

WHAT VERILY RECALLED

(Mississippi 1946)

by Conrad Pegues

"Tell me why she call you Verily Lazarus?"

Horse made waves in the tub, sloshing water onto the floor. Iya parted the murky waters with her hand like she were making a way for something.

"My pappy took her against her will Miss Iya," he said and sighed like he'd laid a great burden down. "Spilled his cream in her cup. Ruined her. Thirteen she was. Just a girl. For a long time they didn't believe it happened like that. Said she was just being womanish, you understand. He was a man being a man.

"When I started pushing out, she went to squat right in the middle of the road near where he took her. Over by where the old highway meets the new. Sixty-one that is. Stopped traffic. White folks was too outdone to know what to do and thought Negroes should get her. Negroes was shamed and called for my grandma. Bout time she got there my mama got up enough strength to knock my grandma down and drop me out of her into the dust."

"Your grandma told you all this?"

He looked down into the water and smiled. "I suspect you gone think me crazy."

"Naw Verily. Seen a thing or two in my life."

"I saw it...what happened and all. Seen it clear in my mind's eye. Use to be dreams. Then it was bits and pieces coming to me awake. See things even more when I'm with...you know."

"You ain't the first one to use a woman for a divining rod."

"No hand caught me Miss Iya. I was covered in red dust. She bit the cord and walked off screaming with a bloody mouth, 'Verily, Verily I say unto you, he took me against my will.' There was a trail of red behind her going on up the road. I remember her screaming my name out over the cotton fields, 'Verily...Lazarus...Verily... Lazarus.' Crazy woman sang my name up the road till nobody saw her. I remember crying in the dust for the longest until this man come out of nowhere and put me to his breast to suck like any woman. When I settle down he handed me to my grandma. Never said a word. Nobody to this day know who he was."

"A man suckled you?"

"A man."

"What happened to your mama?"

He hunched his shoulders. "Can't even see in dreams. They say there was a trail of blood to the new highway that just stopped somewhere or another. Never saw her again. She gone to heaven."

"Heaven?"

"Heaven Miss Iya. Where that blood stopped is where Jesus swoop down to collect her."

"You ever see your daddy?"

"Lazarus? Raised me. My grandma got tired of me. Said I had too much of his blood in me. Was the worst child she'd ever seen. Took me to the juke joint pointed him out, and left

me. Fucker looked just like me Miss Iya. Like looking in a goddamn mirror."

"He say anything about what happened?"

"Naw, didn't say a damn thing. Not something people round here like to talk about anyway. Some things best dis remembered to keep your mind. That's why it's easier for everybody not to call me nothing but Horse. Too much stuff riding Verily."