THE BEGINNING OF THE END

By

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FADE IN:
SUPER: SOUTH CAROLINA 1860

INT. PLANTATION HOUSE - DINING ROOM - DAY

JEREMIAH OATES 30’s, plantation owner, sharp featured, muttonchops, crisp white shirt, cream breeches, riding boots, sits at a table, finishing his breakfast.

He wipes his mouth with a napkin.

He looks across the table, addresses his wife EMILY 30’s, delicate, crinolined from neck to ankle.

    JEREMIAH
    Very nice, as always my darlin’.

Emily tips her head in recognition of the compliment. Her ringlets bob. She smiles shyly.

    EMILY
    Why thank you Sir. Very kind of you to say so.

She glances at Jeremiah’s empty plate.

    EMILY (CONT’D)
    You ate well my beloved.

Jeremiah stands, stretches.

    JEREMIAH
    Yes...This morning of all mornings I shall need my strength.

Emily looks embarrassed. She sips coffee from a porcelain cup.

Jeremiah walks over, places a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

    JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
    It has to be done...and the Good Lord knows, it has to be me.

Emily looks up at her husband sadly.

    EMILY
    But it’s William---

Jeremiah points his finger in the air in emphasis.
JEREMIAH
Precisely my point! My best ‘boy’ has violated The Black Code of South Carolina and by God and all that’s Holy, today I will teach him a stern lesson!

Emily rises, gently kisses Jeremiah on the cheek, turns back, clutches herself and drops her head.

EMILY
As you wish my husband...I’ll pray for you...

Jeremiah, irked by her leniency, spins and leaves. The door slams. Emily jumps.

EMILY (CONT’D)
...for you both.

She begins to gently weep.

EXT. EDGE OF FOREST - DAY

Black slave WILLIAM 30’s, stands tied, facing a tree, naked from the waist up.

His wrists bleed from the rope bonds cutting into his flesh. He trembles with a mixture of fear and fatigue. Jeremiah arrives, cracks his bullwhip. William jolts, petrified.

JEREMIAH
Good morning to you William...I trust you had sufficient time overnight to consider your wrongdoings?

William shivers. No answer.

Jeremiah approaches, rams the handle of the bullwhip into his throat and forces his head back.

JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
Don’t dare ignore me boy, else it’ll be the worst for you...you hear?
He roughly pulls the bullwhip away. William gasps for air.

WILLIAM
Yes Masa...sorry Masa...I was praying to The Lord.


JEREMIAH
Well I sure hope you prayed good, ’cause when I’ve finished with you...He just may have your soul.

WILLIAM
If that’s His will---

JEREMIAH
No William...if it is my will!

Jeremiah readies himself for the first stroke.

JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
You sure you’re ready to die for a fuckin’ pickaninny?...You know you can’t fraternize with the women...you broke the law!

WILLIAM
Sarah’s my woman.

Jeremiah lashes William’s back. He writhes, agonised.

JEREMIAH
I’ve about had enough of your back talkin’ boy

He whips him again, ignoring the cries.

JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
But now I have a thought that tonite ’your’ Sarah may be my woman. Yessir, maybe she’d like some white meat, what say you?

William screams in pain and anger.

WILLIAM
Dear God! For one minute let Masa be in my place...

Crack! William howls.
WILLIAM (CONT’D)
One minute, Lord...is all I ask!

He closes his eyes.

DREAM SEQUENCE

Jeremiah is tied to the tree. Naked from the waist down. His back resembles a butcher’s slab.

William stands behind him, eyes closed, bullwhip in hand.

His white shirt, breeches and boots are spattered with blood.

As Jeremiah speaks, William opens his eyes.

JEREMIAH
Masa, you can whip me, take my woman...even my life...but you can’t never take my faith.

William snarls, raises the bullwhip, hesitates.

JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
You say I broke the law...what law? Your law? Written by men?

WILLIAM
I am the law!

JEREMIAH
No Massa you ain’t...God is the law...

William steps forward aggressively, raises his weapon again.

Once more he falters.

Jeremiah cries at the top of his lungs.

JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
...Thou shalt have no other gods before me...Thou shalt not murder...Thou shalt not commit adultery...

As if struck by lightning, William drops to his knees.

The whip falls from his grasp.
EMILY (O.S.)
Jeremiah? What’s wrong?

BACK TO SCENE
Jeremiah kneels behind William, looks to the sky.

JEREMIAH
Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s
house, his wife--

Emily rushes to him. She takes him in her arms.

EMILY
Dearest, what has overcome you?

She touches his forehead.

Jeremiah looks at his wife.

JEREMIAH
God knows...only God truly knows.

He attempts to rise. Emily helps him to his feet.

JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
I came here today to teach william
a lesson...but sweet Jesus, it is I
who has learned.

With Emily’s assistance he staggers over to William.

He begins to untie him.

JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
I learned Emily that for all these
years I’ve been wrong.

William, released from his bonds falls to the ground.

JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
We’ve all been wrong.

He screams at the sky.

JEREMIAH (CONT’D)
So damn wrong!...Dear God may you
forgive us for our sins! For this
lamentable evil we have
perpetrated!
EMILY
Husband, just what is it you are saying?

Jeremiah takes Emily’s hands in his.

JEREMIAH
We will free these human beings...for that is what they are...human beings, as are we.

Emily kisses Jeremiah’s hands.

EMILY
Thank God...you are a good man Jeremiah Oates...and I am proud to be your wife...but you know this may be the beginning of the end?

JEREMIAH
In my heart of hearts I pray that to be true...we must be strong, for others will despise us...Come, kneel with me.

He lowers her gently to the ground and kneels beside her.

WILLIAM (O.S.)
Masa?

Jeremiah looks over.

JEREMIAH
There is no ‘Masa’ now William.

William hauls himself across to the other two, tears stream down his face.

He drags himself to his knees and takes their hands in his.

WILLIAM
Please...may I give thanks with you?

Jeremiah and Emily nod, squeeze his hands tight.

WILLIAM (CONT’D)
Our Father...

ALL
Our Father, which art in Heaven....

FADE OUT:
THE END