

Israel's Pig

Written by Guy J. Tirondola
Tuesday, 21 June 2011 12:00



*Editor's Note: "Israel's Pig" is the winner of the Lowcountry Weekly/Short Story America Tricentennial Short Story Contest. Congratulations to writer **Guy J. Tirondola**. (And thanks to **Jonathan Green** for the use of his images.)*

"Isril, I won't lose dis child tuh hunger," Mina said as she rocked her young son to sleep. Noah sat on her lap, head on her chest, and exhaled a plaintive moan that grew softer and softer with each breath. The wood plank floor beneath the chair squeaked with the rocking, and the sound seemed to soothe the boy. "He ain' growin' proper," she added. "He too small an' delicate fuh five year ole."

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Israel sat across the table from Mina, shucking oysters and sliding them down his throat. "Too bad Noah be 'lergic tuh shellfish," he said. "Dat de only ting dere plenty of."

Oysters were one of the few things thriving that hot, dry August in 1951. The sea islands of Beaufort County, South Carolina, were locked in the grip of an unprecedented drought. A drought that withered Israel's crops. A drought that made the water in the surrounding tidal rivers and creeks too uncomfortably warm for the fish, driving them out into Port Royal Sound, and from there out into the cooler ocean waters.

"De woods been hunted out," Israel said, wiping his hands on the front of his overalls. "I habn't seen a wild turkey or hog in weeks. An' de deer be dyin' off."

Israel stood, walked quietly over to Mina, lifted his sleeping son in his arms, and walked him into the bedroom.

They lived in a two-room shack, cobbled together from rough-hewn pine boards, scrap from local mills. The roof was covered with tar. The door frame and the trim around the windows were painted indigo-blue to protect against hags and haints, nighttime interlopers from the domain of evil spirits, seeking entry to work their mischief.

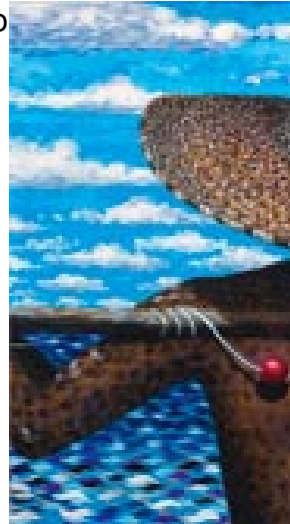
The shack sat on land owned by four generations of Israel's family, Gullah folk, descendents of slaves from Angola, Africa. The land was part of a plantation confiscated by the Union Army in 1861. Ten acres of the plantation were purchased by Israel's great-grandfather with bonus money he earned by joining up with the Union soldiers. Over the years, most of the land was sold off to pay taxes. Only two acres remained in Israel's possession, two acres that contained patches of corn, tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, cabbage, radishes, and cucumbers.

"Dem few puhtettuh I pick yistiddy been all dat's left growin' in de fiel'," Mina said as Israel cleaned the oyster shells off the table. She put her face in her hands. "Lawd, what we goin' do?"

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“In a few week de cotton be ready fuh harbest,” said Israel. “I can hire on an’ mek so



me money pickin’. Den we can buy food fuh de boy.”

“Noah ain’ got a few week. Dat be too late fuh ‘im.”

“How ‘bout gatuh meat?” Israel asked. “I caught sight o’ Ol’ Slagtooth in de swamp dis mawnin’ when I be huntin’. He pull de las’ duck unduh watuh befo’ I can shoot ‘im. Mebbe I can catch ‘im in his den after dark.”

Mina stood and placed her hands on her hips, elbows forward. She looked hard at Israel. “Yo’ stay away from dat thirteen-foot monstuh. Ain’ bad nuff he et our dogs? Yo’ wan’ tuh leave po’ Noah wid no pa?” Mina tightened her wrap dress; its pastel flowers were faded and stained, and its cotton worn shear.

Israel sat and thought. “Dere be no moon tonight,” he said, “and de tide be high at midnight. A good night tuh git a pig.”

“I’s ‘fraid when yo’ go dere. If dey catch yo’, dey tro yo’ in jail. Den what me an’ Noah do?”

“Dey can’t catch Isril. I’s black as de night, quiet as de snake, and swift as de owl.” Israel stood with his lean, muscular arms outstretched like an owl’s wings. He watched Mina admire his body. A slight smile caused her lips to barely separate. The opening, no thicker than a ribbon,

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revealed white teeth behind black lips. For a moment, he forgot why he was standing there with his arms in the air.

"I's still 'fraid," she said, sitting back down. "De haints go trabblin' at midnight. If dey catch yo' in de woods, dey tek yo' soul."

Israel pulled a blue cloth sack, about the size of a walnut, from his pocket. Small bones and feathers were sticking out of it. "Dis a protection root," he said. "It be filled wid dirt from a preacher's grave."

"Which root doctor gib yo' dat?" asked Mina.

"Dis root been made by Doctor Vulture. He de mos' powerful root doctor in dese parts."

A moan came from the bedroom.

"OK," Mina said. "But I sho nuff be prayin' de whole time yo' gone."

Later that evening, at 10 P.M., Israel gave Mina a kiss, took his sledgehammer, and headed east from his farm. After a quarter mile walk through woods, he emerged at the Beaufort River where his small rowboat was tied to a tree. The boat had an undersized outboard motor with only enough gas for the task at hand.

Israel's destination, Parris Island, was just south of Port Royal Island where Israel lived. A causeway connected them. Parris Island, six miles long and three miles wide, was the home of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot where 75

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