GARY PAULSEN

NIGHTJOHN

A powerful story of slavery and survival
This is a story about Nightjohn. I guess in some ways it is a story about me just as much because I am in it and I know what happened and some of it happened to me but it still seems to be most about him.

Nightjohn.

There's some to say I brought him with witchin', brought Nightjohn because he came to be talking to me alone but it ain't so. I knew he was coming but it wasn't witchin', just listening.

It happened. How it came to be was that Nightjohn he came and it wasn't me, wasn't nobody one or the other brought him except
maybe it was that God did it, made Nightjohn to come.

God and maybe old Clel Waller. He wants that we should call him 'master', and they's some do when he can hear but we call him dog droppings and pig slop and worse things yet when he ain't listening nor close. He ain't no master of nobody except that he's got dogs and a whip and a gun and so can cause hurt to be on some, bad hurt, but he ain't no master for all of that. We just call him that when we have to. Keeps him from whipping on us.

I'm Sanny and they be thinking I'm dumb and maybe up to witchin' and got a stuck tongue because when I birthed they say I come out wrong, come out all backwards and twixt-and-twinst. But it ain't so that I'm dumb. I'm just quiet and they be thinking because I don't make noise and go to twittering all the time that I be dumb. But I ain't. I just be so quiet and listen all the time that I learn things.

I'm Sanny and the other part of my name be the same as old Waller who wants to be master but is nothing. Nothing. I don't count the back part of my name no more than I count old Waller himself. No more than I count spit.

My mammy she told me that my birthing mammy was sold when I was four years old because she was a good breeder and Waller he needed the money. My mammy say that my birthing mammy brought enough for four field hands and that she cried when the man bought her. My mammy say that my birthing mammy stood in the back of a wagon and watched back and waved and my mammy held me up so I could see the waving and hear her crying. But I don't remember that.

All I know for a mammy is the one that raised me, old Delie, and she be the one who raises all the young. Breeders don't get to keep their own babies because they be spending all their time raising babies and not working. So when they're born babies go to the wet nurse and she feeds them and then old Delie gets them and they don't live with their birthing mammies again even if they aren't sold off.

It isn't for certain how old I am except for the sticks. Mammy keeps a stick for each one of
and in the summer she cuts a notch on the stick for each of the girls so as to know when it will come time for the troubles and then the breeding. Waller puts great store in the sticks and watches them like a old hawk watching the chicken pens.

By the stick I am going into the same year as all the fingers on both hands, fold them down, then hold up the thumbs. Delie says it be twelve but I don’t know numbers to count so that doesn’t mean so much to me. I don’t yet have the trouble so I am still left to be as a child. We work around the quarters and clean the yard and gather eggs and help mammy with the young ones. It’s work, but it ain’t dawn to dark hard work like the field work and it leaves me a bit of time to listen and see things. Mammy she tells me some things to learn and I hear some others from the field hands who come back at dark and now and again I have to work in the flower beds below the big window on the white house.

The house women are fond of leaving the window open and talking all their business right there. So when I’m in the flower bed below the window I hear more things to learn. When the day is coming on dark and we are all finished eating out of the trough in the front of the quarters I get onto the pallet in the back of the long log house with Delie and the babies and I lays there and thinks.

I thinks of all the things I have learned that day and then I tries to add them to the things I learned the day before and then the day before that. I’ve been doing that as long as I can remember, since I was almost just walking, and I remember all the parts of my life. If there is time of an evening and I haven’t been worked to the bone I can just lay there in the dark and think on all my time and remember it. Except for my birthing mammy – I can’t think on her at all except to wonder and wonder about her. Did she have dark skin or light? How was her voice, how did it sound? But you can’t remember what isn’t there and no amount of thinking on it will make it come into my brain.

It was in the flower bed that I first heard about Nightjohn. Not by name, but by happening.