

*God, Send Sunday* departs from the conventions I find in Morrison's *Beloved* and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*. Like Morrison and Williams, Wheelock had to create a plot based on the evidence of history, but she puts a spotlight on the agency of the enslaved in shaping evidence which is often used sparingly by professional historians. Although the novel is immersed in black Christian thought, she wisely refuses to throw hush-puppies to the modern and somewhat passive Christian choir. Discerning readers will appreciate that.

— JERRY W. WARD, CO-EDITOR OF THE  
CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

I was totally mesmerized while reading *God, Send Sunday*. I laughed, cried, got angry, and put it down only to immediately pick it up again. I felt the pain of desertion, despair, desolation, and the sheer unadulterated joy of reunion. Jacqueline Wheelock has a gift for painting a picture so clearly that you are able to see each detail—from the buildings to the clothes to the facial features—with accuracy and clarity. Her writing is a welcome change in a world that seems devoid of civility and human compassion.

— PATRICIA WHITLOCK, RETIRED  
UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI MEDICAL  
CENTER PROFESSIONAL AND AVID READER  
OF BLACK HISTORY



# God, Send Sunday



JACQUELINE FREEMAN WHEELLOCK



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PRESS

Quench your thirst for story.

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*To all God's women who have bent their minds to settle for what  
their hearts neither desired nor deserved, Sunday dedicates her story  
to you.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Linda Fulkerson and Scrivenings Press for the opportunity to publish one of the books of my heart which I had long since dubbed a shelf novel. Equally, I want to thank my husband, children, their spouses and my grandchildren for loving me through it all.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE: A CAVEAT

The word “nigger” was used regularly during the antebellum period. In an attempt to remain faithful to many of the conversations of that era, I have chosen to use the word in this novel. It should be noted, however, that the choice is solely mine and, in no sense, reflects the policies and leanings of Scrivenings Press. In my opinion, however, the neglect of its use in dialogue during the nineteenth century imposes a superficiality that does not serve a realistic image of certain pre-Civil War interactions.

I deeply appreciate Linda Fulkerson for her understanding, and my hope is simply that the novel provides readers with a slightly different perspective on slavery and the Christian walk during a painful segment of America's evolving history.

~ Jacqueline Freeman Wheelock

## PROLOGUE



*A county in southern Virginia*

*Sunday, July 7, 1846*

Six-year-old Sunday Pennington stretched her legs along her father's solid lap. Back nestled against his chest, she felt the steady beat of his heart. Most mornings when he left for his shed, she was still asleep, so this Sabbath-Day pause, when the two of them lingered at the breakfast table and Mama quietly moved about tidying up, was a time young Sunday lived for.

Papa set down his empty coffee tin, gently tugged one of her thick wiry plaits, and pressed his whiskered chin against the part in her hair while she giggled and waited for the words she knew would come.

"All right, my little Sabbath girl. What world-famous drawing do you have for your papa today?"

His deep voice was as comforting and familiar and mysterious as the rapidly aging sunrise outside the window. Sunday shrugged her shoulders in mock modesty. Beneath her empty breakfast plate lay one of her pencil sketches, its crimped edges



hidden from Papa. She eased the length of paper from underneath the dish and placed it in Papa's hands, her eager inquiry spilling forth before the sheet touched his palm.

"You like this one, Papa?"

Papa played the game with practiced ease. Angled the grease-spotted paper toward the sun. Took his time answering. "Best drawing you ever did."

He looked into her eyes as though he'd not made that declaration a thousand times before. And for the thousandth time, she believed him with all her heart.

"A drawing of your mama and me," he said, resettling her onto his lap. Suddenly his voice was small and shaky, his eyes wet. "You're gifted and beautiful, just like your mama, and one day you go'n be famous. Your papa go'n see to it."

Sunday snuggled in closer. That sadness in Papa's eyes—as though he dragged a big dark secret behind him whenever he spoke pretty words about Mama—didn't show up often. But each time it happened, it pulled hard at Sunday's feelings.

"Time to worship," he said as Mama quickly placed a greasy butcher knife in the dishwasher basin, the tang of the bacon slabs she'd fried and served earlier still hanging in the tiny space of the kitchen.

"I'll wash it later," she mumbled to herself. Mama forced a smile. The one she used when she was nervous. "William, I wouldn't worry overmuch about all those slave speculator rumors running around. We've been on this spot of land for a good many years now, and not a single white man—except a few poor ones who tried to use their color to demand we sell—has set foot out here unless he truly wanted to buy something."

Papa frowned. Shot a rare mean look at Mama. "You sure about that, Sadie?"

Mama seemed scolded, like a naughty puppy. "Well ... that is ... *nearly* none."

Sunday studied her mother's words. Decided there was no

real trouble hiding in Papa's rather harsh correction. Summed it up as another one of those odd grown-folks things that happened every so often.

Contentment flooded Sunday as her mother slid into her special chair—the most beautiful piece Papa had ever carved—and waited for his special after-breakfast Sabbath prayer. There was no church for blacks out here, so Papa made his own. Sunday bowed her head. Mouthed the words along with her father.

“Most Holy One, we thank you for this Sabbath Day. A day after which my sweet girl here was named. A day in which we celebrate the gift of freedom which you have bestowed upon us.”

He halted, throwing Sunday's silent recital out of rhythm. His voice trembled through the next part of the prayer.

“And, Father, we pray once more and again for our sisters and brothers out yonder not yet free, believing and knowing it's go'n happen one of these days. 'Til then, we remain your humble servants. Amen.” Sunday's mama bustled up from the table, her voice full of its own weepiness.

“Mercy. I've got okra to cut before that sun gets too hot.” She poured Papa a second steaming cup. Dabbed her eyes with her apron bib and enfolded her family with a quick hug. “Don't know what's taken hold of me.” She swept up her garden basket and flew out the back door as Sunday pointed toward the basin on the work table.

“Mama done forgot her butcher knife.”

Papa's shoulders shook with laughter. “Yep. Forgot to wash it too. When that garden of hers hits your mama's mind—”

Pounding, sharp and sudden, shut down Papa's laugh. “Horse's hooves. Who'd be wanting chairs made bad enough to come way out here on a Sunday?”

As abruptly as the sound rose, it ceased. Whinnying, mixed with Mama's “hello,” struck through the silence.

“Yes, sir. What can we do for you?”

Sunday’s stomach tumbled. Mama’s voice was as thin and uncertain as Papa’s had been moments ago. Was she still upset over Papa’s correction?

“Where’s your man?”

The words from the stranger were question words, but the sound was scary. Demanding. Papa’s body stiffened underneath Sunday.

“A white man. Doesn’t sound too friendly either.”

Sunday had never met a white man in her life, Papa always making certain she was kept out of sight when he did his chair-making business. Fresh cup still in his hands, he nearly pushed her from his lap. He grabbed the greasy knife from the dishwasher. Slid it into his shirt.

“Stay here. Don’t move unless I say so.”

“Papa?” She folded the sketch and slid it into the pocket Mama had stitched onto her dress. “Papa?”

Curiosity outstripping Papa’s orders, she hovered in the shadow of the doorway and peered across the small grassless yard. Funny. The rider hadn’t even bothered to tie his horse. Papa stepped off the porch and faced the man. Why had Papa said the man was white when he was clearly the loudest shade of pink Sunday had ever seen? Her insides took another dive. She couldn’t tell what, but something was bad wrong.

“Help you, sir? Needing some chairs built today?”

“Ain’t interested in none of your fancy chairs.”

Papa said nothing. Just continued to stand with the coffee cup in his hand. The pink sweating man pulled something from his belt—a foreign looking thing with a handle and a short shiny pole pointing straight at Papa.

“I’ve got no personal quarrel with you, but you’ve been playing the big nigra long enough—building out here in the middle of nowhere, selling fancy made chairs like a white man. Mr. Duval is needing boys like you to work the tobacco fields

over at Duval Plantation. I've been offered a right nice sum to haul you and your woman out there. And I intend to deliver."

Papa gestured toward one of his fine-looking rocking chairs at the edge of the porch. "'Fraid you got the wrong fella. Like you yourself said, I make chairs for a living. I'm a freeborn man. I don't work without pay. Don't try to hide that from anybody."

The man's laugh was clipped. "Free? Don't you know there ain't no such thing as a free black man in this country? Now put down that cup and let's go."

Papa continued to hold the cup—not loosely as he had at the table but with a death grip that made Sunday want to visit the outhouse. But she couldn't, not when the smell of fear had overpowered the bacon, nailing her to the spot.

"There's been some kind of mistake here. My wife and I have lived on this land nigh on to eight years."

"Not interested in your li'l make-believe nest out here nor how long you've lived in it."

From beneath his collar, the man produced a chain with a set of open circles at either end. *Click, click.* He fingered the handle of the metal pole.

"Put the cup down and turn around. No foolishness now, or I'll have to—"

"Nooooo!" Mama's scream echoed across the yard. "Don't let him do it, Lord!"

*Now.* It was time for Sunday to do something. She opened her mouth. Tried to warn Mama of the horse. But the words cowered inside, mute and cold as a log of green firewood.

"Don't hurt my husband. Please." Mama's tiny body hurtled toward the pink-white man like a falling star.

"Sadie, no. Stay back."

A fire curled the edges of Sunday's stomach as the horse whinnied and reared. Eyes flashing alarm, the animal pawed the air, the same space Mama was flying headlong into while Sunday's toes gripped the floor. *Thud.* Mama hit the ground,

her eyes staring at the sky. Fixed in shock as though she'd never before seen the rising sun.

*My mama.*

A scream tried to push past the terror lodged in Sunday's throat, as Papa flung the coffee into the white man's face. Yelping like a scalded dog, the man dropped the metal pole as Papa pulled the knife from his shirt. Walking backwards towards Mama, he waved it toward the intruder.

"Get off my land, or you won't live to ride another day."

Papa knelt at Mama's side, just before the man bent toward the ground and grabbed the handle to his shiny pole.

*Papaaa!*

Papa turned. In a stretch of seconds, Sunday watched her father join her mother in the dirt, their faces to the sun, blood pumping from Papa's head faster than a body could milk a cow. Finally, Sunday moved from the shadows, the latent screams bursting forth like a spring freshet. Clear. Cold.

"Mamaaa! Papaa!"

Water and waste from her convulsing body made their way down her legs, Mama's words in hot pursuit.

*"Remember, honey. Big girls don't soil their pants."*

Sunday halted the screams. Breathed relief. That's what Mama would say when she woke up—when she and Papa got better and everything turned back to the way it was minutes ago.

*Big girls don't soil their pants. Big girls don't ...*

And if they should happen to do so now and again, they certainly didn't go outside wearing them. Slamming the door shut, Sunday flew toward the bedroom in search of fresh underpants.

Yes. That's what Mama would say. She'd be proud of Sunday when she woke up. Wouldn't she?

# **PART I**

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Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

~ Exodus 20:3

*Saturday, March 16, 1861*

*Duval Plantation*

*A county on the southern border of Virginia*

Sunday Duval rushed along the edge of the tobacco fields toward the door of her cabin, her son July in her arms, her husband Noah speaking too close to her ear.

“You don’t understand, Sunny. I need you to trust me.”

“Trust you?”

Had this man been sleeping on the same pallet with her for over three years, and still didn’t know Sunday Pennington Duval trusted no one? Stepping over the threshold, she rounded on Noah. Glared up at him with all the defiance in her arsenal. She knew what he wanted, all right. Vowed she would never give it to him.

“It ain’t about trust, Noah. I just won’t do it.”

Even suggesting such a thing was past what she could

understand. He knew what a homebody she was. Knew she'd not ventured from her world of field and cabin since she was six. Not even—for reasons too painful to admit—to mount the back steps of the big house. Why, then, was he asking her to join something as far-flung and cloudy and shapeless as the Underground Railroad? The very idea struck fear to Sunday's soul causing her to press the soft wool of July's head to her throat.

“And I plan for them to be my final words on the matter.”

Squinting past her husband toward the westering sun, she looked out onto the dead tobacco fields that had been her life for so many years. She gathered her child closer. Moved deeper into the cabin. Waited and hoped for Noah's usual gentle concession to her demands, so that her life could regain its pulse of backbreaking work and loving July. And more back-breaking work.

But Noah didn't budge.

“Well? You go'n just stand there like a dumb oak 'til this time next week? Shut the door.”

He didn't blink. Just held his place filling the doorway, giving free course to every bug in Virginia to invade her nest. The shock at her blunt refusal had marred his good-looking face which she knew every female fieldworker on Duval Plantation secretly wanted to touch. It was a wonder she hadn't gotten caught up in the sheer beauty of the man. But it had never been possible, since she'd married him for one reason and one reason only. To conceive July.

Her son. The only real joy she'd experienced since Mama and Papa. A joy trapped between the moment she had first laid her soft eager baby to her breast and that dreaded day when she would look at him and know he had become old enough for Handley Duval to sell.

Snatching the dusty rag from her head, she settled her son onto the dirt floor. She placed the smooth wooden ball Noah



had made for him into his hand and locked eyes with her sweat-drenched husband.

“I ain’t got no more time for this kind of addlebrained talking, Noah. I got to fix supper.”

“Don’t fix none for me. I got a sore throat.”

Ignoring him, she removed a sack from behind the fire pit. Examined the last of this week’s meal allowance. Poured the meal into her only frying pan. Long-buried horrors from her past popped and sizzled inside her head like the rancid hog fat she’d already used the last of. Bright pink and purple, the only two colors she despised, swarmed her brain. Muddled her thoughts. Tried to lock her tongue. *Am I about to fall dumb again?* As she’d been for years when she was an orphaned child living with Miss Tullie.

Wrong word. She had never been dumb. It had simply become too painful to talk.

“What in the world ails you, Sunny? Don’t you even want to be free?”

Reminded of Papa’s words, she winced at the accusation lurking in Noah’s question. “Oughn’t every drop of black blood in these United States be running toward a chance at freedom?” Papa used to say.

*No, Papa.* The image of her baby being snatched from some “railroad” wagon and thrown to a pack of howling dogs splayed itself across Sunday’s mind. Stiffened her resolve. Sealed her lips until hopefully Noah would hush.

“I asked you a question, Sunny. And I ain’t go’n be put off no more. Do you or don’t you want us to have a new life of freedom—me, you, and July?”

A long, tired sigh escaped Sunday’s chest. Eleven of her twenty-one years, she had known Noah Duval—gathered in tobacco from the fields with him, received the same rotten rations with him. Savored the night skies with him. Finally agreed before God and the other slaves to be his wife. Yet

never once had she told him what she really thought about this thing called freedom—how it had deceived her, cowed her at those crucial minutes when she should have done something to save her mama and papa, jerked her around for five whole days afterward, until she'd landed at the brink of crazy and stayed there for years. Until Miss Tullie's kindness coaxed her tongue loose. After a back-wrenching day of clearing the final bit of land Handley Duval owned for a new tobacco field, the last thing she wanted to discuss was freedom.

Setting aside the idea of supper for a while, Sunday scooped her son up from the floor while Noah pressed a hand to his throat. A frisson of worry caused her to grip July. She backed up toward a bench against the wall of the cabin. Lifted her gaze to the space separating her from July's father.

"Noah, you feeling po'ly?"

Noah took a moment. Sized her up. "This about Silas, Sunny?"

*Mr. Silas*, he meant. Somehow things seemed always to crawl back around to that lowdown murderous man who stood between Handley Duval and the other slaves like a barely disguised sinkhole.

"You scared he'll find out and send Massa's hounds after us? 'Cause if that's all it is, you got to remember it won't be just us out there by ourselves fighting men like Silas. There's conductors and stations and—"

"Stop it, Noah. Will you just stop with all this railroad talk? Naw, it ain't Silas what's holding me back. Ain't seen that rascal for a while now. Wouldn't be scared of him if I did." *Lie*. Handley Duval's black driver had sparked fear in her since the days of that dreadful scarecrow.

But Silas didn't know that, and neither did Noah.

"Well if it ain't Silas, what's troubling you? What can a man do to make you understand that this our time, girl? Tomorrow

night might be the only chance we ever get to leave this place. Make a better life for July.”

“So you asking me to just pull up roots overnight? Strike out without even much ’lowing him to say bye to Miss Tullie who loves him nearly as much as I do? You’d ask me to do that to her, good as she’s been to us?”

Noah rearranged himself in the door space, one hip leaned into the frame, his brow drawn into a scowl that disturbed her. “So now it’s go’n be all about Mama Tullie, huh. Well, you might as well know. I already talked to her. She’s all for us leaving.”

Sunday pressed July into her chest until he whimpered. “I can’t do it. I just can’t.”

Noah slammed shut the shabby vertical boards he had fashioned into a door, his steps eating up the space between them in three long strides. He leaned into Sunday with violent urgency she’d not seen before.

“Can’t or won’t?”

He pointed back toward the rope-hinged door that had crept back open, his half forefinger trembling with anger. Why had he never told her what happened to his fingers? Why had she never asked?

“Didn’t I just explain to you, coming from the field, how all this works? These railroad folks want to help us. Free us. But it’s got to be now, Sunny. Now!” His eyes settled back into a plea. He stepped away. Tamped down his voice.

“They ain’t got time for this kind of foolish fence-riding, Sunny. Too many other slaves waiting in line. They know what they doing. Been doing it for years.”

Turning away from her, he paced the cabin in long strides. His excitement building, charging the close space like lightning strikes. Desperation bled through every word. He stopped. Squatted before her and July.

“These white folks, they got it all laid out, just where they

go'n take us and how they go'n get us there. Stations, they call them. Places where all different kinds of folks—rich and poor, farmers and city folk—hide whole families like me and you and July along the way. All the way up yonder to Canada.”

Canada? Where in the world was that?

Noah's eyes continued to beg for what his mouth had stopped short of. The one thing she knew he'd craved these many years. Love. Sunday's heart tried to stutter into some uninvited feeling of warmth. She wouldn't allow it.

“Why it got to be tomorrow? Is there something you ain't telling me? Something I don't want to know? Who is these white folks you talking about, Noah? And if all you say be true and everything be lined up so easy like that, how come more slaves haven't left Duval Plantation long time ago—?”

“Don't chu go against me on this one, Sunny.”

There it was in varying shades of purple. That hint of rage she'd seen while they'd walked from the fields, lurking at the edges of her husband's speech. Threatening the way she'd painfully set things up in her cabin all these years.

“You don't know how many nights I've spent thinking about this. Dreaming about how it would feel to make sure July grow up into a free man ...”

“*One day you go'n be famous, Sunday. Your papa's go'n see to it ...*”

Lies. All lies.

“Now, at last, I got me the push I been waiting for. I need you to be with me on this.”

Noah slumped onto the bench next to her, leaned his head back against the wall—the pleading in his eyes now outrage as he massaged one of the finger stumps.

“If I don't take this chance for freedom, no telling what I might do to Handley Duval this very night. You hear me? No telling. I got that Nat Turner feeling on me, and it just ain't no telling.”

Sunday sat forward. “You in some kind of trouble?”

“The leaving—I hadn’t planned on it quite so soon. But something serious done come up. I got to leave. Right away.”

“How come?”

One of the men in the field passed a word on to me today. Said Duval’s land is just about wore out.”

“Yeah? And?”

“Money done dried up. Might have to sell most of his slaves if he don’t turn a profit soon. That’s why he had you women out helping us clear the new field.”

Moisture trickled alongside Sunday’s neck down into her bosom. Somehow, she’d always known this day would come when she would have to choose between her husband’s desires and her son’s future. And, Lord help her, she’d always known which one would win.

“What? Why didn’t you say that up front ’stead of all this talk about freedom?”

“Cause the whole thing is about freedom, woman! Duval done already sold me to a speculator from up north. Said he’s losing money on the sale, but he figured I’d bring him the best price of the lot of us men he still owned. It’s just a matter of hours ’fore the man come looking to claim me.” Sunday’s arms slacked away from her son.

“Aw, Noah, naw.”

“Just so happens I heard at the hush meeting that somebody from the Railroad go’n be near your creek ’round midnight tomorrow. Might not be back for months. Said the fellow’d be able to take up to eight passengers. Plenty ’nough room for me and you and July.” Noah stroked his knuckles along July’s cheek then pointed toward the top of the cabin. “Don’t you see, Sunny? Somebody up there looking out for us.”

God. He was talking about God again. Noah and Miss Tullie—always bringing Him up at the worse possible times. Sunday wasn’t of a mind to hear anything about God tonight—the very

One who, when she was still on Papa's knee, had shown her just how treacherous freedom really was.

She searched her husband's profile. Despite how firmly she'd rejected his railroad idea, her heart was wooed. Noah Duval was a good man. Working twice as hard as any slave on the plantation, trying to get around the very thing that was about to happen—the auction block. He deserved better.

*Better than you.* Maybe. But that ingredient didn't belong in this mixing bowl of troubling thoughts.

In a stretch of seconds, she measured and weighed everything out in her mind. July was everything to her. The love of her life. She couldn't risk it. Simply could not. She felt a piece of herself detach as she watched her thoughts quickly form into a lie.

"Now you listen to me, Noah Duval. Me and July, we go'n be all right. We got Miss Tullie, and we got each other. You go on ahead with the white abolitionist. I want you to—truly I do."

She tapped Noah's forearm. Shushed a squirming July. Every nerve in her body strained under the weight of the treachery. Rarely had she lied to Noah outright. Never about anything this big, not even about her feelings for him when he'd begged her to marry him ...

*"I ain't so sure about that thing y'all call love."*

"Tell you what. I'll—me and July—we'll just catch the next 'train' that comes around. When you reach freedom land, you can wait for us. Then we'll all go to Canada together. How about that? That sound good to you? Just tell me where to look for you, and we'll be coming along 'fore you know it."

Noah opened his eyes. Bolted up straight. He rubbed his palms against the ragged britches covering his muscular thighs. "Going from station to station on the Underground Railroad ain't quite that simple. From what I hear, there ain't just no one or two routes. I can't tell you what the folks who run this train got planned nor where I'm go'n be at a particular time."

“I know, I know. But I’m strong and I’m well and we can do it, me and July. We’ll find you soon as July gets well.”

“Gets well? What’s wrong with my son?”

“Oh, nothing much.” That part of Sunday she still owned wondered how these lies were coming so fast. “Just a little fever last night, like young’uns will have. I didn’t wake you, and Miss Tullie said not to tell you. Said a big good-looking hardworking man like you didn’t need to hear every time his young’un take a head cold.”

She held her breath, the balls of her feet tingling with fear and another feeling she’d not been touched by since July’s birth. Hoping Noah was desperate enough to believe her, she startled when he laughed at the flirtatious words that sounded so much like Miss Tullie. He exhaled deeply, his eyes lighting up with hope.

“I don’t know. But as I think on it, it might just work.” Sunday bit her lip. Nodded for him to continue.

“I hear tell of folks who so caught up in wanting to help free slaves they actually come back down to get a man’s family.” He turned to look at her, cupped July’s face. “Sunny, if y’all willing to do exactly what I tell you—”

“I will. I’ll do anything you say.”

She listened as he explained who it was that had put him on to this chance to escape, someone from another plantation who attended those hush harbor meetings. Noah would ask the man to keep her informed about the next opportunity. He would work hard to learn the railroad system and who would be coming back this way. And with God on his side, when he made it to a free state, he’d send word to her. Then he’d wait.

“I’ll wait forever if I have to, Sunny, ’til you and July come. No matter how long it takes, I’m go’n wait—try to see if I can hear tell of us a little place somewhere in Canada where I can start my own woodshop and July can have a little yard to play in.”

She watched the flicker of hope light Noah's eyes again as he searched her face for a reaction. Hoping it was enough to satisfy the longing she saw, she managed another smile. "I reckon that's a good plan, Noah."

"And in the meantime, you'll watch out for Silas, all right? You know that old lusty hound dog been after you since you was twelve." She smiled at Noah's description.

"I can handle Silas."

But knowing she had no intention of ever joining Noah in Canada or anywhere else, she put a label on that other feeling she'd been gripped by a moment ago.

Shame.

The same helpless shame she had felt when she'd just stood there and watched Papa and Mama die in the advancing sun.