

Important events in the Night john plot.

sarny does not remember her "birthing mammy" because she was only four years old when the woman was sold away. so we are introduced to delie in the beginning who the kids refer to as mammy.

mammy tells sarny she is 12.

sarny likes her roses and her plant bed

The slaves in the quarters are fed in large troughs. The troughs are filled with buttermilk or cooking juice, and the people dip cornbread and pieces of pork fat into it.

The slaves are not supposed to know anything about God, nor are they allowed to pray, but Mammy prays anyway, "late at night when there isn't anybody to hear." Mammy prays for freedom.

The new slave, Nightjohn, is "brought...in bad." He is naked, and his body, which is "all over scars from old whippings," is drenched with sweat and covered with biting flies.

The slaves are worked mercilessly. Other than a brief period at noon when they are allowed to wolf down a piece of cold cornbread and pork fat while standing, they work every minute of the day.

The slaves are always tired after working that they go right to sleep. Nightjohn, however, is different. As Sarny lies, still awake, in a pile of sleeping children, she hears him whisper, "I need some tobacco...I'll trade something for a lip of tobacco."

Sarny seems intrigued by his offer and since she knew what reading was she accepted to learn from nightjohn.

That first night, Nightjohn teaches Sarny the letter *A*, and the sounds that go with it. It is so simple that Sarny is mystified as to why the white people will cut off the slaves' thumbs if they learn to read. Nightjohn explains:

"Cause...for us to know things, is bad for them. We get to wanting and when we get to wanting it's bad for them. They thinks we want what they got."

Alice, a young slave girl with an "addled" mind, had been forced to become a breeder and had resisted so violently that "they [had] tied her to make it happen."

The master had whipped her, and when her back "was all ripped and bleeding," he had rubbed salt in her wounds "to make more pain." Mammy has been trying to nurse Alice back to health.

On the third night after Nightjohn teaches Sarny the letter *A*, Alice runs away. The master sets his dogs after her, and she does not fight them. The dogs tear away the whole front of her, but the young woman does not die

As Alice lingers somewhere between life and death at the other end of the quarters, Nightjohn teaches Sarny the letter *B*. Mammy catches him. Slamming him against the wall, she demands, "Don't you know what they do to her if they find her trying to read?"

Mammy asks Nightjohn why his back is so completely knitted with the scars of the whip, and the man tells her it is because he ran. The first time he did it, he had managed to get all the way to freedom, but he had returned so that he could teach his fellow slaves to read.

Nightjohn's intent had been to keep moving, "teaching a little here, a little there.

Mammy asks what difference it makes if the "young ones" learn to read. She says it will only bring them grief to "find what they don't have, can't have." Nightjohn replies that it is important for all slaves to learn to read and write so that they can record for posterity the injustice and atrocities that are being done to them. Mammy leaves the man alone then, and he goes on to teach Sarny C, D, E, F, and G.

It is not long before Sarny is able to spell her first word, *BAG*. She is so excited by what she has learned that she unthinkingly draws the word out in the dirt one day and is caught by Waller.

he "master" demands to know what she is doing. Although the child insists that she is only reproducing something she saw on an old feed sack, Waller does not believe her. Throwing her to the ground, he begins to bludgeon her with his feet. Sarny rolls away from him and runs to Mammy, who is tending to Alice in the quarters. Waller follows her and turns his ire on the older woman, asking her repeatedly, "Who is teaching Sarny to read?" Mammy claims she does not know, but Waller is unrelenting. He drags Mammy to the spring house and shackles her to the wall. Leaving her hanging there, he goes into the white house.

Wailing, Sarny runs to Mammy. She knows that the woman is going to be whipped and that it is all her fault. Mammy, however, stoically says that she would have gotten whipped eventually anyway.

When the field slaves come in, Waller returns and makes them watch Mammy's humiliation. He rips the clothes from her body and hitches her to a buggy, forcing him to pull her as he wields the whip mercilessly. Nightjohn steps forward then and tells Waller that Mammy does not know anything about the reading, and asserts, "It was all me."

the "master" gets out of the buggy and orders a field hand to fetch some tools from the blacksmith. He declares to the gathered slaves that it is wrong for them to learn to read, and that the punishment, as decreed by the law, is

"removal of an extremity." Forcing other hands to hold Nightjohn's feet down on a stump, he cruelly chops off the middle toe from each with a chisel and hammer. When Waller finally leaves, the field hands carry Nightjohn to the quarters, and Sarny rushes over to tend to Mammy.

Mammy is back up comparatively quickly, but Nightjohn is down for longer. Despite what has happened, he continues to teach Sarny. After three nights, he is gone. Despite his condition, he manages to get "clean away." Waller is livid, but the slaves are quietly jubilant. Sarny continues to practice her letters surreptitiously, making them into words in her head.

In the fall, Sarny's "troubles" begin. She is terrified that soon she too will be sent to the breeding shed.

she hears a sound in the darkness and knows that Nightjohn has returned.

Nightjohn takes Sarny across the fields, into some "brushy ditches" along the river, where she finds a space lit by three crude pitch torches—a "pit school." Gathered there are slaves who have come to meet Nightjohn and to learn to read.

Nightjohn shows his students a book: it is a catalog, filled with all the things the slaves can never have. Under a picture of a horse, Sarny is excited to see a combination of letters that she recognizes. The word they form is *BAG*. Sarny is now able to read. After everyone has had a look, Nightjohn, with Sarny's help, teaches the letters to those who do not yet know them.

The slaves are confident that Nightjohn will come again, walking in the darkness, and that soon, they will all have "the way to know."