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Hermitage

by Ruth A. Rouff

I was sitting with my niece Melanie in the living room of her home in Nashville. We were talking about President Andrew Jackson's house, The Hermitage. In front of us, Melanie's six-year-old daughter Sarah sat playing with a doll that was nearly as big as she was. The doll had pink skin, blue eyes, and blond hair made out of some coarse synthetic fiber. Sarah had brown skin, brown eyes, and springy soft black hair. Strangely enough, her African American grandmother had sent her the Caucasian doll. Melanie said that she had found it on sale somewhere. Hard for doting grandmothers to resist a sale.

"I don't think Sarah is ready for that conversation," Melanie was telling me. She was referring to the fact that The Hermitage had been a slave-worked plantation. If Melanie and Sarah went with my brother Bob and me to the Hermitage, Sarah would inevitably raise certain questions. Sarah was a bright child, alert to nuances and evasions. She was also very sensitive.

"I understand," I told Melanie. I was disappointed that she and Sarah wouldn't be joining us, but I could understand why. However, I was determined to enjoy myself. This was my first trip to Nashville. I wanted to see all the sights...politically dicey or no. I had been happy when Melanie and her musician husband Ken had decided to move there from Los Angeles a year earlier. Nashville is much closer to New Jersey than is Los Angeles, and I had always been curious about the "flavor" of Southern life.

The next morning Bob and I set out in our rental Pontiac, heading onto 155 East. One of the things I like best about Bob is that he never criticizes my driving. He's developmentally disabled-but he can read and loves to do so. He also loves to see sightsee. I thought he'd get a kick out of a trip to Nashville-that's why I took him along. After a few minutes on Old Hickory Boulevard, we made a right onto Rachel's Lane, so named after Andrew Jackson's beloved wife.

You can't see The Hermitage mansion from the road. You first enter the one-story visitor's center. Inside, we picked up our audio headphones and began looking around. As we did, any thought that Melanie could have avoided telling Sarah about slavery during a visit was quickly dispelled. Interspersed between exhibits of Jackson's personal belongings were placards telling about the various house slaves who had catered to him and his family. One showed Hannah Jackson, a thin, unsmiling woman who was head of the house servants. Hannah was wearing a white apron over homespun and held a walking stick on her right hand. The bottom section of her face was sunken in, as if she had no teeth. Another photograph was of Betty, the family cook, and her great-grandchildren, circa 1867. She looked grim-faced, clad in a coarse jacket and dress; the children were ragged and unsmiling.

We then left the visitors' center and walked up a path to the white-brick mansion, which was nested between tall trees. From a cheerful lady docent dressed in period costume, we learned that the original mansion had burned in 1834 and been rebuilt in Greek Revival style. It had Doric columns and a white picket balcony. Inside the large center hall, French neo-classical wallpaper depicted a scene from the Odyssey: the visit of Telemachus to the island of Calypso in search of his father. I had already known that the Southern aristocracy fancied itself heir to the ancient Greeks. Here was

more proof.

Up the elegant, elliptical stairway, there were several bedrooms. Inside each one was a canopied four poster bed, so high you needed steps to climb into it. Adjacent to the bedroom Andrew Jackson died in was his library, containing over six hundred volumes. The docent told us that the Ladies' Hermitage Association had had to buy back most of the original furniture after Andrew Jackson's adopted son sold it to pay off his debts. Evidently Andrew Jr. had let the family fortune slide through his hands. So much for inherited wealth.

At the foot of the back stairs was a huge dining room with venetian blinds, elaborate place settings, and a wall-to-wall cloth floor covering, the height of fashion circa 1836. Out the back door, the kitchen stood in its own small building. We were told that it had been separated from the rest of the mansion to prevent fires and to keep odors and heat from entering the house.

Outside another docent pointed out a bell on a pillar that was used to call the slaves. The docent told us that there were wires connecting rooms in the mansion to other, various-sized bells. Depending on the tone of the bell, a slave could tell in which room his or her services were requested. Then the slave would have to drop whatever he or she was doing and go to attend that person.

"What if the person was a pain in the ass?" I wondered.

Bob was content to take pictures.

Next we walked around the side of the mansion to the Jacksons' tomb. It stood within a lovely English garden. It was a Greek Revival cupola made of Tennessee limestone and coated with copper. It stood over two stone slabs...Andrew's and Rachel's. A few paces to the right sat another grave. This grave belonged to Betty's son, Alfred. After a lifetime spent at The Hermitage, Alfred had requested (demanded?) to be buried within spitting distance of his dead master. Since Alfred chose to stay on the property even after emancipation, the powers that be acceded to his request. It couldn't have been that Alfred particularly enjoyed servitude. Our audio tour noted that when Alfred heard a white visitor say that slavery wasn't so bad, he asked the man, "Would you like to be a slave?"

I speculated about Alfred. Perhaps he had asked to be buried close to Jackson because he knew that millions of people would visit the place. Perhaps he wanted those visitors to know that slaves had built it. However, we'll never know for sure, since the slaves at the Hermitage, as elsewhere, were discouraged from learning to write.

Bob and I then walked over to a slave cabin. It had a plank floor, a window, and a fireplace. There was no French wallpaper depicting Telemachus's journey. There were no oil paintings or canopied bed. We had the option of taking a walk to see more of the cabins, but since the temperature was over one hundred degrees, we decided to go to lunch instead. I doubted if the other cabins would have differed much from this one. Uniformity was kind of the point of slave habitations.

As Bob and I sat eating our lunch in the cafeteria, I realized that there was

no way that Melanie could have taken Sarah to see The Hermitage. This was sad, because in one respect, Andrew Jackson was a great man. He had expanded American democracy to include the average man...average white man, that is. But he kicked the Cherokee Indians out of Tennessee and lived in luxury while blacks lived in abject servitude. He thought that was the natural order of things. I could imagine little Sarah asking, "Mommy, what's a slave? Why were only black people slaves? Why did they have to live in little houses while the white people lived in big houses? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?"

When Bob and I returned to my niece's house, I told Melanie that she had made the right decision.

"There's no way," I said, "you could have avoided the subject." A little while later, Melanie's husband Ken walked upstairs to get something to drink. He had a studio downstairs where he produced music. Ken's family had been land owners who had been run out of Mississippi decades earlier by the Ku Klux Klan and who had eventually made their way to California. Although I didn't ask Ken, something told me that he was in no hurry to visit The Hermitage. I wondered too about him bringing his family to Tennessee. But Nashville is more liberal than other parts of the South.

"Nashville went for Obama," Melanie told me.

"People have been very welcoming," Ken had said earlier.

On the couch, Bob sat looking at his Hermitage postcards. Meanwhile, Sarah played with her white doll. She liked to lug the doll around the house with her. The doll had a stilted grin on her face. I didn't think she was a particularly attractive doll.

"Sarah's alter-ego," I said to Melanie while we were standing in the kitchen.

"Sarah likes white dolls better than she likes black dolls," Melanie admitted. "I wasn't counting on that."

I told her I knew several women, one white, one black, whose biracial children were now fairly well-adjusted adults.

"It's a process," I said.

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