

*"All this work," sniffed Rachel. "You'd never think there'd be so much of it in such a narrow little dark place. I spend all my time huffing and puffing."* She dragged a kettle of water to the fire. It sloshed sideways, so she dispersed some of the spillage around the floor with her bare foot. Droplets raced across the wooden boards like ants, vanishing double-quick into corners. It was almost as good as sweeping, she persuaded herself, which she didn't have the time or inclination for right now.

Here they lived, Rachel and Titan and Jem in their new hut, a small log cabin down by the shore of Birchtown. Titan hadn't given up after their disaster in Shelburne. He had fashioned every log and seam of this new home himself. It wasn't the Maybe House, it could never be that, but it was a kind of house all the same, with one small room and a fireplace to cook on and keep them passably warm—as long as there was enough wood chopped. Rachel felt she mustn't be ungrateful—it was much better than the pit-cabin, anything had to be better than that—but sometimes it was hard to keep the tears from squeezing out and running down her nose when her hands were rough and aching from the labour of it all.

Mamma was still lost, and Rachel felt lost without her. It wasn't just a question of love. And it wasn't just that Mamma was the twine that tied them neatly into a family bundle. It was more than that. Truth told, Rachel found it dreadfully hard being the mamma in Mamma's place, doing all the woman chores and looking after the baby besides. Though she'd never have admitted it before, it was even harder not to hear Mamma's grumping day after day. The lack of it meant her warm stout presence was gone and Rachel was supposed to act the grown-up woman of the house. Now it was just Titan and herself to guard Jem against the harsh befallings of the world.

She didn't feel ready for it. She wanted normal child chores and the freedom to be out in the woods with her Micmac friend, Ann-Marie, or even better, she wanted to be sitting on a rock, book-studying. Or putting memorized tricky things into little Corey's head, reading and arithmetic, to make Nanna Jacklin's grandson into a civilized Nigra. She needed to give those tricks away, pass them along like a great chain of learning. First to Corey, then to her own little brother, Jem, when he was big enough, and then, who knew? Learning, reading and writing, could just stretch and stretch like a great fishing net till it covered the world. And everyone fished up in that net would be happier for it, doubtless.

Thinking about Mamma again, Rachel went over it all in her mind, just as she'd done nearly every day since Mamma had been gone. She'd racked and riddled her brains and told Titan all she knew. Rachel was a good describer. But no one, not Titan, not Nathan Crowley, not even the Sunday preacher who came sometimes to Birchtown but travelled around the whole area, had been able to search Mamma or her captor, George Gyssop, out. Now the Micmac family of Ann-Marie were seeking. They used their wits and their eyes and small bunches of herbs and stones to divine by, but though it was said that they could find anyone or anything, that they could

find a lone white crab in the whole wide ocean, they'd not found Mamma. Maybe Gyssop had moved on, taking her with him, his property.

Rachel tried to remember more. Her missus Pritchard in Shelburne had said George Gyssop was likely named after King George of England, but a man less like a king you'd be hard put to find.

"You've done your best. That's the truth," replied Titan, when she told him that last tidbit of knowledge, and there was the end to it. But he had a wild lost look, and every night he sat with his arms dangling and his chin dropped almost all the way to his chest.

The hut had chinks in the log walls, filled with straw, bits of paper, and scraps of fabric the family had found to keep the wind out. There wasn't much thrown away in Birchtown. Almost every last fragment of anything was used up. Yet there were still gaps in the walls for the gale, when it visited, to whistle through. This wasn't entirely bad. A space between two logs near the door made a bit of a hidey-hole for keeping things in. Rachel thought of it as her treasure trove. Not that she had a pile of things to store there. But she did have something special: the five English guineas. Rachel had pushed the precious coins under some straw in the hole, wanting to keep them for the worst days of winter. Then they'd shine like summer sun. Then they'd be more useful than a spade to dig taters, more useful even than the biggest basket in the world for *bluebetties*, and then some. She didn't tell anyone about them, not Ann-Marie, not Titan, not Nathan Crowley. They were her secret.

Rachel had never seen nor known such money in her life before. Each heavy drop of gold was worth twenty-one shillings, more than she could carry in her hand at one time or fold her mind around. She tried doing the sums, using the numbers that Nathan had taught her. One guinea was a nest egg; five a fortune, likely more than Titan could earn in half a year—and that was if there was work for him. There'd been little enough lately, skilled carpenter though he was.

Sometimes Rachel caught a glint of the hidden coins in the straw of the wall, especially after the wind blew hard, and covered them fast, her fingers trembling and dark against the spangly cool yellowness of them. They were a secret spell. They lifted the Sparrows from the level of the other Nigras roundabout and set them somewhere else. In their way they were now high and mighty maybe as Colonel Blucke, the head of Birchtown. Thinking that made her feel guilty and good at the same time—she was keeping something back from Titan, it was true, but in the end it would be something for all of them. Her coins were the guinea promise. They drifted luminous and spanking clean through her dreams. Somehow she imagined they would keep the family safe from the bad people that still hung around Birchtown, the de-listed soldiers and the homeless drifters. She didn't know where those folk came from. She didn't know what they kept locked up in their minds. It frightened her.

But, "Here we are, Titan," she was finally going to say one day around Christmas, her chest puffed like a pigeon, if things became too hard to bear. "Here's all we need to buy the fish and grain to get us through these mis'erable times."

And Titan would stare at her and grin, and they'd all dance round in a circle, singing and laughing. Negro frolics, the white folk would call their antics, with that lordly toss of the head. But Rachel knew better. It was just pure energy that needed to be let out, like steam from the cooking pot, and a bit of the fear as well. Best of all, when Rachel came to think back on it, Mamma was in those imaginings too, singing and laughing with the rest of them.

The new Sparrow hut was a little ways along from the big rich house of Colonel Blucke, and Titan always tipped his cap to him of a morning, especially as Colonel Blucke had loaned him tools to make their new hut. Colonel Blucke wasn't white or black. He was somewhere in between, a nice tan colour like he was white folk sunned too long, and that made him special. He'd been mighty important during the war, an army officer in charge of many Nigras. A kind man, though gruff enough to put the shyness into Rachel whenever she passed him, he still organized the men into work brigades whenever possible and bargained with the white authorities back in Shelburne over food and pay. But all Colonel Blucke's effort didn't seem to help a titch at the moment. Rations were cut, the Nigras were facing more starvation than they'd ever borne as slaves, and you could actually hear winter most days, whining round corners and rattling ill-fitting doors. Or even worse, pit-cabin roofs. "I'm coming," it seemed to be moaning. "You think things are bad now, but I'm coming, so watch out."

Rachel prayed it wouldn't be like last winter. The snow had been piled so high it covered the whole town, and all she'd seen when she went out were rows of spiralling smoke, issuing out of the ice—like men were puffing on their tobacco pipes underneath. That was because the drifts had grown so tall all the chimneys and roof holes were hidden. Folk both black and white crossed themselves or spat sideways when they spoke of it. They prayed such cruel weather would never come again. But if it did there were still those five guineas. There were always the guineas. Come snow or hail or freezing weather too bad to tramp out in, the Sparrows would make it through the ice days. But Rachel didn't want the coins used up faster than needed, for after that there'd be nothing. And the feeling of having nothing made a big hurting hole in her middle like the worst kind of bellyache. So she had to figure out, careful as a squirrel hoarding for its long sleep, when and how to act, what to use the sparkling money for.