

# **UNCHAINED MELODEE**

Written by  
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BLACK SCREEN:

HEAVY BREATHING from a female, running, being chased.

BAYING bloodhounds, the POUNDING of horse hooves and the TICK-TICK-TICKING of a road bike from those doing the chasing.

SLAM CUT TO:

EXT. SYCAMORE ROW CHATTEL RANCH - DAY

A RAGING pack of blood hounds races through the backwoods in hot pursuit of a dazzling, quadron slave named MELODEE (25).

SUPER: ALABAMA, GREAT STATES OF AMERICA (2107)

In ragged, threadbare skirt and shoddy leather boots she SPRINTS through the thick underbrush. She's smart, rebellious and as clever as MacGyver in a situation like this.

Not far behind the lead dogs, on a sweating roan, the ranch's overseer-from-hell, JAKE SLOCOM (40s), a whirling dervish of anger, fear, and hypocrisy, CHOMPS a chaw of tobacco, as he dodges skinny pines and towering magnolias.

Two of Slocom's crew, CASH HAYES on horseback and JERICHO LAW on pimped-out mountain bike, speed alongside him.

Melodee glances back. The hounds have closed the gap.

She seeks cover behind a large boulder marked discreetly with an X. She withdraws a hunter's knife hidden there.

The GROWLING lead dog charges. She slices a rope tied to a spike. The dog leaps at her. In midair, the hound is lifted into the air inside a rope net. It spins around the tree line and HOWLS at Melodee watching him from below.

She grabs a backpack hidden behind the boulder, stuffs in the knife, and takes off like a comet.

Slocom and gang appear, a second hound BAYING beside them. They glance up at the HOWLING bloodhound spinning in the net.

HAYES

Coon girl's pretty smart. Got to climb up the tree to free the hound.

SLOCOM

FUCK IT! No time.

The two men KICK their horses into high gear. The second hound jumps in front to lead the way.

Melodee glances back, distracted. She trips and slides down a steep hill into dense shrubbery and tall grass.

Slocom and Hayes see Melodee's fall but they aren't going to chance spraining the horses' delicate ankles. They veer off on a path less steep.

Law follows her. His bike CLIPS a rock. He flies off and SMASHES his head on a boulder. Stone-cold dead, literally.

The second hound continues to HOWL behind Melodee.

She takes advantage of the break. She stops, tosses off her tattered dress and DOUSES it with liquid.

She changes into a cloth shirt, button-up men's trousers and wool duster. She straps on her backpack and races off again.

Seconds later, the remaining hound discovers her clothes, takes a SNIFF and takes off after her. After a few steps, the dog wobbles and falls, fast asleep.

Slocom and Hayes arrive, see the slumbering dog, and see Melodee's dress. Slocom sniffs it and immediately dry heaves.

SLOCOM (CONT'D)

Kava root. Son of a.

Slocom is pissed. He SHOOTs the dog in the head. BAM! BAM! And he returns to the chase. Hayes flinches, begins to object to Slocom's reaction but decides against it.

EXT. CLIFF - DAY

Melodee peers over a steep cliff. A five hundred foot jump. Sure death. Not a good idea.

Hayes sees her and jumps off his horse to pursue on foot. Behind him, Slocom has Melodee in his sights but Hayes obscures his shot.

SLOCOM

CASH, MOVE!

Melodee sees Hayes advance. She spins around, wiggles her fingers irreverently goodbye over her shoulder and jumps.

Hayes now sees the edge of the cliff but he can't stop his momentum. He SLIDES to the edge and flies off.

Slocom pulls up. He jumps off the roan, baffled, and peers down as the SCREAMING Hayes falls to his death.

EXT. VALLEY - DAY

On the horizon, Slocom watches Melodee float in the sky hanging from a kite? At closer look, it's two sheets sewn together. Whatever the hell it is, she dangles from it and rides a thermal into the valley like a soaring hawk.

Slocom watches as a locomotive appears, its black coal-powered smoke flume rising into the sky.

Melodee veers toward it and LANDS on top of a train car. She tosses off the chute and lays flat on the train as it rolls out of sight.

EXT. CLIFF - DAY

Slocom SPITS out a wad of tobacco, mounts the roan, grabs the reins of Hayes's horse, and heads back to the chattel ranch.

SLAM CUT TO:

BEGIN MONTAGE

INT. CYBERSPACE - DAY

Profanity laced social media tweets and posts float by. "Drive-by media sucks!" "Cancel culture!" "Patriots unite!"

INT. NEWS STUDIO - NIGHT

An angry TV NEWS SHOW HOST and GUEST battle verbally.

NEWS SHOW HOST

Curtz is the ultimate patriot!

GUEST

Correction. Curtz is the ultimate autocrat!

EXT. U.S. CAPITOL - DAY

VIOLENT MOBS in white "AMERICA **IS** GREAT AGAIN!" baseball caps attack the U.S. Capitol wielding flag poles, bear spray, canes and bricks. They chant the mantra of the day.

MOB  
 PRESIDENT FOR LIFE. LARSON E.  
 CURTZ!

EXT. MIDDLE SCHOOL - DAY

PARENTS pick up their CHILDREN from school. RAGING PROTESTERS shout and point. They throw face masks and syringes at the families who flee in terror as the protesters run after them.

FEMALE PROTESTER  
 CHILD KILLERS!

The protesters start a chant.

PROTESTERS  
 NO NEEDLES! NO MASKS! NO NEEDLES!  
 NO MASKS!

EXT. ARCTIC - DAY

Surrounded by water and melting ice caps, helpless, stranded Polar bears drift away on tiny blocks of ice.

EXT. GULF COAST - DAY

Hurricane-force winds drive a wall of water onto shore. Houses wiped out. Windows shatter. Roofs of abandoned cars poke out above the water surge that blankets the highway.

EXT. SPACE - NIGHT

Lights around the world fade out. Earth goes dark. A satellite slowly passes by, sputters, and shuts off.

EXT. WHITE HOUSE - DAY

From the South Portico, in blue Sharkskin suit and elongated red tie, LARSON E. CURTZ (a Botoxed 78) addresses a shoulder-to-shoulder MASS OF HYSTERICAL SUPPORTERS on the lawn below.

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Marching, HELMETED THUGS in full body armor wield automatic weapons at petrified BLACKS, HISPANICS, ASIANS, INDIGENOUS, JEWS, MUSLIMS. A bleak detention camp looms behind them.

CURTZ (V.O.)  
 My fellow New Great States  
 Americans, we all know laziness is  
 a trait in minorities.

HYSTERICAL SUPPORTERS (O.S.)  
 LOCK THEM UP! LOCK THEM UP!!

EXT. HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Straight from a scene in "FRANKENSTEIN," an angry MOB waves silver crucifixes at non-Christians. MUSLIMS, JEWS, HINDUS. They pelt them with rocks and celebrate with high fives.

CURTZ (V.O.)  
 And we know the guiding principles  
 of White evangelicals are the key  
 to keeping our newfound nation  
 great.

HYSTERICAL SUPPORTERS (O.S.)  
 AMERICA IS GREAT AGAIN!

EXT. WHITE HOUSE - DAY

Curtz applauds the supporters as they chant. He raises his hands, motions for silence as he delivers a final edict.

CURTZ  
 Tonight, I have signed an Executive  
 Decree for all White citizens to do  
 whatever necessary to maintain our  
 race's manifest destiny on earth.

HYSTERICAL SUPPORTERS  
 PRESIDENT FOR LIFE! LARSON E.  
 CURTZ. PRESIDENT FOR LIFE!

END MONTAGE

SLAM CUT TO:

EXT. TRAIN - DAY

Melodee battles the WIND as she lays spread eagle on the top of the train. She grabs the horizontal ladder and begins to pull herself toward the front edge of the car.

She carefully swings her body down on the vertical ladder and DROPS to the cabin deck.

A TALL MAN in a long coat with tails SLIDES OPEN the car door and stares at her. He's about twice Melodee's age, with piercing blue eyes, like hers.

His skin is a light caramel like hers. They could pass as father and daughter.

Her pinpoint landing on the train hasn't phased him a bit.

TALL MAN

Nice of you to drop by. Quite an entertaining escape.

Melodee stares in disbelief. He's amused by her reaction.

TALL MAN (CONT'D)

Sorry, I work with circus performers. Not much surprises me. Come in, before one of us falls.

INT. TRAIN - DAY

They step inside the passenger car of the old steam locomotive. Well-worn bench seats, Victorian era decorative flourishes, sconces with candles. A desk in a corner piled with paper. Melodee eyes the stocked bar.

TALL MAN

You look like you could use a shot.

MELODEE

Rather have water.

He hands her a bottled water. She downs it in one GULP. He hands her another. She GULPS it down too.

TALL MAN

Who are you anyway?

MELODEE

At the moment? Escaped property. Name's Melodee.

THE SPANIARD

Just call me The Spaniard. My given name's too difficult for most folks to say.

The Spaniard points back over his shoulder.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

And that angry guy back there?

MELODEE

The overseer for the chattel ranch  
I just escaped from. It was that or  
get raped the rest of my life. Or  
traded. Or killed.

THE SPANIARD

Think he'll come after you?

MELODEE

Oh yea. He's pissy that way.

A JOLT. The train GLIDES to a stop. Melodee glances out.

DWARFS, CLOWNS, ACROBATS, ANIMAL TAMERS, A BEARDED LADY and  
other strange CHARACTERS chat in the shade. Unlike Melodee,  
all are White.

Solar-powered AI BOTS supervised by human GAUCHOS begin to  
load the train cars with equipment and supplies.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

Sure'd appreciate it if you'd let  
me tag along for a little while.

THE SPANIARD

To avoid Mr. Pissy back there?

MELODEE

That and because I have to take  
care of some unfinished business.

The Spaniard rubs his chin.

THE SPANIARD

One more mouth to feed in these  
hard times. I dunno.

MELODEE

Just for a few shows?

THE SPANIARD

We only have two more shows this  
season. New Orleans and Natchez.

MELODEE

What if I'd do that trick landing  
at those stops?

THE SPANIARD

You do realize they kill escaped  
slaves down here? Your presence  
could put the circus in jeopardy.

Melodee glances out the window again.

MELODEE

Looks to me like you've already got  
a head start on runaways. What's  
one more gonna hurt?

She points to a bald, tattooed GIANT with a chest of granite  
and biceps the size of melons.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

That guy for instance. Gotta be  
running away from something or  
someone.

THE SPANIARD

That freak of nature? Ralph? Well,  
yea, actually he is. From his  
daddy. Wanted him to join the  
family business. Ralph preferred  
the circus.

She motions to an animated DWARF poking Ralph's chest.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

Him? Ivan? Yeah, he is too. Family  
kicked him out of his Virginia  
home. Because he's different.

MELODEE

Just because he's a Little Person?

THE SPANIARD

NO! Cuz he's gay. Not a popular  
persuasion in the New Deep South.

They watch Ralph and Ivan continue their lover's spat.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

He and Ralph are sweethearts.  
Lovey-dovey one day, fightin' like  
hell the next.

He pours himself another shot.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

So, yeah, we do have our share of  
runaways. It's part of our name.

He points out the window to a BOT rolling up a banner.

"DOC WAYMORE'S RUNAWAY CIRCUS AND FANTASY FAIR."

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

Maybe we can offer you a spot 'til  
end of the season. You definitely  
have a unique act. The Human Kite!

MELODEE

Thanks, Mr...Spaniard.

THE SPANIARD

We'll need to keep that runaway  
slave thingie hush-hush though.  
Anybody asks, you're my daughter.

MELODEE

Well, *Daddy*. Guess you're lookin'  
at your newest circus performer.  
Promise you won't regret it.

THE SPANIARD

Hope not.

INT. SYCAMORE ROW CHATTEL RANCH - BIG HOUSE - DAY

Ranch owner PETERSON PECK (70), a living Egyptian mummy,  
WHEEZES in his bed. He's wrapped from head to toe in blood  
soaked bandages.

Slocom KNOCKS, enters, and removes his hat respectfully.

SLOCOM

She got away, Mr. Peck.

PECK

And your crew?

SLOCOM

Hayes and Law both dead. One of the  
hounds is left but he's shell  
shocked. Won't be slave huntin' no  
more.

The old man cranes his neck toward Slocom. Only his mouth can  
be seen beneath the bandages as he SPEAKS.

PECK

But that black bitch still walks  
the earth?

Slocom nods, then catches himself, remembers Peck can't see.

SLOCOM

Afraid so. Used bedsheets to make some kinda kite. Just floated off a cliff and disappeared.

PECK

So porch monkeys can fly now?

Slocom fidgets nervously with his hat. No answer.

PECK (CONT'D)

Find her and bring her back. She's gonna pay for what she done to me.

Peck shoos out Slocom. When he's at the door, Peck MUTTERS.

PECK (CONT'D)

Which way was she going?

SLOCOM

Southwest.

PECK

So Jackson. Hattiesburg. Maybe New Orleans.

Peck COUGHS up blood. He WHEEZES and catches his breath.

PECK (CONT'D)

Goddamn it! Catch her before somebody else does. Get!

Slocom nods, shoves his hat back on and shuffles out.

INT. CIRCUS TRAIN TO NEW ORLEANS - DAY

A dozen boxcars loaded with circus ANIMALS, PERFORMERS, ROADIES and supplies RUMBLES down the track behind two passenger cars.

INT. PASSENGER TRAIN - DAY

The Spaniard CHOMPS on beef jerky. When he offers some to Melodee, she waves it off.

MELODEE

I'm anti-carnivorous.

The Spaniard raises his brow.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

What? Meat makes me sleepy.

THE SPANIARD

You are one strange n--

The Spaniard stops himself in mid-word.

MELODEE

You weren't gonna call me the N-word were you?

THE SPANIARD

I was just--

MELODEE

Cause the last man to call me that was my previous owner. And I cut his dick off with a hunting knife.

THE SPANIARD

You cut his DICK off?!

MELODEE

How'd you like it if some guy called you spic or a sand spade?

THE SPANIARD

I might slap him around a bit but I wouldn't cut his dick off!

MELODEE

'Cept this senile old fuck's been rapin' me for years and nobody's said a word or lifted a hand.

THE SPANIARD

Did he die?

MELODEE

No such luck. I saved his life. Cauterized the wound. I did chuck his dick in the fire, though.

He shakes his head. Torn between disgust and admiration.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

And threw hot ashes in his face. He might be a little blind.

THE SPANIARD

A *little* blind?

MELODEE

Lucky I didn't cut off his saggy, wrinkled balls.

(MORE)

MELODEE (CONT'D)

But now the ole' pervert'll keep  
his urge to get it on with slave  
girls. Just won't have equipment to  
enjoy it.

The Spaniard BITES off another piece of jerky and starts to CHEW. He examines the cylindrical piece of dried meat. His eyes bulge. He SPITS out the jerky and tosses what's left out the open train car window.

Melodee smiles, amused. The train continues down the track.

EXT. WARD SLAVE-O-RAMA - NEAR NEW ORLEANS - DAY

Melodee's mother RUTH (50s), a proud mulatto striving to stay positive, joins other SLAVES for a meeting with their master.

The SLAVES, BLACKS, JEWS, LGBTQ, HISPANICS, file in behind her in search of a shady spot to sit.

The owner of the Slave-O-Rama, MITCH WARD (50s), introduces preacher HONTZ SNYDER (60s), dinner-plate-faced, double-chinned, belly over his belt.

WARD

In recent months, three slaves have  
run away from this slave  
dealership. And from me. Your  
master. I've asked Reverend Snyder  
to recite scripture to show you why  
that must no longer occur.

Snyder steps forward. He raises his bible like Moses brandishing The Ten Commandments.

SNYDER

Question: What does God demand  
servants to do for their masters?  
Answer: Obey the master and you  
obey God!

GRUMBLES emerge from the back. Snyder shuts that down with an angry glance. His VOICE rises.

SNYDER (CONT'D)

Question: Why are Blacks, Jews,  
Mexicans--the non-Whites--chosen as  
slaves? Answer: Because the Lord  
wants it so. They are dimwitted but  
strong. Ugly but made for hard  
labor, like mules and oxen.

Audience members COUGH, CLEAR their throats, SIGH.

SNYDER (CONT'D)

Question: If a servant runs away, what should be done? Answer: He should be caught and punished however the master sees fit. Even killed if necessary.

Snyder saves the best for last.

SNYDER (CONT'D)

A final question: Do we blame the master for punishing his servant? Answer: NO! He is just doing what he must to help those who cannot help themselves, the non-Whites and non-evangelicals among us.

Snyder SNAPS the bible shut. In the distance, two of Ward's HENCHMEN drag a Hispanic slave, MARTINA (30s), to a wooden cross. They LASH her arms to the horizontal patibulum and expose her bare back to Ward, his whip in hand.

Audience members MUMBLE and turn away. A SHORT HISPANIC SLAVE takes two steps toward Ward, hangs his head in despair and returns to his previous spot in the crowd.

SNYDER (CONT'D)

Master Ward mentioned slaves have been running away from their home.

Snyder points to the woman lashed to the cross.

SNYDER (CONT'D)

Martina is one of them. And before she did, she set Master Ward's best hemp field on fire.

From the crowd, a whispered response.

LESBIAN SLAVE

You go girl!

SNYDER

The bible says if a master strikes his slave and the slave dies, then the master shall also be punished. But if that slave survives, no vengeance shall be taken. For she is her master's property.

Martina cannot see Ward but she turns her head as far as possible toward him and SPITS. She YELLS back in Spanish.

MARTINA  
 I'M NOBODY'S PROPERTY! AND YOU'RE  
 NOT MY MASTER YOU PIECE OF SHIT!

Snyder doesn't speak Spanish but he knows Martina's words are spoken with anger and resentment.

Ward grits his teeth. He doesn't wait for Snyder's signal. He rears back and LASHES Martina, OVER and OVER again.

In the crowd: MOANS. SHRIEKS. SOBS.

Martina, her back bloody and cut, slumps and passes out. Ward motions for his henchmen to take her down from the cross.

Snyder addresses the shaken audience.

SNYDER  
 God bless Master Ward. I am sure  
 Martina will be fine. But she will  
 now practice obedience. As God  
 requires of all enslaved property.

On the way back to their shacks, Ruth helps a Black slave past his prime, UNCLE SIMON (70s). He turns to her.

UNCLE SIMON  
 That was sure some psycho White man  
 bullshit!

Ruth smiles lightly, places an arm around the old timer and straggles back to slave quarters with him in tow.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF NEW ORLEANS - DAY

The circus train emerges from woods into an urban wasteland.

Black smoke flumes rise from every part of the city, like Victorian London at the dawn of the Industrial Age. Coal is king now, even here in New Orleans.

The train meanders through the devastation. Skyscrapers with shattered glass windows. Storefronts with the goods inside picked clean. Government buildings hidden by overgrown kudzu.

Beneath an underpass by the Mississippi River, hordes of homeless ITINERANTS stream from tents.

INSERT - STAKED WOODEN SIGN

"CURTZVILLE"

MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN in threadbare rags SCURRY alongside the circus train. They wave at DOC WAYMORES'S animals, PERFORMERS and FREAKS.

Circus PERFORMERS toss promo flyers from the train. Hundreds of pieces of paper cover the city like snowflakes.

INSERT - PROMOTIONAL FLYER

"CIRCUS PERFORMANCES ALL WEEK! CITY PARK"

A YOUNG GIRL catches a flyer and hands it to her MOTHER. They read it and smile.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS TRAIN STATION - DAY

The train SPITS OUT a final smoke flume and rests. CROWDS close in. The circus CREW JUMPS out and starts to UNLOAD.

Melodee notices a nearby sign.

INSERT - SIGN

"CRESCENT CITY SLAVE AUCTION. DAILY. SUNRISE TO DUSK. WHITE MALE BIDDERS ONLY."

She dips her broad brimmed hat over her face and hides behind a large magnolia to listen and observe.

EXT. SLAVE AUCTION HOLDING PEN - DAY

A nervous Black man, POMPEY (late 60s), addresses a small group of shackled SLAVES.

POMPEY

Listen up. I'm here to prepare you for tomorrow's auction.

Pompey points to a listless MIDDLE AGED SLAVE.

POMPEY (CONT'D)

You! What's your age?

MIDDLE AGED SLAVE

If I live to see coca and marijuana planting time, forty-five or fifty, I guess.

POMPEY

Today and every day forward, you're thirty.

MIDDLE AGED SLAVE  
I know I'm older than that!

POMPEY  
Not anymore. From now on, if  
anybody asks and you say forty-five  
or fifty, the master'll string you  
up and whup you 'til you smoke!

Pompey lets his words sink in. The slaves hang their heads.

MIDDLE AGED SLAVE  
Well then, I reckon I'm only  
thirty.

Melodee smiles nervously, even though the scene is not funny.  
She recalls when she was sold at another slave auction.

BEGIN FLASHBACK

EXT. BATON ROUGE SLAVE MARKET - DAY

It's busy. Packed with SLAVE DEALERS, PLANTATION OWNERS,  
CHATTEL RANCHERS, AUCTIONEERS, FARMERS, SPECULATORS, THE  
CURIOUS and, of course, SLAVES. Thousands of slaves.

SUPER: *BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA, EIGHT YEARS EARLIER*

The once thriving Louisiana state capital has become a scene  
from *Mad Max*. THUGS, SEX WORKERS and gun-toting RUFFIANS  
crowd filthy streets. Dogs and the HOMELESS ravage trash for  
food scraps, bottled water, anything of value for sale or  
trade.

EXT. SLAVE AUCTION PLATFORM - DAY

In the town square, a wooden platform serves as the stage for  
today's *entertainment*.

The AUCTIONEER, a self-important con man in stovepipe-hat and  
black tails, quiets the all male, all White AUDIENCE.

AUCTIONEER  
Gentlemen, we've saved the most  
valuable slave for last.

The Auctioneer's GOONS escort MELODEE (at age 17) to stage.

AUCTIONEER (CONT'D)  
Young Melodee is an authentic  
quadroon. Born to a Black nigrass.  
(MORE)

AUCTIONEER (CONT'D)  
 Fathered by a distinguished White  
 political leader.

Melodee remains steadfast and proud despite the comment.

AUCTIONEER (CONT'D)  
 She's the ideal fancy maid for  
 those cold southern nights.

He shoots the crowd a lecherous grin and waits for the  
 LAUGHTER to stop before he continues.

AUCTIONEER (CONT'D)  
 How much do you bid?

FARMER (O.S.)  
 Five hundred Curtzcoin!

AUCTIONEER  
 Gentlemen! Please don't insult me.

He flashes an official-looking document.

AUCTIONEER (CONT'D)  
 This notarized certificate promises  
 she's of good moral character.

PREACHER (O.S.)  
 Seven hundred.

AUCTIONEER  
 And she's very intelligent.

SCHOOLTEACHER (O.S.)  
 Eight hundred Curtzcoin!

Melodee wipes away tears, defiantly grits her teeth and  
 glares at the audience.

AUCTIONEER  
 Her chastity is pure. Gentlemen,  
 she has not yet been deflowered!

That did it. The lustful BIDDERS go bonkers.

DOCTOR (O.S.)  
 Thirteen hundred.

LAWYER (O.S.)  
 Fifteen!

The camera zooms into a dapper, square-jawed, self-assured  
 blonde lawyer, SILAS GREENE (22).

SILAS GREENE  
Seventeen hundred Curtzcoin!

The Auctioneer grins. He can see that's the winning bid.

AUCTIONEER  
Going. Going. Gone!

The Auctioneer STRIKES his gavel and points to Silas.

AUCTIONEER (CONT'D)  
Sold! To that young man for  
seventeen hundred Curtzcoin!

From the crowd: MURMURS. CHEERS. APPLAUSE.

The other BIDDERS swarm Silas to congratulate him for his purchase.

The Auctioneer's goons drag Melodee offstage and present her to her new owner. Her head down, wrists cuffed, leg irons tight, Melodee sobs.

Silas lifts her chin, retrieves a handkerchief and wipes the tears from her eyes. He motions for the goons to remove her handcuffs. She looks at him. He smiles. Her eyes brighten.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. SLAVE AUCTION HOLDING PEN - DAY

Melodee returns to reality. She surveys her surroundings. Confident that nobody has seen her, she creeps back to the circus to help with set up.

EXT. IVAN'S MAKEUP TENT - DAY

Ivan ducks into a tent bearing a sign.

INSERT - SIGN

"PERFORMERS ONLY"

Melodee HURRIES over.

MELODEE  
Mr. Ivan?

Ivan pokes his head out of the tent flap.

IVAN  
 Been expecting you. Spaniard filled  
 me in.

INT. IVAN'S MAKEUP TENT - DAY

Ivan POURS himself a whiskey shot. Points to the bottle.

IVAN  
 Snake bite medicine?

MELODEE  
 You circus folk sure like your  
 spirits. No thanks, but I'll take  
 some water.

Melodee sees a fruit bowl.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
 And maybe a peach? Haven't enjoyed  
 fresh fruit for years.

Ivan hands her the water and a peach.

IVAN  
 Spaniard says you...you jump?

MELODEE  
 Not really jump. More like kite.  
 Parakite.

Ivan squints. Parakite doesn't register.

IVAN  
 Whatever it is you do, you're gonna  
 need a costume. That's what I do.

MELODEE  
 Could you make the parakite too?

IVAN  
 Child, if it can be sewn, stitched,  
 tailored, tacked, embroidered or  
 knitted, I can do it.

MELODEE  
 Great. Already drew up what I need.

Melodee hands Ivan a pencil sketch.

INSERT - PENCIL SKETCH

The parakite resembles an upside down, oblong letter U.

MELODEE (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
Needs to be light but strong. To trap the air. I based it on one in a book. By Leonardo da Vinci.

Ivan squints. Again, the name doesn't register.

IVAN  
Okay. So one costume and one of whatever this is.

Ivan tosses Melodee's sketch on a table.

IVAN (CONT'D)  
There's something else I need to make you.

Ivan RIFLES through a cabinet drawer and withdraws a fake black beard. He places it on a mirrored makeup table.

IVAN (CONT'D)  
A disguise. Spaniard said you're a runaway. And that "man getup" you're wearing ain't enough for you to hide in plain sight.

MELODEE  
So much for the Spaniard wanting to keep the runaway thingie *hush-hush*.

IVAN  
It is hush-hush doll. Just me and Ralph know and we'd never tell a soul. Cross my cute lil' heart!

Ivan winks at her. He CLIMBS a stool to get a better look at Melodee's face.

IVAN (CONT'D)  
A little glue and the beard and you'll pass for a White man any day of the week.

MELODEE  
Glue? How long does it last?

IVAN  
'Bout a week 'fore we do a retouch.

MELODEE  
A week!? Is it itchy?

IVAN  
No more'n crab lice or poison ivy.

Melodee rubs her face, grimaces. Ivan SNICKERS.

IVAN (CONT'D)  
I'm shittin' you girlfriend! Washes  
off with soap and water.

Melodee SIGHS, relieved.

EXT. SYCAMORE ROW CHATTEL RANCH - DAY

Slocom KICKS in the door of a decrepit slave cabin. Other  
SLAVES step on their porches to watch.

SLOCOM  
Queenie! Get your fat black ass out  
here.

Inside, the weak voice of QUEENIE (22), a plump, dark-skinned  
slave pleads for mercy.

QUEENIE (O.S.)  
Please, Master Slocom, I ain't done  
nothing wrong. I ain't.

SLOCOM  
Spare me the whimpering bullshit.

Queenie creeps out onto the CREAKING porch. Slocom grabs her  
by the hair, SLAMS her to the ground. Blood seeps from a cut  
on her forehead.

Slocom bends over her, WHISPERS with a raspy, irate voice.

SLOCOM (CONT'D)  
How'd she get all that shit? The  
knife, the rope net, the sheets?

Queenie SOBS hysterically.

QUEENIE  
I really don't know, sir.

SLOCOM  
You two're never without each  
other. Why ain't you together now?  
Why'd she leave you behind?

Slocom SPITS tobacco juice. It SPLATTERS Queenie's neck. She  
flinches but dares not wipe it off.

Her cherubic-faced husband JAMES (30s) emerges from the cabin  
and runs to her.

JAMES  
Queenie didn't wanna leave me,  
Master Slocom.

SLOCOM  
Didn't mind helping her insolent  
friend though, did she?

From James's silence, Slocom knows the answer.

SLOCOM (CONT'D)  
Okay. Last time. Where'd she go,  
Queenie? Tell me or I'll kill you.  
Right here. Right now.

James lifts Queenie into his arms.

JAMES  
Melodee said she was gonna get her  
freedom. Then she's gonna make her  
mama and daughter free. Said dyin'  
can't be no worse than bein' a  
slave.

Slocom, irate, SPITS again. He peers at James and Queenie.

SLOCOM  
You fools. One of you runs off, not  
so rare. But she thinks she's gonna  
set other Africoons free too?

JAMES  
Can we go now, sir?

Slocom fumes. He draws his pistol and SHOTS Queenie in the  
heart while she's still in James's arms. Her head hangs.  
Blood SPATTERS James's face and body.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
NO! NO! NO!

James's face fills with anger. Slocom points the gun and  
dares him to take a step toward him. He addresses the OTHERS.

SLOCOM  
If any of you run away or help  
another grunt run away, expect to  
end up just like Queenie.

Slocom climbs onto the roan and GALLOPS off. The others  
gather around James. They SOB louder and louder.

INT. IVAN'S MAKEUP TENT - DAY

Ivan finishes Melodee's beard disguise. THREE MEN explode into the tent lugging Ralph, who MOANS in pain.

Ivan JUMPS from his stool, motions at a cot.

IVAN

What happened to my baby?

SKINNY GUY

Fell from the Big Top scaffolding.

Melodee LEAPS from the makeup chair. In men's clothing and Ivan's beard disguise, she's a dead ringer for a White man. She embraces an air of superiority and RASPS in an imitation of a male baritone.

MELODEE

Ivan and I got this.

FAT GUY

Who the hell're you?

Ivan stops caressing Ralph.

IVAN

He is the new parakeet guy.

MELODEE

Kite. But yeah.

SKINNY GUY

You tame parakeets?

Melodee frowns, starts to answer but Ivan's had enough. He motions them out with a flip of his wrist.

UGLY GUY

Fine by me. Rather be workin' than hangin' out with queens anyway. And some bird trainer.

Ralph sneers and GRUNTS. The men get the idea and leave.

IVAN

(to Melodee)

You know what you're doing?

MELODEE

Gonna find out.

She examines Ralph.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
Fall on your shoulder or back?

RALPH  
Shoulder.

MELODEE  
Hear a snap?

RALPH  
Yea. A pop.

MELODEE  
So not so bad. Your shoulder's  
dislocated.

Ivan caresses Ralph's cheeks.

IVAN  
Oh my sweet, handsome muscle man!

Melodee POURS a whiskey shot, hands it to Ralph.

MELODEE  
This'll help you relax.

Ralph downs the shot. Ivan downs one too. Melodee shakes her  
head, MUMBLES.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
You circus folk are amazing.

She points to Ralph's shoulder.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
Relax the muscles around that  
shoulder. DO NOT tense up.

Ralph relaxes, SIGHS, squeezes Ivan's hand.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
Here we go. One. Two.

At two, Melodee yanks the shoulder hard and fast.

SFX: A gigantic POP.

RALPH  
OH MY GOD! What the fuck Melodee!

MELODEE  
You would've tensed up if I waited  
'til three.

Ralph nurses his shoulder. After a few seconds, his expression changes from grimace to grin.

IVAN

Baby?

Ralph stops rubbing. Ivan sees this and hugs Melodee.

RALPH

Where'd you learn that?

MELODEE

Books mostly. And my mama.

IVAN

You sure read a lot for a runaway slave. Isn't that illegal?

MELODEE

Oh yea! But mama snuck books from the master's library and we'd read at night.

BEGIN FLASHBACK

INT. SLAVE CABIN - NIGHT - (FLASHBACK)

Melodee (at 6) sits on her mother RUTH's lap (at 30) reading from *Gulliver's Travels*. She finishes, SNAPS the book shut and beams proudly at her mother.

MELODEE (V.O.)

*By six, I'd read the classics. And by seven, I'd consumed the entire encyclopedia, A to Z!*

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Ruth puts her finger to her mouth as she and Melodee trail a wild boar through deep brush. She hands Melodee an atlatl with a five-foot dart affixed to its grooved end.

She flips the shaft. The dart flies through the air and finds its mark. The boar THUMPS to the ground.

MELODEE (V.O.)

*From books, I learned how to hunt.*

EXT. WATERFRONT - DAY

With a petrified Melodee strapped by rope to her back, Ruth JUMPS off a rocky cliff. A parakite SNAPS open and they sail over the river.

MELODEE (V.O.)

*And books showed mama and me how to  
make my first parakite.*

END FLASHBACK

IVAN

That kite I'm making you!

MELODEE

Yep.

RALPH

Where's your mama now?

MELODEE

On a plantation around here. Just  
don't know which one. Yet.

INT. CIRCUS MAIN RING - NIGHT

The bleachers are PACKED. Standing room only. Bug-eyed KIDS are mesmerized by colorful PERFORMERS, exotic animals, and hilarious CLOWNS. Circus WORKERS pull ropes, cart props, and lead elephants, tigers, and ponies from the ring.

Flickering lanterns illuminate the face of tonight's Master of Ceremonies, the Spaniard. In black knee-high boots, red coat with tails and top hat, he addresses the audience.

THE SPANIARD

Ladies, gentlemen, boys and girls.  
Tonight our giant circus tent is  
open to the starry sky.

Everyone gazes at the opening. A full moon peeks through.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

Three minutes from now, you will  
witness a brave performing artist  
glide through that tiny aperture,  
land safely in this Big Top, and  
complete an important mission.

The Spaniard gestures to the opening.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)  
 Presenting the New Deep South's  
 most famous aerialist, the  
 Legendary Leonardo and his Fabulous  
 Flying Wonder Wing.

The Spaniard TROTS off. The eyes of the captivated AUDIENCE are frozen on the opening of the Big Top.

INT. HIGH RISE STAIRWELL - NIGHT

Melodee MARCHES up steep stairs. She DRAGS her parakite and eyes a sign on the wall.

INSERT - SIGN

"43RD FLOOR"

RETURN TO SCENE

She STEPS over debris and enters an immense, empty room with floor to ceiling windows.

INT. FORTY-THIRD FLOOR - NIGHT

High winds PUMMEL the room. Fighting sporadic GUSTS, Melodee TRUDGES to the outside ledge.

EXT. HIGH RISE LEDGE - NIGHT

Melodee peers at her target, the sprawling circus tent.

MELODEE

Either I'm gonna be the life of  
 this party or the death during it.

Melodee CLIPS onto the harness, CHECKS the straps on her helmet, takes a deep BREATH, and DIVES off the ledge.

Ivan's customized costume from a full-body black, neoprene wetsuit is snug. To observers, she's invisible, the canopy, suit, helmet and goggles dark as coal in the night sky.

INT. CIRCUS TENT - NIGHT

A speck appears in front of the full moon, visible through the opening at the top of the tent.

The AUDIENCE SHRIEKS and APPLAUDS.

Melodee steers the parakite through the gap. She waves. Above the acrobat's net, she UNBUCKLES herself and drops to safety.

The AUDIENCE GASPS.

She rolls to the edge and gives her show partner the signal-- a double tongued click.

MELODEE  
CLICK! CLICK!

A ten-foot tall African elephant, HARMONY JANE, THUNDERS over. With precise timing, Melodee PLOPS onto the elephant's bare back.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
(whispers)  
Let's give 'em a show baby girl.

The audience ROARS with delight.

LONGSHOT OF IVAN

In a full body red-striped swimsuit, Ivan perches on a collapsing seat above a full tank of water. To his right is a red and white bullseye.

ON MELODEE

Melodee sits on top of the elephant as it RUMBLES down the ring. She withdraws a ball from a strapped-on bag. She FLIPS up her helmet visor, aims at the bullseye and fires.

Misses.

The audience MOANS.

MIDSHOT OF IVAN

Ivan smiles and waves. Safe this time. He looks nervous as Harmony Jane gets closer.

ON MELODEE

She claws another ball and lets it rip. WHOOSH! Just wide but a bit closer than the first.

ON IVAN

Ivan SIGHS, wipes a brow. His nervousness increases.

The audience SIGHS then begins a CHANT.

CIRCUS AUDIENCE  
DUNK HIM! DUNK HIM! DUNK HIM!

ON MELODEE

She's less than twenty feet from Ivan now as Harmony Jane zooms toward the dunk tank. Melodee's eyes sparkle with fire. She takes aim, rares back and heaves the third and final ball.

SLO MO OF THE BALL HEADED FOR THE BULLSEYE

SLO MO OF IVAN'S EXPRESSION TURNING TO DESPERATION

BINGO! Right on target. The ball SLAMS into the red bullseye.

A loud bell RINGS.

CIRCUS WORKERS wave the torches and run around the ring to excite the CROWD.

ON IVAN

Ivan awaits his fate. He SIGHS one last time, pinches his nose, waves to the audience. He WINKS to Melodee and watches as the bullseye flings back.

His seat collapses and he PLUNGES into the ice-cold, water tank. He ROCKETS out, SHIVERS and grabs a towel.

The AUDIENCE rises in a standing OVATION.

ON MELODEE

Melodee takes a victory lap. She grasps Harmony Jane's huge ears, smiles and waves to the audience.

After once around the ring, Melodee halts Harmony Jane, stands on her back, and removes her helmet. She presses her hand to her heart and throws the audience a heartfelt kiss.

She PLOPS back down. Harmony Jane makes a final celebratory TRUMPET as they exit the Big Top with kids and parents CHASING close behind.

EXT. ROAD TO NEW ORLEANS - DAY

On the roan, Slocum parallels the train track. He scans for clues from Melodee's escape. The relentless sun reflects off a large object. In this ungodly heat, is it real or a mirage?

Slocum KICKS the roan into a GALLOP. They reach the White object. Slocum JUMPS down.

The sheets Melodee used to escape.

He examines them closely. Four sheets stitched together. Ropes from four corners to form two holding loops.

Slocom places his hands in the loops and runs. The sheets CATCH wind. The canopy STIFFENS. His feet leave the ground. He becomes a human kite.

SLOCOM  
Son of a bitch.

He stops running, TOSSES the sheets aside, and HOPS back on the roan. After a few miles, the train track diverges. One side heads north, the other heads west.

Slocom wipes dust off a green metal sign beside the track. An arrow labeled "NEW ORLEANS 18" points west. An arrow labeled "HATTIESBURG 95" points north.

Slocom frowns and withdraws a Curtzcoin from his slicker.

SLOCOM (CONT'D)  
(mumbles)  
Heads, N'Orleans. Tails,  
H-Burg.

He FLIPS the coin, COVERS it with his palm, and peeks. President Larson E. Curtz's ugly face smirks at him. He shoves the coin into his pocket and PLODS down the tracks toward New Orleans.

EXT. CIRCUS CAMP - NIGHT

The circus performance has ended. The CREW completes cleaning and becomes enthusiastic.

CIRCUS WORKER  
Party time!

EXT. BAND STAGE - NIGHT

A three-person music ENSEMBLE breaks into dance MUSIC. Couples wop, wobble, SING, and sway to the TUNES. Drinks poured. Joints lit. Food devoured. Smiles exchanged. And kisses SMOOCHED.

Melodee observes the merrymaking. Still in her performance costume and realistic black beard, she pulls off the White man guise skillfully.

At least, MASON MYERS (30s), a melodramatic gay acrobat in banana-in-my-pants tights is fooled. With a carnal gleam in his eyes, he swaggers over. Obviously plastered.

MASON  
 (slurring words)  
 You got a tough act to follow!  
 Why've you never heard of me? I  
 mean...heard of you?

He catches Melodee off guard. She's surprised men are attracted to her even when she's masquerading as one.

MELODEE  
 Probably because I've never done it  
 before an audience.

Mason inches closer. His alcohol breath causes her to step back. He still hasn't picked up on Melodee's indifference to his lothario power moves.

MASON  
 I'd like to do you with or without  
 an audience.

He sneers, lets go a creepy LAUGH.

Melodee shoves him away. Mason's delicate ego is bruised.

He grabs at Melodee's face and pinches off beard hairs in the process. He rubs them in his fingers and grins.

MASON (CONT'D)  
 That beard's not real.

He steps closer. Scrutinizes her face.

MASON (CONT'D)  
 And you're not White! You're a...

MELODEE  
 Mister, don't say it, please. For  
 your own good.

Poor drunk Mason. He says it.

MASON  
 Nigger!

Melodee shakes her head. Swiftly, she KICKS Mason in the balls. He doubles over. She KNEES him in the forehead. He rocks on his heels and FALLS flat on his back.

The band stops playing. The dancers stop dancing. The Spaniard, Ralph and Ivan RUN over.

THE SPANIARD

What--

MELODEE

Mr. Smooth's had too much to drink. Apparently he thinks I'm not a fine upstanding gay Caucasian gentleman like himself.

Mason's out cold. Ralph and Ivan LAUGH.

THE SPANIARD

Least you didn't cut his dick off. Ralph, take this moron to his tent. Let's hope he sleeps it off and forgets all about this.

Ralph SWINGS the passed out lover-wannabe over his shoulders like a sack of potatoes and carts him away.

RALPH

He's sure gonna have some sore jewels when he wakes up!

Melodee drops onto a wooden chair, rests her elbow on the table, rubs her forehead.

IVAN

I'm sorry you had to deal with that, sweetness.

MELODEE

Will I ever really be free, Ivan? Mulatto? White? Woman? Man?

Ivan places his hand over hers. Leans in.

IVAN

Sometimes being free is not a physical thing. Sometimes it's in your mind. In your heart. I'm not really free either but I don't let that get me down.

MELODEE

You're a bigger man than me then.

Ivan shares his unique cackle. Melodee smiles, then breaks out into laughter too.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS SLAVE MARKET - DAY

In her beard, Stetson, black slicker, and black leather boots, Melodee prowls the auction grounds. She notices Pompey smoking a joint.

MELODEE  
Pompey, right?

Pompey turns, sees that it's a White man. Feigns deference.

POMPEY  
Yes sir. Do I know you?

MELODEE  
No, I saw you a coupla days ago.  
Prepping slaves for the auction.

Pompey chuckles, offers Melodee a toke. She waves it off.

POMPEY  
That was me. Here most every day.

MELODEE  
Maybe you could help me.

POMPEY  
Can try.

MELODEE  
I'm looking to buy a front of the  
house servant. Polished. A mulatto  
or quadroon'd be good.

Pompey leans in, lowers his voice.

POMPEY  
You lookin' to bed her too?

MELODEE  
(fake chuckle)  
Oh no, no! My wife would cut my  
dick off!

They both laugh, Melodee at the irony, Pompey at the White man's fear of his wife.

POMPEY  
Why don't you just come to  
tomorrow's auction?

MELODEE

Can't wait that long. Wife said  
don't bother comin' home today if I  
ain't got a domestic with me.

POMPEY

Ok then. Check with Ward Slave-O-  
Rama in Metairie. If Mitch Ward  
ain't got what you want, nobody in  
Orleans Parish does.

Melodee tips her Stetson.

MELODEE

Appreciate it.

POMPEY

Always happy to help a man keep his  
dick attached!

They share another good laugh. She steps away. Pompey takes  
another TOKE.

EXT. WARD SLAVE-O-RAMA - DAY

Melodee RIDES down a pothole-ridden road covered in rubbish.  
She sees a gigantic billboard with a finger pointing to the  
reader.

INSERT - BILLBOARD

"WARD SLAVE-O-RAMA. YOU'LL NEVER BITCH 'BOUT A SLAVE FROM  
MITCH!"

BACK TO SCENE

She enters an expanse of blacktop, a one-time parking lot.  
Abandoned cars and trucks. Broken glass. Sheet metal.

A circular concrete structure sits in the distance. Melodee  
realizes it's a former car dealership.

Mitch Ward BOUNDS out the front door, fake smile plastered on  
his pasty, pale face. His luminescent neon-green Seersucker  
jacket is two sizes too small, his pants a size too big.  
Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp without the Hitler mustache.

WARD

You look to me like a man in the  
need for new property!

MELODEE

That'd be correct.

WARD

In the right place. Just received a shipment of kikes and wetbacks and a coupla gooks and gays. Come into the showroom. Take a look-see.

INT. WARD SLAVE-O-RAMA SHOWROOM - DAY

Where used cars once sat, slaves are now on display. Shackled by hand and leg irons, tethered by chains to canon balls.

Melodee glowers. Ward beams proudly.

Each cage has a tag with race, age and skillset. No name.

They walk by "KIKE, 28, Bookkeeper," "GOOK, 43, Chef," "GAY, 28, Bed boy," "WETBACK, 39, Landscaper."

Melodee feels nauseous, covers her mouth. Ward is clueless.

WARD

You won't find better property around. Got dealerships in Natchez and Atlanta, too.

Ward points to another room.

INSERT - SIGN

"SERVICE CENTER"

BACK TO SCENE

WARD (CONT'D)

Got the best service warranty in the business too. Lemme show you.

INT. WARD SERVICE CENTER - DAY

They enter a large "garage." Beanpole skinny ROY SIKES (40s) CHOMPS on a slimy cigar. Ward introduces him to Melodee.

WARD

Roy here's the head of our service and parts department. He runs a tight ship.

SIKES

You know it boss. Well-trained  
slaves is what keeps our customers  
happy!

Melodee eyes all the latest *accessories*. It's a "Slaves R' Us  
Superstore." Iron collars, handcuffs, thumbscrews, whips,  
chains, gags, and yokes hang on every wall.

JEFFERSON, a meek brown-skinned teen creeps over.

JEFFERSON

Pardon Master Sikes. Finished  
polishing the new parts.

SIKES

Good boy!

He turns to Melodee.

SIKES (CONT'D)

Jeff here was a mean spirited,  
disobedient young nigger boy when  
his master sent him in for his one-  
year check up. Now look!

JEFFERSON

Yes sir. I've learned my lesson.

Jefferson bows. Sikes pulls a peanut from his jacket. TOSSES  
it to the teen. He bows again.

JEFFERSON (CONT'D)

Thank you, Master Sikes!

SIKES

There's more where that came from  
once you clean them toilets and  
wash off the new property that come  
in this morning.

Jefferson runs to finish his chores. Ward nods a goodbye to  
Sikes. He places an arm around Melodee as they walk back to  
the Showroom.

INT. SHOWROOM - DAY

Ward leads Melodee to a table beside a row of office files.

WARD

What make 'n' model you wanting?

Melodee shrugs. Ward realizes she doesn't understand.

WARD (CONT'D)

My bad! I sold cars when there was still gas and electric. I mean like rag heads, half-breeds, coons.

She swallows hard at Ward's blatant racism and plays along.

MELODEE

Ah! An Aunt Jemima. Light skin. Experienced. A good-natured mammy the wife can trust for cleaning and cooking.

WARD

We got lots of them in inventory.

Ward SLAPS a heavy journal on a table and opens to a section titled HOUSE NIGGERS. He scans it with his index finger.

WARD (CONT'D)

Seven in stock. All are workin' for me up at the Big House.

Melodee spots her mother's name.

INSERT

*Name: Ruth Origin: Baton Rouge, LA Age: 52 Nigger %: Octoroon*

RETURN TO SCENE

Melodee feigns disappointment. She's found what she came for.

MELODEE

All seem too old. Not really what I was looking for.

Ever the used car salesman, Ward's not about to let a customer get off the lot without a slave purchase.

WARD

I assure you, our properties are the best in the parish. I can deal.

No dice. Melodee heads for the door.

MELODEE

I'll just check the New Orleans Slave Market.

She makes it outside, but Ward is on her heels.

WARD

That meat market! Their inventory's  
Level E or F. It's street trash!

Melodee makes one last try to convince Ward she's serious.

MELODEE

Then I'll just buy a server bot.

WARD

A bot? No, this is not California!

Finally, she reaches her horse. Ward keeps on going and going with the sales pitch, the Energizer Bunny of Slave Salesmen.

WARD (CONT'D)

I didn't even get your name!

Melodee's not about to provide him with a name. Ward's irritated. He KICKS pebbles around the lot, lowers his head, and returns to the showroom to torture his property.

EXT. WARD BIG HOUSE - DAY

Melodee RIDES along a gravel driveway. Next to Ward's massive brick Antebellum home, FEMALE SLAVES of all races hang laundry, BEAT rugs, and tote buckets into the Big House.

Melodee sees her mother Ruth. She glances around. No overseers or Whites in sight. She CREEPS toward her mother. Ruth sees her, DROPS her wicker basket, and RUNS to Melodee.

MELODEE

(whispers)

Don't mama! Not now.

Ruth stops. She understands. No celebratory reunion for mother and daughter. Not yet.

Melodee points, and acts as if she's asking for directions.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

You healthy mama?

RUTH

Yes. But I wanna hear 'bout you.  
How'd you escape? Find me?

MELODEE

The skills you taught me came in  
handy. And had a bit of luck.

RALPH

Just like I taught you! You make a good White man too. Just can't fool your mama!

They smile at each other knowingly.

MELODEE

I'm hiding with a circus. And I'm going to come for you, mama. You can hide with me. And, I need your help to rescue Mary too.

RUTH

My baby girl's got her mama's spirit, that's for sure.

The other slaves sneak peaks now. Curious.

RUTH (CONT'D)

Awful dangerous proposition. But I trust you with my life, daughter.

Melodee ends the conversation with a loud, dramatic flourish to ensure the curious slave women hear her.

MELODEE

(loudly)

Thank you ma'am. My wife says I have a terrible sense of direction.

She WHISPERS to Ruth one last time.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

Tomorrow night mama. At eight. Right after sundown. Be up front.

Melodee ambles back to her horse. Ruth snatches the wicker basket and strolls into the Big House. She hides a huge smile.

INT. NEW ORLEANS ROADHOUSE - DAY

Slocum leans against the packed bar. Obnoxious PATRONS BLOW OFF STEAM telling bullshit tall tales. Slocum overhears one told by a bald, frumpy STORYTELLER (50s).

STORYTELLER

Never seen anything like it! He floated in on a kite, plopped on an elephant, and dunked that dwarf right into the pool!

Slocom SPITS tobacco on the filthy, wooden floor.

SLOCOM

What'd this kite flyer look like?

The Storyteller smiles. Finally, a willing audience!

STORYTELLER

Dressed in black from head to toe.

SLOCOM

What race?

STORYTELLER

White, I guess. Hard to tell in the low lantern light.

SLOCOM

You're not sure then.

STORYTELLER

Well, no. Why don't you go see the act for yourself. Here.

He hands Slocom a folded promotional flyer.

The flyer reads: "CIRCUS LEAVING SOON. FINAL TWO PERFORMANCES TONIGHT AND TOMORROW! CITY PARK."

Slocom DOWNS his shot, STASHES the flyer in his slicker, and nods at the storyteller on his way out.

INT. CIRCUS TENT - DAY

In her black costume, Melodee practices with Harmony Jane.

Just then, Mason EXPLODES into the Big Top. A well-fed MAN with a badge and three OTHER MEN PARADE IN beside. Their considerable paunches attest to a love of rich Cajun cuisine.

Mason points at Melodee and GROWLS.

MASON

That's him sheriff! Er, her. The nigger girl.

Melodee GRITS her teeth. That N word again!

Sheriff BUD ROCHAMBEAU (45) stares at Melodee. Ralph, Ivan and the Spaniard overhear Mason's voice and hurry over. Rochambeau REMOVES HANDCUFFS, approaches Melodee.

SHERIFF ROCHAMBEAU

You're under arrest. Might've heard here in the Great States of America, we've brought back a little thing called slavery.

THE SPANIARD

Mason, what kind of trouble have you stirred up now?

MASON

The justice kind. He is not a "he." He's a "she." And, a coon at that!

THE SPANIARD

Prove it!

MASON

What?

THE SPANIARD

Prove it. That is a beard on his face! And his skin is lighter than yours or mine. Ever see a slave with skin that light Ivan? Ralph?

IVAN

Nope. Un uh.

RALPH

Never.

Rochambeau extends his palms toward Melodee's face.

SHERIFF ROCHAMBEAU

Mind if I check for myself?

Melodee glances at Ivan. He crosses his fingers. She nods, spreads her stance, and crosses her arms behind her back.

Rochambeau plants his right foot, places both palms on Melodee's beard and YANKS.

MELODEE

OH MY GOD!

Melodee rubs her face. Rochambeau check his fingers. Not a single hair.

THE SPANIARD

Satisfied?

MASON

It's fake! I'm telling you!

Harmony Jane NUDGES Mason with her trunk. He sways. She NUDGES him again, this time toward the exit.

## THE SPANIARD

Harmony Jane's trying to tell you something Mason.

Ralph and Ivan LAUGH.

## IVAN

Proof that elephants are the smartest animals in the circus.

The sheriff motions for his deputies and they leave. Mason tries to turn back but Harmony Jane won't have it.

## THE SPANIARD

Don't bother coming back either!

Ralph and Ivan smile at Melodee. She continues to RUB her face.

## MELODEE

(to Ivan)

Soap and water, huh?

## IVAN

Aren't you glad I was wrong?!

## EXT. CIRCUS ENTRANCE - NIGHT

A serpentine line winds in front of the ticket booth.

The TICKET BOT, a solar-powered, metallic droid programmed for a single task, performs its gatekeeper function.

## TICKET BOT

(in a nasal monotone)

Two goods per guest ticket.

A prim grandmother, ANTONIA (70s), steps up. Her excited grandson BUDDY (10) holds her hand, TAPS his feet. His head rests on the counter.

## ANTONIA

Your flyer said one.

## TICKET BOT

Circus Saturdays, one. Weekdays, two.

## ANTONIA

But we only have two cans of beans. Do you honor Curtzcoin?

The Ticket Bot points to the sign.

INSERT - SIGN

"NO CURTZCOIN. GOODS ONLY!"

TICKET BOT

No Curtzcoin. Only goods of value.  
Food. Clothes. Bottled water.

A nerdish WALTER (70s) steps forward, SETS two bars of soap on the counter. He smiles at Antonia and her grandson.

WALTER

My guest decided not to come.

ANTONIA

Thank you sir!

WALTER

Walt.

ANTONIA

Walt. Why don't you join us?

Walter hands the Ticket Bot two more soap bars. Buddy grabs Walter's hand. The three of them head into the Big Top, all smiles.

EXT. SUPPLY TRAIN - NIGHT

A TRANSPORT BOT tows a loaded metallic bin to a train car.

INSERT - SIGN ON TRAIN

"SUPPLIES"

The Transport Bot slumps. Checks his power setting.

INSERT - POWER INDICATOR

"10%"

The bot BEEPS out a warning.

Nearby, SECURITY BOTS guard the supply train as WORKER BOTS UNLOAD the bartered goods and STACK them for inventory.

The Transport Bot's power indicator drops.

INSERT - POWER INDICATOR

"5%"

INT. BIG TOP - NIGHT

From the top row of the jam packed stands, Slocom watches Melodee's Legendary Leonardo act come to a rousing finish.

Atop Harmony Jane, she removes her helmet, presses her hand to her heart, and tosses a kiss to the audience.

SFX: Tumultuous crowd cheering and applause.

Melodee spots Slocom eyeing her from the bleachers. She PLOPS down on the elephant. In a hurry now.

MELODEE  
CLICK! CLICK!

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
(to elephant)  
Let's get out of here girl.

Harmony Jane BARRELS out. Slocom SCRAMBLES down the stands. He's caught in the excited throng JOCKEYING to meet the Legendary Leonardo and his extraordinary elephant sidekick.

SLOCOM  
Out of the way!

The crowd ignores Slocom's order. He rolls his eyes, REMOVES his gun and waves it at the running masses.

SLOCOM (CONT'D)  
I said move.

The crowd points at the gun. Everyone STEPS ASIDE to let Slocom RUN down the center like Moses parting the Red Sea.

EXT. CIRCUS TENT - NIGHT

ACROBATS, CLOWNS, and other PERFORMERS sign autographs. A man in BLACK BODY SUIT and matching helmet chats with a little girl. Slocom muscled through.

Slocom PRESSES his gun barrel against Black Body Suit's back.

SLOCOM  
Guess you think you're hot shit?

Black Body Suit spins around. Slocom's grin disappears.

BLACK BODY SUIT  
Back in the day, maybe.

It's not Melodee.

SLOCOM  
Who the fuck are you?

BLACK BODY SUIT  
Back at ya buddy. Who're you?

Black Body Suit motions for Slocom to stop pointing the gun.

BLACK BODY SUIT (CONT'D)  
Do you mind?

Slocom doesn't budge.

BLACK BODY SUIT (CONT'D)  
I'm head of the Legendary Leonardo  
fan club.

He calls out to his friends.

BLACK BODY SUIT (CONT'D)  
Team. Come introduce yourselves to  
this nice gentleman.

Five other black body suit CLONES appear, stare at Slocom.

Slocom shakes his head and moves on.

EXT. WARD BIG HOUSE - NIGHT

In her White man's outfit, Melodee leans forward in the saddle. She sneaks to the front of Ward's estate. She dismounts and creeps down the road.

SFX: FOOTSTEPS. A twig CRACKS.

Melodee clenches her fists and prepares for a clash.

RUTH  
(whispers)  
Now can I hug my baby girl?

Melodee SIGHS. Unclenches her fists.

MELODEE  
Mama!

Reunited mother and child HUG. Ruth cups Melodee's face.

RUTH  
Now, let's get the fuck outta here!

Melodee smiles, grabs her mother's hand. They STEP softly.

MELODEE  
 (whispers)  
 Nobody followed you?

RUTH  
 Don't think so but Ward has guards.

Melodee helps her mother ONTO THE HORSE and CLIMBS behind.

SFX: CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

Bullets WHIZ by. Melodee KICKS the horse into a GALLOP.

SFX: CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

SFX: HOUNDS HOWL. Loud. Getting closer.

MELODEE  
 Why's it always gotta be hounds?  
 White people never heard of cute  
 kittens?

Ruth looks over Melodee's shoulder. Two of WARD'S MEN pursue them on horseback. Two HOWLING bloodhounds lead the way.

RUTH  
 I'm sorry Dee Dee. This escape is  
 gonna get us both killed.

MELODEE  
 No mama. I've planned it for a long  
 time. Just like you taught me.  
 Measure twice, cut once.

Ward's men and the hounds are closing in.

The foliage thickens. The gravel road yields to grass.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
 Get ready.

RUTH  
 For what?

MELODEE  
 To duck.

RUTH  
 What?

MELODEE  
 NOW! DUCK!

Both women duck their heads.

Ward's lead rider doesn't. Suddenly, his head SNAPS back. He FALLS off his horse. Felled by a rope between two trees.

The second rider sees him go down and DUCKS. He makes it under the rope. He lifts his head and smiles proudly.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
 (to Ruth)  
 Stay down!!

The second rider's head SNAPS back like the first one's did. He FALLS off the horse. A second rope!

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
 Okay, it's clear.

They raise their heads. Ruth points behind them. The bloodhounds continue chase. Melodee takes a peek.

The path splits, one trail in overgrown weeds heads east, the other, an extension of the exiting horse trail, heads west.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
 Whatdya think, mama? East or west?

RUTH  
 When in doubt, always follow the  
 wisdom of Robert Frost.

MELODEE  
 The road less taken? Good advice!

Melodee turns east.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
 Mama, take the reins.

Melodee reaches into a saddlebag. She TOSSES pieces of meat at the dogs. Four. Five. Six large chunks.

The dogs stop to INHALE the meat. They lose ground on Melodee. And they start to wobble. The lead dog totters and FALLS. Seconds later, the second dog FALLS.

Melodee slows the horse to a TROT.

RUTH  
 How'd you?

MELODEE  
 Remember that medical book you took  
 from Jefferson Cole's library?  
 (MORE)

MELODEE (CONT'D)

Had a real informative section on sedatives. Those hounds should be out for quite a while.

RUTH

Always said you should be a doctor!

MELODEE

Still might be.

Melodee turns the horse west, back to New Orleans.

INT. CIRCUS - NIGHT

The Spaniard ANNOUNCES the final act.

THE SPANIARD

Ladies, gentlemen, boys and girls.  
A big round of applause for our performers, clowns, animals and the crew who made this circus possible!

The BAND PLAYS "ENTRANCE OF THE GLADIATORS."

The CIRCUS PERFORMERS MARCH around the ring.

SFX: Wild CHEERS, APPLAUSE, CHANTS of approval from the CROWD.

CLOWNS make balloon animals for the children.

PERFORMERS WALK on their hands and do somersaults.

KIDS pet the PONIES, DOGS and ELEPHANTS. But they simply gaze at the wilder beasts--LIONS and BEARS--in wheeled cages.

At the height of the final sendoff, Sheriff Rochambeau appears. This time with MORE MEN. Mason among them. The band stops. The circus parade ends.

SHERIFF ROCHAMBEAU

Folks, we're shutting down the show. For a second time, we have reports of illegals.

GRUMBLING and angry SHOUTS from the crowd.

SHERIFF ROCHAMBEAU (CONT'D)

Remain calm. Exit slowly. If you're a White citizen with an OFFICIAL CURTZ CARD, you can be on your way.

MAN IN THE CROWD (O.S.)

RAID!

SCREAMS. WAILS. SHRIEKS.

EXT. CIRCUS TENT - NIGHT

Slocum watches as the frenzied CIRCUS GOERS TURN on each another. He looks for any sign of Melodee.

The Sheriff and his men RUN ahead of the RIOTING horde. Mason GRABS the sheriff's arm.

MASON

Even if we can't catch illegals, we can raid the supply train. They got all kinds of shit! Follow me.

SHERIFF ROCHAMBEAU

Come on men!

EXT. SUPPLY TRAIN - NIGHT

Rochambeau and his men STOP running. The GUARDIAN BOTS are frozen. The door to the car is wide open, unguarded. All of the goods used to barter for tickets are stacked inside.

Mason CREEPS toward one of the frozen BOTS and TOUCHES the cold metal chest. Sees the power indicator is red.

INSERT - POWER INDICATOR

"0%"

BACK TO SCENE

MASON

They're not charged up! Come on!

Mason, the sheriff and his men RUSH into the train car.

SFX: A LION ROARS. Then ANOTHER.

A stunning, well-muscled blonde, LUNA ALEXEYEV (30s), calmly saunters to the train car. Arms crossed, she glares at the crazed thieves as they raid the circus inventory.

She CRACKS a whip at the two roaring, teeth-baring behemoths at her side. Her lions SAMSON and DELILAH.

She points to the men in the car. The lions LEAP inside. The men have no time to react.

The lions TEAR into flesh. Blood SPURTS. Bones BREAK. His jelly-belly wobbling, the sheriff TAKES OFF. Samson TEARS into his leg. The sheriff FALLS. Delilah FINISHES him off.

Mason tries a different tactic. Surrender. He closes his eyes, DROPS the stolen goods, and raises his hands high.

MASON (CONT'D)

They made me!

Luna shakes her head, turns and SNAPS her fingers. The lions stop their vicious attack and RUN to her.

She CLOSES the train car door behind them, crosses her arms, and posts herself in front of the secured train. Samson and Delilah stake out spots beside her.

Mason opens his eyes. He surveys the carnage, sees Luna and her lions guarding the train car. He peeks around the corner, decides to take a chance. And, he BOLTS to freedom.

EXT. IVAN'S MAKEUP TENT - NIGHT

Melodee and Ruth RIDE up. They observe the ongoing chaos. CIRCUS GOERS go berserk SCRAMBLING out of the Big Top.

MELODEE

Stay here, mama.

Ruth nods. She DUCKS into the safety of Ivan's tent.

EXT. SIDESHOW AREA - NIGHT

Hiding in a corner, Slocom sees Melodee leave Ivan's tent.

INT. CIRCUS TENT - NIGHT

The Spaniard, Ivan and Ralph brood in the stands. Melodee takes a seat. A few more AUDIENCE MEMBERS STUMBLE OUT. The remaining PERFORMERS and GAUCHOS begin CLEANUP and TEAR DOWN.

THE SPANIARD

You missed all the fun.

RALPH

We were worried about you.

MELODEE

I'm good. Rescued mama. She's in your tent, Ivan. That alright?

IVAN  
More the merrier.

THE SPANIARD  
We'll clean this up and leave at  
sunrise gents. And lady.

MELODEE  
I'll check on mama then help you.

EXT. IVAN'S MAKEUP TENT - NIGHT

Melodee OPENS the tent flap. The barrel of a gun POKES out.  
She raises her hands.

Slocom STEPS out. RESTRAINS Ruth. He points the gun at her  
head and TAUNTS Melodee.

SLOCOM  
Came for one. Caught two.

MELODEE  
Your lucky night.

He SHOVES Ruth to the ground. GRABS Melodee and SHOVES her  
beside her mother. He points his weapon at them.

SLOCOM  
Up to me, I'd kill you both. But  
I'm sure Mr. Peck'll love havin'  
the nig-nog who cut his dick off.  
Along with her mother.

Ruth glances at Melodee, raises her eyebrows. Melodee nods.  
It's true. Ruth grins proudly.

Melodee returns her gaze to Slocom. She's distracted by  
something behind him. Slocom WITHDRAWS two sets of cuffs,  
starts to place them around the women's wrists.

MELODEE  
CLICK! CLICK!

Slocom senses something behind him. He turns and sees a  
CHARGING, ten foot tall, ten thousand pound African elephant.

Harmony Jane is upon him. She KNOCKS him down. His gun and  
the cuffs SLIP from his hands and FALL to the ground.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
CLICK! CLICK!

Harmony Jane PRESSES her foot on Slocom's chest. He GASPS.

SLOCOM  
I CAN'T BREATHE!

Melodee looks at Ruth. They ROAR WITH LAUGHTER.

MELODEE  
Well *Master* Slocom, paybacks are  
hell, aren't they?

Harmony Jane raises her head and TRUMPETS out a victory call.

SFX: PFFUGAH! PFFUGAH!

Her slobber DRIPS onto Slocom's face. Melodee grabs Slocom's  
outstretched hands and SNAPS his own cuffs on him.

She WALKS to her horse, REMOVES a rag and a small bottle. She  
SOAKS the rag with liquid. PRESSES it against Slocom's mouth.

He STRUGGLES for a few seconds. Then he's out, fast asleep.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!

Harmony Jane removes her foot.

Ralph, Ivan and the Spaniard appear with big smiles.

THE SPANIARD  
This the pissy overseer?

MELODEE  
Yup. And this is my mother. Ruth.

They all nod at each other.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
You don't mind if she comes along  
with the circus, do you?

THE SPANIARD  
(to Ruth)  
If you're anything like your  
daughter, I'd love to have you.

RALPH  
What're we gonna do with this guy?

MELODEE  
My first thought is to kill him.  
But, that'd be stooping to his  
level.

RUTH

Be nice if he could feel what you  
and me feel everyday. Lack of  
choice. Loss of freedom.

Melodee beams at her mother's comments.

MELODEE

Mama, your wisdom never ceases to  
amaze me. I have an idea. Ralph,  
can you carry him over for me?

Ralph CHUCKS Slocom over his shoulder and FOLLOWS Melodee.

EXT. TRAIN - DAY

A train ROLLS down the track, black flumes leaving tiny grey  
clouds in the gloomy sky.

INT. TRAIN - DAY

Darkness.

MUMBLES from inside the car. The door SLIDES open. Two rail  
yard employees in blue coveralls, a bulky Black man, ESRAH  
(40s) and a short Hispanic, JAVIER (50s), peer inside.

The outside sunlight streams into the car like a spotlight.

We see Slocom. Tied up. Mouth duct-taped. His eyes bulge.

Esrah and Javier shoot each other a questioning glance.

ESRAH

Never seen that before.

Esrah starts to CLIMB into the car. Javier RESTRAINS him.

JAVIER

Not our concern.

Esrah BRUSHES him off, CLIMBS in, RIPS off the duct tape.

SLOCOM

SHIT! Dumbass coon. Untie me.

Esrah STEPS back. Javier smirks. Slocom grows impatient.

SLOCOM (CONT'D)

What're you waiting for?!

Esrah smiles at Javier.

ESRAH

Think you're right. Ain't our  
concern. Next stop can handle it.

Esrah SLAPS the duct tape back on Slocom's mouth. Slocom  
WIGGLES, PROTESTS beneath the tape. Esrah climbs out.

JAVIER

Sorry you couldn't stay longer in  
Mobile. You'd fit right in here in  
the New Great State of Alabama.

ESRAH

Oh, I don't know, Javé. He'll do  
okay in Jacksonville too.

JAVIER

Plus Florida's got more sunshine.  
Good for a nice redneck sunburn.

Javier SLAMS the door shut. Slocom hears LAUGHTER.

EXT. TRAIN - DAY

From above, we see Slocom's train LEAVE the station.

INSERT - ROAD SIGN

"JACKSONVILLE, FL 404 MILES"

The train WHEEZES down the track and out of sight.

EXT. CITY PARK - NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI - DAY

The circus PERFORMERS, freshly-charged BOTS and GAUCHOS  
UNLOAD supplies, animals and hardware from wagons. Shirtless  
WORKERS hammer stakes into the ground for the Big Top.

A TICKET BOT hands out promotional flyers.

INSERT - PROMOTIONAL FLYER

"THE CIRCUS IS HERE! A COLOSSAL COMBINATION OF PERFORMANCES  
BY MAN AND BEAST! NATCHEZ CITY PARK. ONE WEEK ONLY!"

INT. IVAN'S MAKEUP TENT - DAY

Melodee and Ralph watch as Ivan applies makeup to Ruth's  
face. Ivan stands on a stool, glances at Ruth, then at the  
mirror to see her reaction. The makeup he applies makes  
Ruth's face darker and darker with each application.

RALPH

Seems a shame to cover up such a pretty face.

Ivan's slightly offended. He stops, posts a palm on his hip and turns to address Ralph.

IVAN

I do hope that's not meant as a critique of my cosmetology skills!

Ralph steps back. Clearly wants to avoid a fight with Ivan.

MELODEE

Nobody'd ever question your artistic vision, Ivan. I just need her to be darker. To look like my slave, not my mama.

RUTH

For my own protection, I suppose.

MELODEE

Yes, it is. Especially in Natchez. As long as I can convince Mississippi White folks I'm one of them and you're my property, we should be just fine.

RUTH

Ironic isn't it? Skin's too dark, they make you a slave. Too light, your own people call you an Oreo.

MELODEE

The mulatto curse.

INT. THE BIG TOP - DAY

ACROBATS and other circus TALENT practice for the upcoming performance. Sitting atop Harmony Jane, Melodee spots the Spaniard reviewing a ledger. She YELLS down.

MELODEE

D'ya ever hear of a little outfit called Cirque de Soleil?

The Spaniard peers over his bifocals.

THE SPANIARD

Course. Bunch of lib activists who destroyed the old circus ways before the Collapse.

Satisfied, the Spaniard returns to the financials.

MELODEE

By old ways, you mean performances  
with animals?

The Spaniard SIGHS and glances up.

THE SPANIARD

I know where you're headed. I've  
thought of it before. But audiences  
around here are *not* fond of change.

MELODEE

Doesn't make it right.

THE SPANIARD

Come on, Melodee! It's a circus.  
Circuses have animals. And animal  
acts. You're sitting on top of one  
of the stars of the show right now!

Melodee signals Harmony Jane.

MELODEE

CLICK! CLICK!

The elephant kneels and extends her trunk to the ground.  
Melodee slides down the trunk and PLOPS on the bench next to  
the Spaniard. She points to the ledger.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

What percentage of costs do you  
spend on animal food?

The Spaniard SLAMS the ledger shut, faces Melodee.

THE SPANIARD

35-36%.

MELODEE

And how much does it cost to  
transport your Noah's Ark train  
cars from town to town?

THE SPANIARD

Another, probably, 15%.

Melodee rises, strolls to Harmony Jane, spreads her arms wide  
to cover the elephant's huge ears. She WHISPERS.

MELODEE

And when they pass away. What's it  
cost to bury and replace them?

THE SPANIARD

Depends on the animal. Rare  
elephant like Harmony Jane, a lot.

She removes her hands from Harmony Jane's ears.

MELODEE

So, more than half the costs of  
this circus is for animals.

THE SPANIARD

Your point?

MELODEE

Animals—rare or common—they're like  
I used to be. Slaves. They WANT to  
be free.

THE SPANIARD

How d'you know? You speak elephant?

Melodee answers him with a "show don't tell" signal for  
Harmony Jane.

MELODEE

CLICK! CLICK!

Harmony Jane curls her trunk around Melodee, and lifts her  
onto her back. Melodee leans toward the Spaniard.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

Know what became of B&B?

THE SPANIARD

They went under.

MELODEE

And Cirque de Soleil grew and grew.  
Only took twenty years for them to  
earn what it took B&B to earn in a  
hundred years. And they performed  
to one hundred fifty million  
spectators, three hundred venues.  
With...no animals.

The Spaniard SIGHS, his petulant mouth curled into a frown.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

They deserve better. Nobody, humans  
and creatures alike, deserves to be  
someone else's chattel.

Harmony Jane TRUMPETS her agreement in *Elephantese* as she and Melodee STOMP out of the Big Top. The Spaniard TOSSES his pen half way across the circus ring.

INT. MELODEE AND RUTH'S TENT - NIGHT

Melodee and Ruth are asleep on two cots. As Ruth SNORES lightly in the background, Melodee dreams.

DREAM SEQUENCE BEGINS

EXT. SILAS GREENE'S HOUSE - DAY

At age 17, Melodee sits obediently beside Silas in a black carriage PULLED by two identical White Orlov trotters.

She's straight from her slave sale, in a bright hoop skirt embellished with lace bows. Silas's ear-to-ear grin is in stark contrast to Melodee's confused detachment.

Silas reins the horses to a stop before a quaint, secluded cottage, hidden from the road.

He seizes Melodee's hand and escorts her up the stone walkway. They pass under a Gothic iron arch and through the gate of the White picket fence.

At the arched doorway, Silas smiles at Melodee, CARESSES her cheek, tilts his head. She SIGHS. He lifts her into his arms and carries her inside. She LAUGHS now, her sincerity still uncertain. Silas KICKS the door SHUT behind him.

INT. SILAS'S AND MELODEE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Melodee, at 18, gives birth to MARY. The BLACK MIDWIFE hands the CRYING child to her father, Silas. Mary immediately stops crying. Melodee gazes at Silas from behind happy tears.

INT. STUDY - DAY

Mary (5) sits on her mother's lap as Melodee (23) reads to her. Silas EXPLODES into the room and RUSHES them upstairs. He escorts a well-dressed White man, Baton Rouge Mayor JAMES STONE (50s), and his haughty, FAN-WAVING daughter GERTRUDE (22) into the study.

From their hiding spot upstairs, Melodee and Mary watch the upper class White folk revel at each other's superiority.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

GIGGLING, Melodee (24) and Mary (6) SKIP down the road clinging to an aloft kite. They HEAR HORSES behind them and duck into deep underbrush. The kite soars into the clouds and disappears.

Silas and Gertrude PASS them in the carriage. They cling to each other. Silas STOPS the carriage and KISSES Gertrude. They embrace for a moment. Silas WHIPS the horses back into action and they GALLOP off.

Melodee and Mary SCRAMBLE back to the cottage. Both CRYING. Both alarmed.

EXT. SILAS GREENE'S HOUSE - DAY

Gertrude BURSTS out the front door. She restrains a KICKING, SCREAMING Mary (7).

Next comes Jake Slocum. He DRAGS a handcuffed Melodee (25). She lunges for Mary as she passes. Slocum YANKS on her chains. Melodee FALLS to the ground, reaches for Mary.

Slocum picks Melodee up and TOSSES her into his buckboard.

Gertrude SHOVES Mary into the house as Slocum CHAINS Melodee in the back of the wagon. Melodee SCREAMS for her daughter as the wagon disappears.

Silas peers from the arched front door as Melodee is CARTED off. He covers his face with his palm, steps back inside and slowly CLOSES THE DOOR behind him.

DREAM SEQUENCE ENDS

INT. MELODEE AND RUTH'S TENT - NIGHT

Melodee SCREAMS awake and BOLTS upright on the cot.

MELODEE  
NO! SILAS! MARY!

Ruth SCRAMBLES over. She rubs Melodee's shoulders and pulls her to her breast.

RUTH  
Just a bad dream, Dee Dee.

Melodee presses her face into her mother's shoulder. SOBS. Ruth runs her fingers through Melodee's hair.

MELODEE

I gotta get my Mary back. I should  
have never trusted a White man.

RUTH

Without that White man, there'd be  
no Mary.

Melodee pulls away, wipes away her tears.

MELODEE

I can still wish, can't I?

Ruth shakes her head. Grabs Melodee's hands, cradles them in  
her own.

RUTH

Wish all you want but it won't  
change what is. Just like your  
growing belly. Wishin' won't change  
a thing.

Melodee stands, turns away, caresses her stomach.

MELODEE

How long have you known?

RUTH

I'm your mother. Not much mothers  
don't know. If we don't know, we  
suspect. And our suspicions  
generally ring true.

Ruth stands. Melodee points to her belly.

MELODEE

Does it show?

RUTH

Nothin' that your big ole' man  
drawers and puffy shirt can't hide.  
But not for long.

Ruth rubs Melodee's stomach.

RUTH (CONT'D)

It's your last master's, isn't it?

Melodee nods, drops her head.

MELODEE

I don't want to bring that evil  
man's baby into this world, mama.

(MORE)

MELODEE (CONT'D)

He raped me. Day and night. For years.

RUTH

Looks like this one time it took.

Ruth pulls Melodee close.

RUTH (CONT'D)

I know what you're feeling baby. Every Black woman alive knows that sickening feeling these days.

Melodee turns nauseous. She SCRAMBLES to the tent flap. VOMITS outside. Ruth RUBS her back. Melodee continues to RETCH between SOBS.

INT. NEW ORLEANS GENERAL STORE - DAY

Slocom SPITS tobacco juice at a spittoon as the bell atop the door JANGLES. He misses. He approaches the counter clerk, a SHABBY GUY IN OVERALLS.

SLOCOM

Lipbalm. S'much as you got.

SHABBY GUY IN OVERALLS

That's hard to come by. Got shea butter though.

SLOCOM

Whatever.

The clerk places three cans of shea butter on the counter. Writes down the sale on a notepad.

SHABBY GUY IN OVERALLS

Got dry lips myself. From all this dust and debris.

Slocom FLIPS a Curtzcoin on the counter. Peers at the guy.

SLOCOM

I don't really give a shit.

As Slocom turns to leave, the doorbell JANGLES. Mitch Ward strides in. They recognize each other.

WARD

Well, son of a bitch. If it's not the meanest, ugliest overseer in the entire New Deep South. How the hell're you Jake?

Ward reaches for a handshake. Slocom SPITS at the spittoon. Misses. Again. He brushes off the handshake offer.

SLOCOM

Ward.

Ward withdraws his hand. Realizes who he's talking to.

WARD

How's old man Peck?

Slocom applies shea butter to his lips.

SLOCOM

Bedridden. Bandaged head to toe.

WARD

What the hell happened?

SLOCOM

Slave bitch. Cut him, burned him and run off. Got word she's hidin' as a performer in the circus up in Natchez. Her and her nigger mama.

Ward's eyes widen.

WARD

The mama a mulatto?

SLOCOM

Yea. Both of 'em are light skinned bitches. Peck's nigger is masquerading like a White man.

WARD

I'll be damned. I think she's the guy who was looking for a light-skinned domestic at my lot. She stole her from me. Her mama's my property!

SLOCOM

Sounds like somethin' my slave bitch'd do.

WARD

We should team up. You can get your property back and I'll get mine.

SLOCOM

Prefer to work alone.

Ward places a hand on Slocom's shoulder. Slocom eyes it until Ward removes it. Ward motions him to the window.

WARD

I think you'll change your mind  
when you see this.

Ward RUBS dust off the window with his shirt sleeve. He points to a submarine-shaped airship tethered to the ground.

Hand-lettered across the side of the sixty-foot blimp is "WARD SLAVE-O-RAMA" next to Ward's grinning likeness.

Slocom applies more shea butter, faces Ward, and smiles.

WARD (CONT'D)

Fastest way to find them. And  
easiest way to bring 'em back. No  
saddle sores or waiting in train  
stations. Plus it's safer in the  
air than on foot, rail or hoof.

Slocom considers Ward's proposal. SPITS. Finally, his mess finds the bottom of the spittoon.

SLOCOM

Still ain't shakin' your hand.

Ward opens the door for Slocom. The bell JANGLES. They both exit the store to check out the airship.

INT. SILAS GREENE'S HOUSE - BATON ROUGE - DAY

At a table, Mary (now 10) cradles an infant named ELIZABETH in her arms. She makes funny faces at the baby as she feeds it from a bottle. The baby smiles and FARTS. Mary GIGGLES.

Like a bee from a hive, an enraged Gertrude Greene SWARMS IN and SNATCHES the baby from Mary's arms.

GERTRUDE

You impudent pickaninny! I've told  
you to NEVER hold my precious  
child! Feed her in the cradle.

Gertrude swaddles the baby in her arms. She grabs the bottle and begins to feed her.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

I DO NOT want Beth getting nigger  
lice from you! Go. Get back to your  
chores. I will feed my child.

Mary stands, WHIMPERS, clutches her natty dress.

MARY  
I AM her sister.

GERTRUDE  
You ARE NOT related to her! Your  
mother is a SLAVE WHORE! Which  
makes you a slave too. So get back  
to your chores.

Mary narrows her eyes at Gertrude with a spiteful glance.  
Gertrude GRABS a fireplace poker and LUNGES toward Mary.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)  
NOW!

Mary RUNS from the room. Gertrude can't keep up. She THROWS  
the poker. The forged iron tip barely misses Mary as she  
FLEES to safety.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

In the airship, Ward, Snyder, Sikes and Slocom float above a  
forest of pine and magnolia on the outskirts of Natchez.

INT. GONDOLA - DAY

Sikes is in the pilot seat, Snyder's the front passenger,  
Slocom and Ward sit in the two back row seats. Ward scans the  
terrain with binoculars.

SLOCOM  
Gotta plan?

Without removing his eyes from the binoculars, Ward replies.

WARD  
The circus should be just over that  
tree line. Once we see the Big Top,  
we'll land and hide the ship.

SLOCOM  
This thing's gonna be hard to hide.

Annoyed, Ward lowers the binoculars.

WARD  
This ain't the first time I've used  
this *thing* to retrieve my property.

Slocom raises his hands. He SPITS tobacco juice out the window. Sikes leans over, watches the wad fall to the ground and SPLAT. Ward returns his attention to the binoculars.

WARD (CONT'D)

Once we've tied up the ship, we'll split up and search. Shouldn't be too hard to find two coons in a crowd of White folk.

SLOCOM

I dunno. Mine's dressed like a White man and's escaped from me twice. And, no doubt your property's gonna be disguised too.

Ward disregards Slocom's words. Peering through the binoculars, he spots something in the distance.

WARD

What the...? Some guy's up in the air strapped to a kite.

Slocom GRABS the binoculars without asking. Takes a look.

SLOCOM

Son of a bitch, it's her.

EXT. SKY - DAY

In her black performer's outfit, Melodee practices with her parakite. The Big Top is a small red dot behind her. Like a seabird diving for fish, she plunges toward the earth, then catches a thermal only to soar to new heights.

INT. GONDOLA - DAY

They all see Melodee now. They gaze in amazement at her flying antics.

SLOCOM

Fuck tying this thing up. We gotta chase her.

Sikes and Snyder look at each other. Ward flinches.

WARD

That's not the plan.

Slocom points his pistol at Ward.

SLOCOM

Is now.

WARD

You ass. This ship is full of gas.  
Fire that. It explodes. We all die.

Slocom doesn't budge. Sikes glances back, sees Slocom pointing the gun. Slocom turns toward him.

SLOCOM

GO AFTER HER!

Ward shakes his head. Snyder and Sikes quiver. Sikes THROTTLES the airship faster.

EXT. SKY - DAY

The airship gains ground on Melodee and her parakite.

She sees the gigantic blimp lurching toward her. The gap is closing. She climbs higher, hoping to evade the encroaching ship. But she actually loses ground.

INT. GONDOLA - DAY

SLOCOM

Can't this thing go faster?

Sikes looks at the control panel.

SIKES

We're going sixty-five now. It's a blimp not a jet.

EXT. SKY - DAY

Melodee dips and dives. The giant airship continues to bear down on her. Melodee changes her defensive strategy. She turns toward the blimp. Head on.

MELODEE

You may be faster than me. But I'm quicker. D'you forget how David and Goliath ended, asshole?

INT. GONDOLA - DAY

Sikes squints. Snyder turns to him, face flush red.

SNYDER  
Is she coming at US?

No answer from Sikes. He frowns. Checks the gauges. Throttles the ship even faster. The engine gets louder.

SFX: A rumbling, ROAR inside the gondola.

EXT. SKY - DAY

Melodee rides the thermal, gaining speed. Focused like a laser on her target. Now she's closing the gap on the airship. She sees Sikes and Snyder in the front seats.

MELODEE  
Who are--?

INT. GONDOLA - DAY

Sikes leans forward. Snyder BRACES himself. Behind them, Slocom has his weapon pointed at Sikes's head. Snyder lowers his head into his chest, prepares for impact.

SLOCOM  
DO NOT SLOW DOWN! Bitch wants to play chicken, we'll play chicken.

EXT. SKY - DAY

Melodee's just feet away from the airship now. She grits her teeth, YANKS on the right steering line and veers off. The parakite just misses the blimp, by inches.

She glides beside the gondola, the airship heading north, Melodee heading south.

She sees Slocom in back with Ward. He points a gun at her. She ZOOMS past. Now she's behind them.

Slocom SPINS around in his seat. She tilts her head at him, smirks. She TIGHTENS the rope lines. The parakite ROCKETS above the airship.

INT. GONDOLA - DAY

Ward senses Slocom is about to pull the trigger. He LUNGES for the weapon. Slocom loses control of the gun. It FALLS to the floor. Sikes YELLS at Snyder.

SIKES  
GRAB THE GUN!

SNYDER  
YOU GRAB THE GUN!

Slocom and Ward STRUGGLE. Heads SLAMMED. Faces PUNCHED. Violent, fast, action-packed like two wrestlers on speed. Slocom delivers a roundhouse PUNCH to Ward's gut.

EXT. SKY - DAY

Melodee reaches the top of the airship. She GRABS for the blimp's tether rope. ONCE. TWICE. THIRD time's the charm. She hangs on like a water skier, standing on top of the airship.

She reaches into her performer's suit, withdraws her knife. She bends down and JABS the airship. Gas LEAKS OUT in a smoggy haze; a white plume leaves a trail in the sky.

She LEAPS off. Catches a thermal and rises above the ship.

INT. GONDOLA - DAY

Sikes checks the instrument panel. A warning siren BLARES.

SFX: BELUGA! BELUGA!

Red lights flash in the cockpit. Panic. Fear. Every man for himself.

Sikes can't control the ship. It tilts toward the ground. Snyder prays.

SNYDER  
Our Father, who art in Heaven--

SLOCOM  
SHUT THE FUCK UP!

EXT. SKY - DAY

Slocom looks out the window. Melodee floats above them, watching, just yards away.

Slocom's pissed. He raises the weapon, FIRES. AGAIN. But Melodee's bouncing around in the sky like Tinkerbell.

All of his shots miss.

Until one doesn't.

A bullet PIERCES the airship envelope, ruptures the gas bag.  
Golden flames ENVELOP the ship as it plummets from the sky.

INT. GONDOLA - DAY

Ward is still lights out.

Snyder and Sikes are ENGULFED IN FLAME.

Slocom glances around. Sees...a parachute.

No time left.

He reaches behind the back seat. He can't reach the chute! He  
DIVES for it. WRAPS his fingers around the strap.

He KICKS open the back door. And JUMPS out.

EXT. SKY - DAY

From above, Melodee watches Slocom TUMBLE toward the ground.  
He struggles to place the chute on his back. He can't do it  
but he's falling fast. So he YANKS the ripcord.

Melodee sees the chute open but can't tell if Slocom is  
wearing it.

The chute and Slocom disappear into the thick forest below.  
The blimp follows. A gigantic EXPLOSION. FLAMES HISS. Black  
smoke blankets the treetops.

Melodee turns away and rides a powerful tail WIND toward the  
Big Top.

INT. MELODEE AND RUTH'S TENT - DAY

Melodee BURSTS IN, eager to report the demise of Ward and  
Slocom.

Instead, she finds her mother on her cot surrounded by Ivan,  
Ralph and the Spaniard. All wear face masks.

Ruth's skin is reddish, blotchy, strangely spotted. She's  
sweating. She sees Melodee and raises her palm.

RUTH  
Stay back, Dee Dee.

Melodee stops, confused. The Spaniard grabs her by the  
shoulders and squeezes softly.

THE SPANIARD

Really. You need to stay back. She might be contagious.

Melodee flinches. She peers angrily at the Spaniard.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

She fainted in the Big Top.

MELODEE

She was fine this morning when I left for practice!

THE SPANIARD

I checked her. She shows all the symptoms.

MELODEE

Symptoms of what? My mother's the healthiest person I know.

THE SPANIARD

Rash, the sweats and chills, a sore throat, abdominal pain, a white tongue.

Melodee's not buying it.

MELODEE

It's just the flu. She'll get over it with rest, fluids, the usual treatment.

THE SPANIARD

The usual treatment for this is antibiotics, Penicillin or Amoxicillin.

MELODEE

So we get the doctor to prescribe them and we--

THE SPANIARD

This is Natchez not New York. Even in New England and California, antibiotics are scarce. In the New Deep South, they're simply not available.

MELODEE

What makes you an expert? How do you know all there is about--

THE SPANIARD

About Scarlet Fever? That's what  
your mother has.

Melodee feels dizzy. She grasps a chair to steady herself.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

And I know because I'm a doctor. At  
least, I used to be.

Melodee, Ivan and Ralph all turn toward the Spaniard.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

Pretty good one too. But during  
that last big wave of the pandemic,  
the politicians got involved. And  
the science went out the window.

Melodee sits down in the chair. Still listening.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

Lost my wife, my kids, my parents.  
All that I loved in one year.

MELODEE

Oh my God, Spaniard! I'm so sorry.

IVAN

Me too, Spaniard.

RALPH

So awful. But how'd you go from  
doctoring to running a circus?

THE SPANIARD

Same as everybody here. I was  
running away. Where better than  
here?

Ruth MOANS. Melodee LEAPS from the chair. Ruth raises the  
palm again.

RUTH

No baby girl. I love you too much  
to get you sick.

MELODEE

Mama, I gotta help you somehow. All  
those medical books I read. I  
should have been prepared for this.

RUTH

Nobody's prepared for dying, little one. Just the way it is. Go on now. I'll hug you in my dreams.

Melodee and Ivan SOB. Ralph leaves, unable to digest this. The Spaniard embraces Ivan and Melodee. Ruth closes her eyes.

THE SPANIARD

Come on. I'm really sorry Melodee.

Ivan SCRAMBLES out, wiping back tears. With his arm around Melodee, the Spaniard escorts her to the open tent flap. He ducks out first. Ruth CALLS to her.

RUTH

Dee Dee.

Melodee turns.

MELODEE

Mama!

Ruth opens her eyes, her lids heavy. She smiles at Melodee.

RUTH

Thank you for these last days. I'm gonna die a free woman. That's somethin' isn't it? You and me, both free!

Melodee starts to RUN to Ruth's side.

MELODEE

Oh mama!

The Spaniard GRABS her hand, shakes his head. Melodee regains her composure.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

Goodbye mama.

She SOBS and ducks under the tent flap.

ON RUTH

Her eyes closed, a smile of acceptance forms on Ruth's face.

INT. HARMONY JANE'S STALL - NIGHT

The full moon casts just enough light to see Melodee, in a dark dress, laying beside Harmony Jane on a bed of straw. She STROKES the elephant as she WHISPERS to her.

MELODEE

I promise, one day soon, I'm gonna set you free. Just like I did for my mama. And just like I'm gonna do for my Mary.

The elephant's giant eyes open. She FLAPS her ears and tail.

Melodee rises, PATS Harmony Jane's belly.

She POURS a bucket of water into the elephant's trough. Harmony Jane LUMBERS up, extends her trunk, and SIPHONS water into her mouth.

Suddenly, Melodee DROPS the bucket, doubles over, and FALLS to her knees. She feels between her legs. Blood soaks her dress. She CRAMPS, WINCES, and COLLAPSES to the ground.

The elephant TRUMPETS loudly and gently NUDGES Melodee.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

Fetch the Spaniard, girl. Hurry.  
CLICK! CLICK!

INT. THE SPANIARD'S TENT - NIGHT

Melodee lies on a cot. The Spaniard, covered in blood, stands beside her. He caresses Melodee's face. Behind him, a concerned Harmony Jane pokes her head and trunk inside.

Melodee opens her eyes, looks up at the Spaniard. He shakes his head. Melodee SWALLOWS hard.

MELODEE

Didn't want that bastard's wicked spawn anyway.

THE SPANIARD

Your owner?

Melodee nods, closes her eyes.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

You've lost a lot of blood. You'll need to rest.

She opens her eyes again. Shakes her head.

MELODEE

Not about to do that. Going after my daughter in Baton Rouge.

The Spaniard grimaces.

THE SPANIARD  
You are one hard-headed--

MELODEE  
And cocky!

THE SPANIARD  
Yes, cocky.

MELODEE  
And beautiful?

THE SPANIARD  
Yes, beautif...wait!

MELODEE  
See what I did there? It's called  
defusing a volatile situation.

THE SPANIARD  
This from the woman who cut a man's  
dick off!

She LAUGHS. He JOINS in. Harmony Jane TRUMPETS approval.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)  
Ivan and Ralph will take turns  
watching you tonight. Tomorrow you  
can go after Mary.

EXT. ROADWAY - BATON ROUGE - DAY

Disguised as a man, Melodee GALLOPS down the road. She  
FLINCHES slightly, still recovering from the miscarriage.

She hears the TROTTING HOOFS of a buggy behind her and DUCKS  
into the forest. Hiding behind an imposing Magnolia, she  
watches as Gertrude and Silas TROT past.

She TRAILS them, careful not to be seen. Gertrude and Silas  
argue. Melodee can't make out the conversation, but it's  
clear Gertrude's upset. She points her finger at Silas,  
crosses her arms and looks away. Silas shakes his head.

EXT. SILAS GREENE'S HOUSE - DAY

The carriage stops. Gertrude JUMPS out, TRAMPS into the  
house. Silas SLAPS the horses' reins onto the picket fence.  
From behind him, a familiar VOICE.

MELODEE  
Guessin' the honeymoon's over.

Silas spins around. Tilts his head. Puzzled by her attire.

SILAS  
Melodee?

She RIDES closer. DISMOUNTS. Faces him.

SILAS (CONT'D)  
What's with the getup?

MELODEE  
Thought I'd experience the White  
man's world for a while. That slave  
gig is a bit burdensome.

He WALKS closer. Reaches out to her. She extends her palms.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
I'm just here for my daughter.

SILAS  
I'm so sorry for what happened.

MELODEE  
Which part? Making me your  
property? Making our daughter your  
property? Promising to wed me and  
marrying that witch instead?

SILAS  
All of it! I regret all of it.

MELODEE  
Like I said. I'm just here for my  
Mary.

She SIDESTEPS Silas. He SIGHS, hangs his head shamefully.

Gertrude ERUPTS from the front door. She points a shotgun at  
Melodee. Melodee GRITS her teeth. Silas DARTS over.

SILAS  
GERTRUDE! PUT DOWN THE GUN!

GERTRUDE  
I know who you are. That outfit  
doesn't fool me.

With hands raised, Melodee STEPS toward Gertrude.

MELODEE  
Just want Mary. Let me have her and  
I'll leave.

There's MOVEMENT behind Gertrude, inside the house. Mary RACES out. She recognizes the White man is really her mother.

MARY  
MOM? MOM!!

Mary passes Gertrude and RUNS to Melodee. Gertrude takes aim. Melodee jumps in front of her daughter. Gertrude FIRES. BAM!

The bullet WHIZES by Melodee's head.

Another shot RINGS OUT.

Gertrude DROPS the shotgun. She looks at the blood oozing from her chest. SLITHERS to the ground.

Melodee and Mary turn toward Silas. He holds a smoking pistol. It points at Gertrude. He DROPS it.

He DASHES to her side. LIFTS her limp, dead body into his arms. SHOUTS to Melodee and Mary.

SILAS  
GO! Now we're even.

Melodee GRABS Mary's hand, HELPS HER onto the horse and they RIDE off. Melodee stops abruptly. Turns back to Silas.

MELODEE  
You can kill Gertrude a thousand  
times and still, we'll never be  
EVEN.

INT. BATON ROUGE POLICE STATION - DAY

Silas sits in the shabby office of Baton Rouge Police Chief COLE DONEGAN (60s). He's grizzled, with a red alcoholic's nose, a short attention span and even shorter temper.

In cowboy hat, cigarette dangling from his chapped lips, Donegan's the spitting image of an old western movie sheriff. He DRUMS his fingers impatiently on the cluttered desk.

Irritated, Silas would clearly rather be anywhere but here.

DONEGAN  
Judge Stone don't buy your story.  
Wants me to arrest you.

SILAS  
Easy for him. She was his daughter,  
but she was my WIFE!  
(MORE)

SILAS (CONT'D)

And the mother of my child. This is  
a bigger loss for me than him.

Donegan leans back in his SQUEAKY chair, PLUNKS his leather  
booted size twelves onto the desk, and reads from a report.

DONEGAN

It just don't add up. A drifter  
sees Gertrude alone, tries to rob,  
maybe rape her. You ride up, see  
what's goin' on and shoot Gertrude  
by mistake.

Donegan takes a long PUFF, TAPS ashes onto the floor, STABS  
out the cigarette on his boot heel.

SILAS

That's right.

DONEGAN

Where's the guy?

SILAS

I told you. He ran off.

DONEGAN

What about Gertrude's shotgun? She  
had taken a shot.

SILAS

Again, I told you and your deputy.  
She shot at the drifter and missed.  
I aimed at him too but I also--

Silas tears up, withdraws a handkerchief, wipes his eyes.

Donegan LIGHTS UP another cigarette. Takes a long DRAG.

DONEGAN

Well, I'd tell you to lawyer up but  
since you are a lawyer, guess  
that's redundant.

Silas rises from his own SQUEAKY chair.

SILAS

Since you haven't charged me, I  
assume I'm free to leave? I have  
funeral arrangements to make. For  
my deceased wife.

Donegan doesn't bother getting up. Motions Silas to the door.

DONEGAN

So sorry for your loss. But do me a favor. Don't leave the county.

EXT. BIG TOP - NATCHEZ - DAY

WORKER BOTS and GAUCHOS TEAR DOWN the tents, PULL UP stakes and prepare to leave.

Melodee and Mary RIDE onto the circus grounds. Harmony Jane sees them and THUNDERS over. Ivan, Ralph, the Spaniard and other WORKERS and PERFORMERS RUN over and crowd around them.

They HOP down. HUGS all around. Harmony Jane NUDGES Mary. Eyes wide, she stumbles, and nearly falls over.

MARY

MOM!

MELODEE

(chuckles)

It's okay. She's just being friendly.

Melodee turns to the elephant, PATS her trunk.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

Aren't you girl? Say hello to my daughter--Mary.

Harmony Jane TRUMPETS a rowdy greeting. Mary covers her ears and breaks into a wide grin.

THE SPANIARD

Why is it you always seem to just miss tearing down and loading up?

Melodee smiles. Rubs her "man's beard" in reflection.

MELODEE

Good timing, I guess.

The camera tracks a man APPROACHING the crowd. This is BRADLEY JOHNSON, (30s) a dapper White man in dark glasses.

Meticulously groomed, confident. He wears a clean, tailored suit. Not a common sight in the New Deep South. Johnson STROLLS expressionless toward them. Flashes credentials.

JOHNSON

Agent Brad Johnson.

The Spaniard glances at the badge.

## THE SPANIARD

Bureau of Slave Reclamation? You're  
at the wrong circus, agent. No  
slaves here to reclaim.

Johnson stuffs the badge into his jacket pocket. Melodee  
DUCKS in front of Mary.

## JOHNSON

One of our CI's says an escaped  
slave is hiding out here with your  
little band of misfits. S'not  
legal, you know, to conceal escaped  
property in the New Great States.

## THE SPANIARD

Love to help but as you can see  
we're about to leave town.

Johnson's unfazed.

## JOHNSON

Her name's Melodee. A mulatto.  
Dresses like a man.

Ralph STEPS in front of Melodee and Mary to conceal them.  
Ivan CROWDS in next to Ralph and WHISPERS to Melodee.

## IVAN

Go. We'll divert his attention.

Ivan turns, winks. Gives Melodee a light push. She and Mary  
CREEP away. They're hidden behind Ralph's bulk and the rest  
of the crowd in front of them.

## THE SPANIARD

Nobody by that name here. Certainly  
no slave.

Harmony Jane STOMPS toward Johnson to conceal the FLEEING  
mother and daughter. But, he sees them RUNNING AWAY.

## JOHNSON

STOP!

He draws his weapon. FIRES a warning shot. Melodee STOPS.  
Covers Mary.

## MARY

MOM! What're you doing? We can make  
it!

MELODEE

Can't risk you getting shot, baby.  
There's a time to fight and a time  
to surrender.

Melodee turns to see Johnson RUN toward her. She stands up, extends her wrists, and awaits the handcuffs.

INT. BUREAU OF SLAVE RECLAMATION HOLDING CELL - NIGHT

Shackled together, Melodee huddles with Mary in a dark corner. Mary CRIES into her mother's chest.

OTHER SLAVES stake out their own grimy spots for the night.

Melodee HUMS as she rocks her daughter, back and forth.

She hears loud FOOTSTEPS outside the door, stops humming.

Keys JINGLE at the lock. The heavy iron door CLANGS open.

Moonlight streams in, just enough for her to make out worn boots SHUFFLING toward them.

The grinning, withered face of Jailer NORTHAM WALKER appears. He's somewhere between the late sixties and death. He LIMPS deeper into the cell, his right wooden leg CREAKING.

WALKER

Heard we got a new pickaninny in.  
Come now. Make yourself known.

He stumbles and FALLS. Gets to his knees and looks around in the dark. Mary's SOBS get louder. Melodee covers her mouth.

MELODEE

(whispers to Mary)  
Shush now.

WALKER

I heard that! Over there is you?!

Walker STRIKES a match. Waves it at the walls. The slaves duck and cover their faces, WHIMPER and MOAN.

Walker spots Melodee and Mary cowering in the corner. The match burns his finger. It DROPS to the floor. He shoves his burnt finger into his mouth. SUCKS on it.

WALKER (CONT'D)

SHIT!

He UNBUTTONS his pants, grabs himself in his hand, and begins to STROKE as he RHAPSODIZES.

WALKER (CONT'D)  
 Been a while since I humped me a  
 little nappy headed gal. Least two  
 days!

He CACKLES at his sick attempt at humor. Finally, he reaches them and stoops over. He orders Melodee out of the way.

WALKER (CONT'D)  
 MOVE. Need me some young dark meat.

MELODEE  
 You are fuckin' with the wrong  
 woman, Mister. You don't know what  
 I do to White men like you!

Melodee grips Mary tight. They both SLIDE back to the wall.

Walker separates them, PUNCHES Melodee solidly in the stomach and SHOVES her aside. He pulls Mary toward him.

WALKER  
 (to Melodee)  
 Stay back, bitch, or stay dead.

He returns to Mary. Lets his pants DROP to the floor.

WALKER (CONT'D)  
 Sweet thing, let's see if you like  
 to fuck white men like your mama.  
 S'how you got that pretty skin  
 ain't it?

MELODEE  
 Don't say I didn't warn you, old  
 man.

Walker grins at Melodee. He doesn't see the jailhouse keys she grips in her hands. She lunges at him. SLAPS him in the face. He CRASHES to the floor.

Melodee YANKS the wall chain around Walker's throat, tightens her grip. He GURGLES, GASPS for air.

MARY  
 MOM! NO! STOP! PLEASE!!

Melodee loosens her grip. Walker loses consciousness and COLLAPSES to the floor. He's a sad sight. Passed out, pants around his ankles, his bare, pedophilic ass hanging out.

The others in the room stay eerily still, quiet. A mouse SCURRIES by but nobody says a word.

Suddenly a spark appears, then a flame. The match Walker dropped IGNITES straw scattered on the floor.

The fire quickly spreads. The shackled slaves SCREAM, try to YANK their chains, cuffs, and leg irons from the wall.

In the corner of the opposite wall, the fire JUMPS onto a stack of straw. The flames grow into a raging inferno.

Melodee looks at the bloody keys in her hands. She THUMBS through them searching for the master. She SCREAMS at Mary.

MELODEE  
GIVE ME YOUR WRIST!

Mary extends her shackled wrist. Melodee tries the key. Nope.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
GOD DAMNIT!

She tries another. Nuh uh.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
FUCK!

Stern faced, she turns to Mary. Forever, the mother.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
Don't ever let me hear YOU say  
that!

Tries a third key. YUP! The wrist cuff SNAPS open.

Melodee UNLOCKS her own wrist cuff. TOSSES the keys to the slaves along the wall.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
It's the smallest key. Unlock yours  
and pass the key to the next  
person. Then get the hell out of  
here!

Melodee GRABS Mary's hand. They RUN toward the door but the growing flames halt their progress. More slaves gather behind them. Everyone stares helplessly as the conflagration grows.

The cell's occupants cover their faces to shield themselves from the heat. One SLAVE'S hair catches fire. Melodee FANS OUT the flames with her jacket.

They hear yelling outside the barred windows. A strange nearly musical noise BLARES in the distance. A TRUMPET?

Something BATTERS the back wall. THUMP! THUMP! A final THUMP and the cement wall COLLAPSES. Dust covers the cell. Some of the fire begins to go out.

As the dust clears, Melodee peers at the hole in the wall.

Harmony Jane STOMPS into the cell with Ivan on top.

IVAN

Go big or go home, I always say!

Melodee looks at Ivan, shakes her head.

IVAN (CONT'D)

I see why you like riding her. This is fun as hell!

The other prisoners look at Ivan. They're speechless too.

IVAN (CONT'D)

Whadya waiting for? Do we have to carry you out too?

Ivan shoots Mary a wink. He sees Walker on the floor.

IVAN (CONT'D)

I assume we're gonna leave the old, bare-assed White guy?

Melodee rolls her eyes and nods. Everyone CLIMBS through the hole in the wall and to freedom. At least for now.

EXT. HALLWAY - DAY

Johnson surveys the carnage. The fire's mostly contained. He checks out the hole in the wall as Walker SHAMBLES over.

Johnson leans into Walker's face close enough to smell his putrid halitosis. He turns away.

Walker's head is bandaged. He has dark marks on his neck. Johnson asks a few obvious questions.

JOHNSON

How'd it start?

WALKER

One of the coons fuckin' with candles. Lucky I come to check.

Johnson shoots a doubtful look at Walker. Knows it's a lie.

JOHNSON

Candles? When did we start giving  
candles to prisoners. How about  
that giant hole?

WALKER

I can't really say. The smoke  
overtook me. I lost consciousness.

JOHNSON

With your pants around your ankles.  
And a bloody head wound? And  
strangle marks on your neck?

Walker averts his eyes. Johnson doesn't blink.

WALKER

Maybe the slaves yanked down my  
drawers. You know. As a joke.

JOHNSON

They started a fire, pulled down  
your pants and escaped through a  
giant hole in the wall?

Walker smiles, nods. Sounds good to him.

WALKER

I think you figured it out. Yep.

JOHNSON

You're pathetic. And you're fired.  
Enjoy your pension-less retirement.

Johnson TRAMPS away. Walker stands alone in the busy square.  
MEN CLEAN up the rubble behind him. He RUBS his neck marks  
and LIGHTS a cigarette.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - NATCHEZ - DAY

The track platform is packed with PASSENGERS waiting to  
depart. The Spaniard helps PERFORMERS and CREW onto the  
circus locomotive. Ivan and Ralph STEP FORWARD.

THE SPANIARD

All board gentlemen. Next stop  
California!

IVAN

Can't wait to escape this hellhole!

RALPH  
Where's Melodee?

SPANIARD  
You know her. Always fashionably  
late for that dramatic entrance.

INT. TRAIN DEPOT - DAY

Melodee and Mary dodge PASSENGERS as they SPRINT through the waiting area. Melodee's in her White man's outfit without the scratchy beard.

Mary SLIPS. A book falls from her backpack.

MELODEE  
You okay baby?

MARY  
My book!

Melodee retrieves the book, hands it to Mary and grabs her hand. They begin to RUN again.

MELODEE  
Hurry now. If I know the Spaniard,  
he'll leave us just to teach us a  
lesson.

INT. TICKET BOOTH - DAY

Nearby, a TICKET BOT helps a THIN MAN in a tattered duster and frayed hat. We only see the back of his head.

THIN MAN  
One ticket to Mobile.

He turns to the camera.

It's Slocom! His face is scarred, his ear bandaged. His left arm is in a sling. He sees Melodee and Mary STREAK past. He smirks and TAKES OFF after them.

The bot watches his customer run away. Undaunted.

TICKET BOT  
Next.

Slocom SHOVES PEOPLE out of the way. His feet CHURN like pistons on a locomotive.

SFX: SCREAMS. CURSES as Slocom BULLDOZES OVER people.

Melodee turns to see what's going on. Sees Slocom.

MELODEE

My God, does that man never quit?

She turns to Mary.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

Baby, we need to run faster. That bad man Slocom is right behind us.

Mary doesn't need further information. She puts her body into OVERDRIVE.

Still, Slocom gains on them.

Melodee and Mary BLAST THROUGH THE DOORS leading to the departure area. She spots a train moving slowly, just leaving the station. She points to it.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

Think we can make it?

Mary's eyes widen. But, she's a chip off the 'ole Melodee.

MARY

Absolutely!

The distance between them and the train widens. Reaching it looks more doubtful by the second.

Slocom CRASHES through the doors. Looks left. Looks right. He spots them. Gives CHASE.

Melodee turns, sees Slocom racing toward them. They're only yards away from the MOVING train. She reaches for the handrail. TOUCHES IT but loses grip. Tries again. Success!

While holding onto the handrail, she JUMPS onto the stairs in one swift motion, and lifts Mary with her. They both SIGH. They look inside the train car. She BANGS on the doors.

MELODEE

PLEASE! PLEASE!

A TALL BLACK MAN peers out. He MOUTHS words. Melodee doesn't understand. MOUTHS them again. Mary points to a padlock.

MARY

They're locked in.

MELODEE

SHIT!

They both turn. Slocum is SO close. He raises his gun while he RUNS. Melodee and Mary duck. The bullets ZOOM by.

The padlock on the back door SHATTERS.

Suddenly, the Black man OPENS the door. Melodee smiles. He sees Mary, then looks back at Melodee. He puts two and two together.

He waves them in. Melodee can't resist a snarky compliment. She YELLS back to Slocum.

MELODEE (CONT'D)  
NICE shot!

She and Mary DUCK inside the train car.

Slocum reaches the stairs. He GRABS the guardrail, LEAPS up. He feels and hears the train GAIN SPEED. Pistol in hand, he SLIDES OPEN the door and STEPS inside.

INT. TRAIN CAR - DAY

The car is PACKED with PEOPLE, all standing. There are no seats. He's JOSTLED. SOMEONE GRABS the pistol from his hands.

Slocum surveys the PASSENGERS. All are dark skinned, non-White. BLACKS. HISPANICS. JEWS. MUSLIMS. He realizes why.

INSERT - SIGN ON WALL

"SLAVES ONLY. ALL PROPERTY MUST BE SHACKLED."

He looks for an escape route. There is none. Just wall-to-wall handcuffed slaves.

Outside the window, he watches Melodee and Mary run toward another train at the station waiting to head in the opposite direction.

Melodee sees him inside the train car surrounded by the angry mob. She waves. So does Mary. They both sport wide smiles.

Slocum PLEADS for his life.

SLOCOM  
NO! DON'T DO IT!!!

But the horde has something else in mind. Slowly, they CLOSE IN. No words are spoken. They PIN Slocum to the floor. Their fists POUND and PUNCH his face and body. They STOMP, SPIT and KICK. Over and over.

EXT. SLOCOM'S TRAIN - DAY

Seconds later, the train car door SLIDES open. Slocom's body FLIES OUT and ROLLS onto the dirt. The train RATTLES OFF onto the horizon. Buzzards circle, SCREECH and wait for the fresh carnage to spoil in the hot sun.

EXT. CIRCUS TRAIN - DAY

Melodee and Mary RUN down the track. They BOUND up the stairs. The Spaniard GREETs them with a frown. Dramatically TAPS on his watch.

THE SPANIARD

Fifteen minutes late. Beat your old record by five minutes.

Mary HEADS inside. Melodee closely follows. She stops, turns to the Spaniard.

MELODEE

The important business we had took longer than expected.

She shoots the Spaniard a million-dollar smile and strolls into the passenger car. The Spaniard shakes his head and follows her inside.

EXT. CIRCUS GROUNDS - CALIFORNIA - DAY

BOTS and GAUCHOS cart supplies, POUND spikes into the ground and RAISE the Big Top for the night's performance.

SUPER: *California*

Melodee shows Mary how to RUN with the parakite on her back. She's no longer in men's clothing. She's in a comfortable red dress and matching Chuck Taylors, as is Mary.

They both sport sunglasses, colorful plastic jewelry, and baseball caps. California Cool.

The Spaniard rides up in a carriage.

THE SPANIARD

(to Mary)

Looks like you're getting the hang of it. Your mother's gonna have to fight to keep her act!

MARY

I'm hoping we'll be a family act!

THE SPANIARD

Great idea! Hop in. Wanna show you something.

Melodee and Mary look at each other.

MELODEE

Uh oh. This doesn't sound good.

They CLIMB onto the bench seat. The Spaniard wields the carriage away from the Big Top.

THE SPANIARD

I did some math. You were right. The animals cost us a lot of money.

MELODEE

Knew I could appeal to your entrepreneurial nature.

THE SPANIARD

It's more than that. They do deserve to be free. Just like you and Mary did.

MARY

You mean do!

THE SPANIARD

Yes. Do.

They enter a plush, green valley surrounded by mountains.

Palm fronds SWAY in the wind, high grass WAVES at them, squirrels SCAMPER in the treetops.

Behind them, the Big Top is now a tiny red speck.

The Spaniard STOPS the horses. They all JUMP DOWN.

He leads them through deeper brush where tall boulders form a narrow, concealed entrance.

The Spaniard SQUEEZES through the tiny gap, and waves for Melodee and Mary to follow him.

Inside is a verdant savannah for as far as the eye can see. The Pacific Ocean looms in the distance in all its panoramic majesty.

MARY

This is awesome!

Melodee and Mary place their backs to each other and scan the horizon spinning like a top. They see the CIRCUS PONIES grazing in a grassy field.

In the distance, the LIONS and TIGERS sleep on a rock-covered area, away from the other animals.

DALMATIONS and COLLIES yap at squirrels in tall pines.

MARY (CONT'D)

They're all free!

MELODEE

That they are.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Harmony Jane ROLLS toward them. She BLARES Her trunk. WAVES her tail like a flag in the breeze.

MELODEE (CONT'D)

My God, Spaniard, what've you done?

Tears well up in Melodee's eyes. Harmony Jane leans down on her knees. She wraps her trunk around Mary, and then around Melodee, and PLOPS them on her back.

The Spaniard smiles up at them from ten feet below.

THE SPANIARD

You can visit her whenever you want. I bought forty acres. All the way to the ocean.

MELODEE

And the circus acts?

THE SPANIARD

If Cirque de Soleil could pull it off, no reason Doc Waymore's Runaway Circus and Fantasy Fair can't too.

The Spaniard shakes his head, corrects himself.

THE SPANIARD (CONT'D)

I mean Doc Waymore's Circusland. No more set-up, tear down, move on bullshit. California's our new, *permanent* home.

Melodee signals for Harmony Jane to let Mary and her down.

MELODEE

CLICK! CLICK!

When they reach the ground, mother and daughter RUN to the Spaniard. They THROW their arms around him in a heartfelt embrace.

From the corners of the Spaniard's lips, a barely perceptible--but nonetheless genuine--smile forms.

The rational businessman, not known for emotional outbursts, begins to CRY with happiness.

EXT. DIRT PATH - DAY

With Melodee and Mary on top, Harmony Jane ROLLS down the road toward the Pacific. Other Circusland performers walk behind--ACROBATS, CLOWNS, DANCERS but no animal tamers and no other animals.

EXT. CLIFF - DUSK

The CIRCUS MEMBERS take in the ocean's picturesque beauty. The sun slowly begins to set. The sky transforms from a bright gold, to reddish purple, to tangerine and a flash of white.

INDIVIDUAL CLOSEUPS OF

A smiling Melodee, Mary, the Spaniard, Ralph and Ivan.

From behind them, we watch the sun set over the Pacific. Everyone APPLAUDS.

Ivan glances over his shoulder, back at the camera, smiling. He winks as the sun dips below the water and disappears.

THE END