sebastian owned me until we reached Lipschitz.

As I put on my lily-white Perturkin shirt he slapped his disciplinary pole against his palm and whistled, pulled from his bottle, said that tonight we were going to see a little something about reparation.

Sebastian's junker was parked outside, next to the smoking pavilion. A Burnt Rod 68 with foreign wheels. I opened the passenger door for myself, and he called me son of a bitch. I should have opened his door first.

I pretended to have forgotten. My acting didn't thrill him. He didn't want to pretend anymore and turned his head and spat.

On the road Sebastian didn't talk, so I looked out the window. The red rock formations on the sides of the highway appeared to burn beneath the snow. The illusion was due to movement. Exhaust from the cars in front lifted and vanished into the winter air. Sebastian's old junker bumped and rattled. We moved at a speed faster than legal, though not obscene. I entertained my own thoughts about slavery, how unsatisfying the modern form could be for someone who desired money and objects. And I wondered how far we would go before he came to his senses and turned back.

After half an hour Sebastian pulled into the parking lot of Breakpoint Diner and told me to get out. I had never eaten in a 'diner' and found the experience blasé. He led me to a booth by the window. The waitress came, he ordered first. We decided on the same meal, a coincidence. The best of working-class fare: flaky

burgers dressed in lemon tang, served with hardened taters and Pam's Gravy for dipping.

Sebastian rubbed his face. I stared more out the window. The red rock, at rest and distant, appeared as itself, the Marsian ribcage of the east. The scattered red bones of giants, I thought.

Sebastian took the straw out of his lemon bubbly and drank straight from the glass. This fellow, Chris Bru, has some interesting ideas about slavery. You remember from before? The work that's done for free? They call it exploitation.

Is that something you'll be doing tonight? Exploiting me?

Damn, he said, followed by mumbling. He flicked a cocky from his nostril then looked up to see if I noticed.

When the food came he folded his hands to pray. I did not, though I waited until he finished before taking a bite. He stuffed his face and wiped gravy from his mouth with a cloth he kept in his back pocket.

I haven't been to Maxville since the war, I said. There must be a lot of slave-owners in that part. I shouldn't be asking these questions. But are you familiar, Sebastian, with all of the regulations?

He nodded because the food tasted good. We go to Maxville. We take care of some business. You don't worry about the regulations.

There's a federal bureau. If you break a law I'll have to report it. The regulations were added for good reason.

No is what Chris Bru says. If I can break a law by treating you a certain way then you're not a real slave. How do you expect me exploit you if you go running to the bureau?

When our waitress came with the check Sebastian ordered me to get my wallet out.

A funny thing you don't think about is how a slave has more money than you and me, he said to her. It used to not be that way. A slave used to not have a thing. Now he's more like a pet.

The waitress was a round woman with gray hair in

buns over either ear. Her nose twitched. She looked over her shoulder to a cook with a mustache who leaned on the counter, watching. Others, in the booths, they paused and turned. Sebastian was being loud. I offered our waitress a wide smile as I placed the wad of bills in her hand.

Tip this woman well. She's a real slave here. If anyone gets money it should be her. Or me. Or any one of these people. I bet they all have slaves that aren't doing a damned thing.

The waitress hurried off, swinging her arm like the money burned.

That's a sensitive subject, I whispered. If you make jokes people will react in a bad way. You are not happy with the reparation, but this doesn't mean that others don't hold it as being, say, a war monument. In a sense.

Sebastian tried his best not to listen. He yawned, looked out the window. His junker, beneath a streetlight, resembled the carcass of an extinct automobile on

exhibit. When the waitress returned with change he stood and ordered me up by motioning with his arm.

The car bumped and rattled, the red rock burned. Sebastian's eyes fell closed now and again. After the flaky burgers and taters and all of the lemon bubbly he was finally getting sleepy.

You've been stringing me along, I said, and this is no way to treat a slave or anyone else. You have to talk now. Lipschitz is getting closer, after that you no longer own me.

We're going to Maxville. We're taking care of some business.

Passing headlights swam across Sebastian's hardened face. How many people in Maxville must own slaves, I thought. We were entering a slave-owner community. A hum beneath my skin made it difficult to sit still.

You're being a little enigmatic. I'm not afraid to say that I'm worried.

At first I thought he hadn't heard. Then: There's a point I'm trying to make. I don't know if you've been

listening.

I was listening. Still, he was being enigmatic.

A small gesture. Perhaps he fixed the rearview, checked his blind spot. I don't know what that word means. Enigmatic.

It means you're a mystery. (I wanted to flatter him.) You're behaving in a mysterious way.

There is no mystery. It's all clear to me.

What's 'it'?

We need to achieve slavery. We can't get ripped off anymore. If we're given slaves then they should be slaves.

Where are we going, Sebastian? What are we doing in Maxville?

If I started telling you everything that we were doing then I wouldn't be treating you as my slave. That's what Chris Bru says. That damned machine that stamps your glass –

The Divin.

That machine doesn't know how to live. Only knows how to stamp the Tunisian glass, or whatever.

You want to treat me as a slave, I said. Good. You're not doing it well. For one, I shouldn't be sitting up here beside you in the front seat. Also, why do you even entertain my questions, Sebastian? Probably the most important point is that I should be doing work and not getting paid. My incentive would be -- I don't know -- you wouldn't beat me or get me with your pole.

Sebastian rolled down his window and a chill entered the car. He put his arm out and slapped the roof. Then he whistled.

The streetlights of Maxville glowed sickly orange and the streets were lined with parked cars, but there wasn't traffic. We turned left here and right there, waited at several stoplights. We drove beneath an overpass that served as a walkway between two of the larger shopping centers. The Thrift Horse's Mouth and Budgetarium.

Sebastian was all but gone. I asked if Chris Bru would be attending wherever we were going.

He'll be there. And some other fellows.

If you don't mind me asking, and I don't want to

suggest anything horrible.

Okay.

You're not going to do anything bad tonight, master. I only say that because I don't know what goes through your mind. You see? You're an enigma.

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel and he made a face like he was about to sneeze. He formulated an answer that sounded like this: We're not doing anything bad. What we're doing is what we should be. It's about justice, if you know what that means.

He pulled into a lot of overwhelming size where only twenty or so automobiles were parked. Sebastian didn't order me to get out of the car, but he opened his door and stood, slammed the door and walked away at a pace so steady, so calm, it appeared for a moment he had sobered up. I remained, frightened, and watched Sebastian vanish into darkness then into light and back into darkness.

Two figures came from where Sebastian had vanished. They were large men. In my memory they were ghosts.

One to Sebastian's door, the other to mine. Laughter. A few words of conversation. One fellow talked about a kennel. The other was enthusiastic. The man at my door must have had a nice-sized piece of wood from a winter solid that he used to bash against my skull.

I came to with a headache in an L-shaped room that smelled like a library. Another slave in fine Tunisian trousers was spread against the long vertical wall. He wasn't conscious. His chest lifted and fell. When his eyes opened and he recognized my lily-white Perturkin, his face turned as pink as summer fruit. Then he whimpered, and I understood that the fellow was not right. The hand at his side, fingers splayed, showed he had chewed his nails down far enough that dry blood encrusted the tips.

After some time I worried that his sobs were affecting me and I asked for his name. Had his slave-owner brought him? Was he beaten with a heavy piece of wood?

The man rolled onto his side and whimpered. Now

and then a name escaped from his mouth: Vanessa. Vanessa, my child. That bouquet does not look like it's for your mother. Now who? Now who do you suppose those flowers go to? What's that? To me? Why yes they do indeed.

An indeterminate period of time passed. The door opened. A fellow larger than Sebastian, though similarly dressed in flannel, came inside, followed by the smell of wet animal. The crazed fellow across the room was on his back and appeared to be licking an invisible teat that hung above his face.

Get up, the man said to him. Knock that off, slave. Reparation time is here. Reparation time has come.

The fellow remained on his back and emitted a *hiss* from his throat. A twig, I thought, stuck in his windpipe.

Come on, said the big man. Your time has come. All you have to do is stand.

He kicked the crazed fellow in the ribs. The latter rolled onto his side. *Hiss* and moan. He kicked his

tailbone. The twig in his windpipe turned into a pebble. The big man lifted him and lugged him over his shoulder, opened the door with one hand and slipped away. The knob turned as he locked the door from the outside.

My period alone in the room lasted a long time. The notion that I might be pushed into ice water. My Tunisian glass. I never willed it to my nephew abroad in Saint Luc de Boufface. It would go on the market, strangers would purchase the collection. What penalties existed for owners who damaged their slaves? Two times I urinated in my trousers.

When the big fellow in the flannel returned I kneeled before him with my hands folded. In my thoughts I begged him for mercy, but I was too frightened to speak.

You going to get up or are you going to play dead? Reparation time. The reparation's come.

I was up and ready, terrified he might kick me. Then down a narrow hallway, lit by kidney-shaped bulbs that

flickered with different intensities, warping the space. On the sides were doors to rooms where other slaves were probably waiting. I shivered and hoped the big man might provide me with a blanket.

The hallway took us onto a stage. My impulse was to turn away, he gripped the back of my neck. The audience beneath was made up of twenty or more men, all like Sebastian. These were his people in flannels. Poles hung from their belt loops. Some were on folding chairs, others leaned against the wall. Most drank frothy lemon bubbly from plastic cups. They looked at me in a curious way.

The big man ordered me to undress. When I didn't move he ordered me to undress again. A bare arm extended from the velvet curtain behind. In its hand was an elaborately colored disciplinary pole. The audience applauded: Whoop-whoop. Here comes the reparation, whoop-whoop. The big man retrieved the pole and swung it like a mallet into the small of my back. The holler that erupted from my mouth belonged

to somebody else.

When I was naked, and my trousers and Perturkin were piled at my feet, Sebastian came running on stage as if he were accepting an award. He waved around the disciplinary pole then whacked me in the back of the legs. Not as hard as the first, though my knees buckled. The audience whooped. I was on the floor. He clubbed my spine. I begged him to be nice to me. I'm not goddamned enigmatic, he said. He got my teeth with his boot and spit in my hair then brought the pole down hard on my tailbone.

After the 'auction block,' which is what these big men called this activity, Sebastian and another carried me out into the lot and laid me in the back of the junker. Whenever I ran into sleep I was confronted by large colored shapes that spun so quickly and at such an angle I was nauseous. Within seconds of seeing the shapes I was more exhausted than I had ever been, a wave. And I vanished.

When I came to we were bumping and rattling down

the road and Sebastian was screaming at me from the front seat. My heart raced. Yes, I thought, he will begin hitting me again, and I'll have to cower. I thought of the Parkshire mole which, when brought out of the darkness, curls into the fetus position. The Parkshire is a frightening little animal, a pale hairless mole with oil drops for eyes.

Hey, he said. You need to wake up for a bit. That's it. You have to sit up and stay awake.

I did as he said. There were unknown pains developing in the lower region of my body.

The men said I should let you sleep for a bit then wake you up. Make sure you weren't suffering a confession from your head being hit.

There was time with no talk. I brought myself to look out the window now and again, but all I saw was black. Sebastian caught me yawning in the rearview and warned that he would come back there and give me some more of the reparation if I dozed off. He pulled from the lemon bubbly. Then he beat his hand

against the steering wheel and sang one of the popular songs by Kris Montobonto or Lilly Hurtzinkle and her Moonshiners. The lyrics were about going to your woman with a flower in your hand then kissing her on the cheek. Then telling her that she's the girl you love and how she makes you weak.

Next Thursday, he said. we're going to do this auction block Chris Bru devised. Basically, we take some belongings from all of our slaves and we auction them off. The word Chris Bru uses is redistribution.

So you're going to be redistributing, I said. And what do you have in mind?

I figure you can suffer a little. So I told the fellow I would have a whole collection of Tunisian glass. What do you think about that?

Sebastian was laughing at me, though I wasn't sure. My nose bled. A drop hit my tongue and I caught myself savoring the salty quality and believed it was miraculous that such a treat could fall from nowhere. I thought, This is my blood. And I realized that I was not right.

So basically we'll be auctioning off your collection, piece by piece. By the way, were you the slave who was in the room with the lunatic?

He caught me dozing off, turned around and threw an empty bubbly at my face. I was asking you a question. Did you hear it?

No.

I asked if you were staying in the room with the lunatic.

I was.

Because it was the funniest thing. We brought him out on the stage just like we did to you, and when Chris Bru hit him with the pole he started hollering about Victoria this, Victoria that. And Chris Bru told him, We've got your Victoria right here, behind this curtain. And when the slave went to look behind the curtain Chris Bru gave him a whack in the ass.

Sebastian took both his hands from the steering wheel and applauded himself. Whoop. Here comes the reparation, whoop. The car swerved and we nearly went

into oncoming traffic in the next lane. Sebastian took hold of the steering wheel and turned around and said to me that he wasn't going to get us killed tonight. Then he pulled from his bubbly to show me how confident he was. This is when we swerved in the other direction, away from the traffic, rolled over a short barrier and hit a mammoth rock.

Sebastian's head was bloody. He cursed and got out of the car and threw some small rocks, pebbles, against the large red rock we crashed into. When he saw this did no good he cursed some more. Then he turned to the junker.

I wanted to sleep, not concerned with how badly I was hurt. Sebastian called me son of a bitch then pulled me out of the car, and I believe he punched me. I can remember little else, for reasons I understand. Only that he told me he hardly cared I didn't have to work, that didn't matter anymore. Truth was he never would have hit the rock had I not been in the car.

He pointed to the rock and asked me if I saw it.

I couldn't bring myself to answer so he asked again, shook me by the collar of my Perturkin and threatened to shatter my tail bone. I said that I could see the rock. Good. He used one hand to grab the hair on the back of my head, the other to grab my trousers. Then he tossed me into it.