

Rite of Passage

The runaways huddled together in darkness at the back of the barn, five miles away from freedom and moments from death. Zeke, the youngest, was crushed against the splintered wood while the other six hid him from the patrollers, the mournful howls of the hound dogs growing louder with each second. Twice during their flight to freedom Zeke wished he'd stayed at the plantation. Once, when they got lost in the Dismal swamp, again when Old Ben got shot and died up around Setter's Point. He could add the Quaker barn to the list now.

Miss Tubman was the only one standing, pacing back and forth before the barn door, her pistol tight in her hand. She wasn't sweating scared like the rest of them. She was angry, mighty angry.

"Where is he?" she said. "Lord Jesus where is he?"

Like an answer to a prayer the barn door swung open. Miss Tubman leveled her pistol at the figure entering but suddenly dropped it to her side as a grin came to her weathered face.

"Praise God!" She exclaimed.

The huge man came into view. He was the blackest man Zeke had ever seen in his life, like a piece of the night come to life. The shirt he wore barely hid the mound of muscles underneath. He resembled one the boys master used for felling trees, big thick arms and small waist with legs as wide as the oaks they took down. A necklace bit into his thick neck, sharp teeth held together by a leather cord with a strange brown stone that glowed like summer.

"Y'all best be gettin'," he said in a way that sounded like singing. "They close; real close."

"You going to be alright, Batunda?" Miss Tubman asked.

The man rubbed his necklace. "I'm gonna be fine, Miss Tubman. Now y'all git!"

Miss Tubman looked at them with her stern gaze. "Y'all come on!"

She ran for the barn door and everyone followed except Zeke. He was mesmerized by the big man and his necklace. The man walked over to Zeke with a gentle smile and lifted him to his feet.

"Get going now, boy. You going to be alright now."

Zeke looked at the man and fear jumped in his legs. He streaked out of the barn after the others. He ran for a while until he heard the dogs getting close. Instead of running harder he stopped. Something about that man made him turn around and head back to the barn. The dogs got closer but Zeke kept going back, his curiosity overwhelming his fear and common sense.

In the clearing before the barn the big man stood confronted by the growling dogs. The dogs seem to hesitate, as if they sensed something about this boy staring back

at them like they were rabbits. The bushes rattled and the patrollers emerged, three dirt poor white men holding rifles.

"You shoulda ran with the rest of 'em, boy," one of them said. "I ain't even gonna waste a bullet on you. Get 'em!"

The dogs leaped at the man. His arms shot out from his side, the brown stone in his necklace glowing like fire. He caught each dog in a hand by the throat. Zeke saw the muscles in the man's forearms twitch and heard a wet cracking sound. The dogs went limp; he dropped them like bad cotton.

The man jumped into the air before the patrollers could raise their guns, landing atop the horse and rider in the center. He hit the rider cross the jaw and his head turned completely around as he fell to the ground. Batunda kicked the rider closest to him and the man bolted off his horse, slamming into a nearby tree. The third rider managed to aim his pistol. Before he realized Zeke jumped from his hiding place.

"Watch out, mister!" he shouted.

The man shot Batunda in the chest. The dark man flinched, looked at his chest and grinned. He reached from his horse, grabbing the gunman by the neck and twisted his head until it broke. The dark man climbed from the horse as the man slumped to the ground.

"I thought I told you to get gone," he sang. Zeke was frozen.

"Go on now, boy. I got to clean this up. And don't you tell anybody what you saw."

Zeke managed to open his mouth. "No, sir. I won't sir."

He spun and ran as fast as he could into the darkness

Ezekiel Barns arrived in Nicodemus on the dregs of a spring downpour. The muddy road grabbed his wagon wheels, wearing out his mule and slowing his progress. The site before him was disheartening. Throughout his long journey from Mississippi he imagined the town as the Promised Land, just as the leaflets pictured it. Instead two wooden buildings rose from the surrounding prairie, a sad welcome for his weary mind.

"Just once I'd like something to be the way it should," he said to his mule.

He rode up to the first building and was greeted by a well dressed black man sporting a worn hat and spectacles. He resembled the carpetbaggers that used to swarm every piece of the South before Reconstruction fell apart. Zeke reined his mule and waited.

"Welcome to Nicodemus!" the man declared. "You must be Mr. Barns."
Zeke tilted his union cap. "That I am."

The man scurried down the steps then tiptoed through the mud. "I'm Henry Turnipseed. My partner is out visiting some of our other esteemed townsfolk and he asked that I wait for your arrival. I see the rain slowed you down."

"Yes it did. I was told you needed a blacksmith. That's my trade."

"Excellent! That's our livery stable and blacksmith shop."

Henry pointed at the building next to the welcome center and frowned.
"It's going to need some fixing up."

"That's true, Mr. Barns. Unfortunately the Lord has yet to smile on us with a carpenter."

"I'm pretty good with a hammer, too," Zeke said. "Where can I find some trees around here?"

"There's a grove about two miles north," Henry answered.

"Good. I'll drop off my stuff and get to work if you don't mind."

Henry looked relieved. "Not at all, Mr. Barns. I guess that means you're staying?"
"I guess it does. Call me Zeke."

"Of course, Zeke."

Zeke dropped off his gear and headed to the grove. There was no sense settling in so he decided to get started gathering wood. The grove was thick with good trees, a rare site in this land of grass. He was removing his tools from the wagon when he heard footsteps.

"You need a hand?" a voice asked.

Zeke turned to see a large man standing at the edge of the woods. He wore a white shirt and old coveralls, a straw hat on his head. He was dark like the Geechee folks Zeke met in Georgia and he talked like them, too.

"How much you asking?"

"Just a good meal is all, suh," the big man said.

"Fair enough. What's your name?"

The man's smile seemed familiar to Zeke. "People 'round here call me Geechee Man."

"That ain't a proper name for nobody. What do you call yourself?"

"Batunda."

Zeke looked at the man upon the mention of his name. Something about it was familiar.

"That's an odd name," he said.

"It's an old name," Batunda replied. "Comes from Africa."

The two set about chopping trees, falling into an instinctive rhythm. Zeke looked up at his companion from time to time, his name rolling around in his head like tumbleweed. Batunda looked at him and gestured with his head.

"Where'd you get that?"

Zeke touched the Union cap on his head. "I served with the 54th."

"You don't talk like a Yankee."

Zeke swung his axe into the cottonwood. "I ain't one. I'm from Georgia. I ran off when I was twelve up to Canada. Ended up around Halifax where I took up smithing and carpentry. When the war started I headed back, hoping to fight. I was one of the first to sign up."

Batunda leaned on his axe. "Why you want to go do that?"

"I wanted to fight for myself," Zeke answered. "Besides, I owed those grey coats a lick or two."

Batunda laughed. "I figured you was a feisty one first time I saw you."

Zeke eyes narrowed. "What you mean by that?"

Batunda went back to chopping his tree. "Nothing. It's just that when everyone else was running. You came back. I never saw a runaway come back to trouble."

Zeke's head spun as the details of that night sprang from the memories he had hidden away years ago. The face of the dark guardian focused in his head, the amber necklace glowing. He dropped his axe and stepped away.

"That was you!" he stuttered.

Batunda smiled. "I must have scared you good. I didn't think you were ever going to put two and two together."

Zeke kept walking backwards to his wagon. "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

Batunda leaned on his axe again. "I'm doing what I always do. I'm protecting colored folks the best way I can. As to what I want...well there's something I need to do that I can't do alone. I figured since I did you a favor twice, you owed me at least one."

Zeke stopped walking away. He'd seen what Batunda could do, so there was no use running. "What you want me to do?"

"Meet me here at midnight. I'll tell you then." Batunda lifted his tree and put it in the wagon.

"You got a rifle?"

Zeke shuddered. "Yeah, I got a Henry."

Batunda smiled. "Bring it."

Zeke rode back to the stable gripping the reins so tight the blood fled his hands. They were tingling when he climbed out the wagon to look at the massive piece of wood Batunda sat in the wagon bed. Henry came outside and stood beside him, his eyes wide with wonder.

"How in the world did you get that in there?"

"I had help," Zeke replied.

Henry scratched his head. "I hope you ain't thinking' I can help you get it out."

Zeke climbed back onto the wagon with an axe and started chopping. He glanced up at the sky, barely able to see the setting sun through the clouds. Fear crept inside him, the kind of fear he hadn't felt since the war. He was afraid to be late for his meeting with Batunda and he was afraid to stay away.

He finally finished chopping the log, pushing the sections from his wagon. He jumped down and went into the stable, returning with his Henry. Turnipseed was back outside.

"Where you going with that this time a day?"

"Snipe hunting," Zeke replied. He reined his mules and headed back to the grove.

Batunda was waiting for him when he arrived.

"You came back," the dark man said. "And you're early, too."

"I was afraid not to." Zeke admitted.

Batunda climbed into the wagon, sitting beside Zeke. "I wouldn't hurt you, Zeke. I ain't never killed no colored man, whether he deserved it or not."

Batunda pointed north. "Just go in that direction. It's gonna take us a couple of hours. You hungry?"

Zeke didn't realize he hadn't eaten. "I could use a little something to eat."

Batunda handed him jerky strips and biscuits. "It's not much, but it's filling. Besides, you won't have much to do anyway."

Zeke chewed on the jerky. "What am I supposed to do?"

Batunda smiled. "I'll tell you when we get there."

They set off into the grey darkness in silence, Zeke eating his simple meal while Batunda hummed a tune, occasionally singing in a language Zeke didn't recognize. They were silent for almost an hour, the creaking wagon and hoofbeats the only sound. Zeke finally built up the courage to ask the question that worried his mind since the day he first encountered Batunda.

"What kind of man are you?"

Batunda shrugged. "I'm a man just like you."

"The hell you are," Zeke retorted. "You put that tree in my wagon like it was a stick. I saw you jump up on those patrollers like a rabbit. I saw you get shot and shake it off like it was nothing. You some kind of demon?"

Batunda chuckled. "I ain't no demon. Ms. Tubman thought I was her guardian angel sent by the Lord. I ain't that, either."

"Then what are you?"

Batunda turned to face Zeke, his eyes glowing in the darkness. "I'm a child of Shango, and I'm fulfilling a promise."

Zeke couldn't tell if Batunda eyes were actually glowing or if it was the light emanating from his necklace. Either way, the fear of a twelve year old boy filled his chest.

"Shango," he managed to say. "That sounds like that voodoo talk down 'round Savannah. Them colored troops from down there used to talk about stuff like that. Come to think of it, they sounded like you, too."

Batunda huffed. "They don't know nothing about Shango. Let me tell you a story. A long time ago there was a prince in a place in Africa called Yorubaland. He was the son of a great chief and the best warrior in his tribe, with many wives and wealth. One day his village was called to fight with their king, the Alafin, against enemies in the south. Before the prince went off to fight his mother gave him a necklace blessed by Shango, the spirit of War. She told him as long as he wore it no harm would come to him. The prince went into battle with the Alafin and his mother's words were true. He did not die, but his father and many others did. He was captured, but instead of ransoming him back to his village, the enemies stripped him and sold him to white men on the coast. They did not touch his necklace. It was like they couldn't see it. He was kept in a fort with hundreds of others, and then loaded onto a ship, stacked like cargo. For months he lay in waste among his own while others died around him and were thrown to the sharks. He began to think the necklace was a curse.

One day the voice of Shango rose over the ship and a terrible storm struck. The ship cracked open like an egg and men and women fell into the sea. The necklace glowed and the prince rose to the surface of the terrible waves then up into the sky. He saw the face of Shango in the black clouds and cowered.

'Protect my people,' Shango bellowed. The prince fell back into the water. Shango's strength flowed in him and he swam, rescuing the men and women and taking them to the shore of a nearby island. He couldn't save them all and he didn't save any of the white men. From that day on, the prince used Shango's blessing to protect his people."

Zeke cleared his throat. "You that prince?"

Batunda smiled. "I didn't say that. I just told you a story." He looked ahead and a grim look took over his face.

"Stop the wagon. We have to walk from here."

A faint glow rose from the ground ahead. The two men climbed out of the wagon, Zeke grabbing his Henry while Batunda rested an axe on his shoulder. They walked towards the glow, and then Batunda motioned for him to get down and crawl. They stopped at the edge of a steep hill. Below them was a cabin surrounded by twenty horses. Excited voices escaped the cabin while smoke belched from the chimney.

"Colored folks ain't the only ones that came out here from down south," Batunda said. "There's some that want to make sure y'all don't forget your place. I've been watching them for a while now. It's about time I did something about it."

Zeke's hands began to sweat. "What do you want me to do?"
"I'm going down into that cabin," Batunda replied. "I want you to stay right here and make sure nobody comes out once I go in. If anybody does....well, I think you'll know what to do."

Zeke gripped his Henry. "Yes, suh."
Batunda stood. "Good, this won't take long." He rested the axe on his shoulder then descended the hill.

Zeke wrapped his left hand around the cold metal barrel of his Henry. Images of bitter days emerged in his mind as he watched Batunda descend the hill, days of terrible battles, days of cruelty and pain. He remembered marching towards lines of grey-coated secessionists knowing that there was no mercy ahead of him. The stockade wouldn't be an option for him and his brown skinned brothers; it was either win or die. He tightened the grip on the rifle as he raised the sight to his eye, aiming at the entrance to the cabin. Win or die, he reminded himself.

Batunda stopped a few yards away from the cabin. He took the axe from his shoulders, holding it in both hands. Zeke could see the necklace grow brighter as Batunda's shoulders rose and fell. With a yell he charged the cabin, hesitating slightly as he kicked the door down. A brief silence was broken by the sounds of screaming men and cracking bones. Zeke tensed, watching the door. A headless body staggered out the doorway and fell quickly, followed by a man holding what was left of his arm. Zeke fired before he realized it and the man spun to the ground, falling over the headless body. The next man was too quick. He barreled out of the cabin, leaping over his dead comrades as he ran for his horse. He was on the horse and riding away before Zeke finally aimed and fired. The man jerked and kept riding. Zeke shot again and the man slumped over in the saddle before falling from his horse.

No one else escaped the cabin. Zeke waited as the cries faded away and the sound of wet hacking continued. Then there was silence, the type of quiet that always followed killing. Batunda emerged from the cabin and sat on the edge of the steps. He waved Zeke down. Zeke trudged down the hill to Batunda. The dark man was covered with blood and he was breathing hard. There were wounds that were healing before his eyes, but it was obvious Batunda had been hurt. Zeke looked into the cabin.

"You don't want to do that," Batunda warned. "It ain't too pretty in there. Go take the saddles off the horses while I finish up here."

Zeke obeyed. Batunda stood and went back into cabin, emerging with a can of kerosene. He splashed the liquid on the porch and on the sides of the cabin. Zeke finished stripping the horses as Batunda finished spreading the flammable liquid.

"You best be going," Batunda said. "I can take it from here."

"What about the horses?" Zeke asked.

"I'll run 'em off. The indians will get them before long." Batunda put down his axe and removed his necklace, handing it to a shocked Zeke.

"This is yours now. I'm finished with it. Y'all ain't Shango's children no more. Most of y'all don't even remember the orishas. Y'all are children of this land now, for better or worse. It's time y'all figured out who you are and what you're going to be."

Zeke took the necklace, too afraid to refuse. "Thank you, suh. Where do you think you'll be heading?"

"I'm going back home, back to Yorubaland." Batunda winked. "You're a good man, Zeke, a strong man. You'll do fine for these folks. You got strength inside you, and when that fails, you got the necklace."

Batunda reached into his pocket and removed a box of matches. "Get on now. You want to be long gone before this fire gets big."

Zeke ran up the hill back to his wagon. He rode away as the glow of the fire appeared over the hill.

"I'll do my best," he whispered as he put on the necklace. His eyes shimmered with the light of the necklace as he rode into the darkness.