



written + directed
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*Inspired by the poem
"Cross"
by Langston Hughes*

EXT. TOUCHSTONE PLANTATION. 1881. DUSK

A rural, sprawling cotton plantation that extends for miles, forever, into the desolate wilderness as far as we can see.

The late summer wind whips through the crops--

EXT. TOUCHSTONE PLANTATION. SLAVE QUARTERS. DUSK

We PUSH IN on an oil LANTERN hanging outside of a small wooden cabin, the walls slightly VIBRATING from impact--

INT. SLAVE QUARTERS. CONTINUOUS

ON LEVI TOUCHSTONE

Late-50s, a European plantation owner, having sex with ANNABELLE LEE - a Black slave, early-40s.

Levi pumps and pants and sweats pathetically. Annabelle stares up at him, her soft face empty and mournful.

EXT. TOUCHSTONE PLANTATION. COTTON FIELDS. DAY

We DRIFT along short rows of FEMALE SLAVES working diligently beneath the scorching sun until the CAMERA finds

ANNABELLE,

working relentlessly like everyone else.

Suddenly -- she feels light-headed -- her eyes flutter -- her knees slightly buckle.

Without warning -- droplets of BLOOD begin dripping from between her legs and stain her bale of cotton.

EXT. TOUCHSTONE MANOR. DAY

Sitting on the porch -- overlooking his estate -- Levi rocks rhythmically in his rocking chair.

Annabelle is escorted by WHITE OVERSEERS.

She asks for permission to approach -- which Levi cautiously grants.

She whispers something in his ear.

Levi looks up at her with cold, unforgiving eyes.

INT. TOUCHSTONE MANOR. FOYER. DUSK

A sitting room transformed into a primitive delivery room.

Annabelle is propped up on a small expensive-looking sofa. Levi stands over her.

Annabelle clutches her MIDWIFE's hand; MOANS in pain.

WHIP PAN to REVEAL from across the room, MAGGIE TOUCHSTONE - early-50s, Levi's wife - watches with disgust -- guzzling a cocktail -- quickly pouring another.

Eventually, two WET NURSES deliver a healthy BABY BOY with light brown skin.

This is MAX.

As Levi cradles the crying newborn with fatherly compassion:

MAX (V.O.)
My old man's a white old man...

With her legs still propped, Annabelle falls back into the sofa, exhausted.

MAX (V.O.)
And my old mother's black...

INT. SLAVE QUARTERS. NIGHT

Baby Max screams and cries before bedtime. Annabelle hovers over his makeshift crib, silently singing lullabies.

INT./EXT. PLANTATION HOUSE. DAY. SERIES OF SHOTS

- * Annabelle helps BABY MAX walk through the cotton fields --
- * Levi teaches YOUNG MAX how to read --
- * WHITE CHILDREN point at Max and LAUGH --
- * Max lowers his head, humiliated --
- * TEENAGE MAX gets caught stealing food --
- * Levi fiercely reprimands him --

MAX (V.O.)
If ever I cursed my white old man...

EXT. TOUCHSTONE PLANTATION. PORCH. DUSK

A wide shot. Levi and Max stand together, contemplating the sky. Levi reluctantly throws his arm around Max's shoulders.

MAX (V.O.)
... I take my curses back.

From inside, Maggie rattles the ice of her empty cocktail, eyeing her husband contentiously.

INT. TOUCHSTONE MANOR. STUDY. NIGHT

A leather-bound copy of John Webster's "The White Devil".

Levi reads aloud expressively -- doing the voices -- over-exaggerating -- entertaining Max and some other CHILDREN.

Max looks over at a few GIRLS his age. Smiles sheepishly.

EXT. COTTON FIELDS. DAY

Thunderclaps BOOM in the distance. The sky darkens.

Max and other CHILDREN laugh and dance in the rain.

Max gets teased by OLDER BLACK CHILDREN because of his hair, which is thin, parted, and coifed.

The Older Black Children hold their forearms against Max's -- comparing skin color -- bullying Max for being lighter.

Max wrestles with a few of the Older Black Kids.

INT. SLAVE QUARTERS. DUSK

Max and Annabelle argue feverishly -- garnering attention.

HEADS turn.

MAX (V.O.)
*If ever I cursed my black old
 mother...*

LATER

Max -- alone -- using a lantern for illumination -- attempts to SCRATCH off his skin, peel away his pigmentation.

MAX (V.O.)
... And wished she were in hell...

EXT. COTTON FIELDS. NIGHT

The dancing flames of a sizzling bonfire.

SLAVES stand around the heat, struggling to stay warm.

INT. SLAVE QUARTERS. SAME

Over his narrow cot, Max prays, eye closed tightly.

MAX
 (whispering)
 -- my mom. Please Lord... please
 just... please Lord... please--

We intrusively PUSH IN on a small picture of the VIRGIN MARY posted above Max's bed.

MAX (V.O.)
I'm sorry for that evil wish...

EXT. SLAVE QUARTERS. MORNING

Max and Annabelle embrace on the porch, overlooking the plantation. The sunset.

MAX (V.O.)
... And now I wish her well.

INT. PLANTATION HOUSE. DAY

We FOLLOW a DOCTOR as he moves down a lavish corridor, making his way into the

MASTER BEDROOM

where Levi lays in bed, slowly dying.

Levi dies surrounded by MAGGIE, OVERSEERS, and CHILDREN.

MAX (V.O.)
*My old man died in a fine big
 house...*

EXT. SLAVE QUARTERS. DUSK

We PUSH IN on the wooden barracks.

CLOSE ON an army of MOTHS fluttering around the lantern.

INT. SLAVE QUARTERS. CONTINUOUS

Annabelle lies in the shed -- dying -- with only Max at her side.

He clutches her hand emotionally.

MAX (V.O.)
My ma died in a shack...

Max pushes away a tear. Makes the Sign of the Cross.

MAX (V.O.)
I wonder where I'm going to die...

EXT. SLAVE QUARTERS. MOMENTS LATER

As Max exits the wooden cabin, a swarm of BIRDS scatter into the sky at the exact same moment.

MAX (V.O.)
Being neither white nor black.

We DRIFT across the plantation, across the cotton fields, dancing in the air, giving way to the wind and the sky.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END