

THE SPIRIT STONE

By Maurice Broaddus

It's best to leave some things forgotten.

Lord have mercy on my soul. Have mercy, have mercy, have mercy. I don't know why you want me to talk about all this in the first place. This here's a spirit stone and I come out here to make sure it ain't been covered up. Things need tending to.

Old man Marse Chapman was always away on business. He left the young Marse in charge. Used to be that we had a colored overseer, Uncle Moses, running the field coloreds. Though black like the rest of us, with a little bit of authority he forgot who he was and where he came from. But young Marse Chapman was coming of age and was eager to prove himself. Told Uncle Moses he was too soft on us and took over. Young Marse was generous with the bull whip.

“What you staring at, nigger? Don't you go on get no ideas about running off.” Young Marse Chapman would say to me when he caught me staring off at the hills. Then he'd crack that whip. Let it land right next to me to give me a start. I was the same age as young Marse Chapman. He had a special hate in him, even then. I tried to stay away from him in case his hatred was a-catching.

I did little jobs to help the field coloreds: toted brush and bark, rolled up little logs, carried water around to our men folk, and swept the yard. Mrs. Annalynn, old man Marse Chapman's wife, took a shine to me early on and I spent many a day on her lap. With my thick braids of hair and my knobby-kneed li'l self sticking out of the burlap sack that passed for my dress, she said I was the smartest colored in the Ohio River Valley. Few of us coloreds had anything to do with no reading or writing as there weren't no schools for us back then. And I wasn't one much for figuring anyhow. My smarts were in keeping my eyes and ears open and my mouth shut. Sometimes I wondered whether Mrs. Annalynn was trying to make herself feel better by taking me on. Owning other folks twisted a body up inside as much as it twisted up those you owned.

We called everyone aunt and uncle out of respect, but Aunt Clara really was my kinfolk. After Mammy was sold, she watched out for me. When I asked her about the mole under my left eye, she said it was a black teardrop. "You cried for all of us," she said.

The field coloreds called Aunt Clara a conjurer.

One time, Uncle Moses tied her up to be beaten. There she was, all spread out for everyone to watch. Even those who resented her light skin didn't want to see her whupped. They feared for anyone who had to face the whip. But I saw her eyes. She weren't scared none. She just stared all boldly at him, practically daring him to whup her. Then Uncle Moses turned and walked away, like he forgot where he left her. No one was allowed to touch her.

One day, a cough settled in old man Marse Chapman chest. A fever burned him up dead. Folks said he became a haunt, swore they saw his spirit walking about the shotgun houses. All I know was that Aunt Clara's eyes weren't so bold after that.

I opened the gates for Mrs. Annalynn, then rode into town with her to buy supplies. Afterwards, she wanted me to sit with her in the kitchen. That turned a few heads, because field coloreds never was allowed in the house, and house coloreds never worked in the field. But Mrs. Annalynn said that I had “special dispen’sion.”

I think I was like a doll to her, someone safe for her to tote around and be her friend, who didn’t talk back, but could keep her company. I was still surprised when she asked me “Do you want to live with me in the big house?” She had an odd, dreamy sort of look in her eyes, as if she were already lost in special plans. Or hopes.

“I want to be with my Mammy.” I don’t know what got into me. My Mammy had long been sold off. I couldn’t even remember her eyes.

Mrs. Annalynn grew red-faced, like I’d slapped her. Betrayed her worsen if I stole her prize cow and sold it to the neighbor she feuded with next door. Something cold replaced the light in her eyes. I knew that look from Uncle Moses’ face. That was the last time she asked me anything.

I couldn’t hate her though. She just wanted a child to call her own again. No shame in that.

Only hurt.

Most days blurred into the next. Lying in my pallet on the floor, I slept until the guinea fowls woke me up. An old bell donged on some plantation up the road a ways, then more bells added to it, like the clanging was on a morning stroll up the road. By four in the morning, young Marse Chapman straddled his horse, a big, monstrous, wild-eyed beast that had a devil in him. Riding down to us, young Marse Chapman picked ham out of his teeth with a long shiny goose quill pick. The rising wind carried the smell of sow belly frying past the shotgun houses. The smell of hoecakes and buttermilk soon followed. The kitchen from the main house had different smells coming from it: cakes, hams, chicken, and poke, taters and good egg and pone bread. Most times I was lucky to get

li'l pieces of scrapback each morning. We worked from sunup to sundown in family groups, that way we could help each other when some- one got behind.

Young Marse Chapman's big mean self studied me. Not like he watched the other coloreds, but like I was a f lower that he waited for the right moment to pluck. One night, not long after dark, he came around the houses. The door to our shotgun house creaked open, waking all of us. We all knew what the mid- night creak meant. Now, he saw me, with that look men got when they were heated up. He stood over my pallet. The other women rolled away, turning their backs and closing their eyes. He crawled on top of me, all pawing hands, his weight pinning me as he grabbed at me. I clawed and gave him what for. He came away from the houses, like a scalded bear. Folks whispered about it all through the night. But all I could think was that if you wounded a bear, you better kill them.

Lord Jesus, have mercy on this poor old soul of mine.

Hills bumped up all around the Chapman house and the land stretched on far as the eye could see. A creek, cold and bubbly, crept through two caves be- fore it passed through the property. It separated the row of shotgun houses the coloreds had from the rest of the estate and emptied into the river. My favorite place was where the creek passed through the caves. It was near dark, but I wasn't worried none. I was supposed to be fetching water, but folks knew I had a way of lingering whenever I went. Whispers carried on the breeze. I tell you what, my heart pounded so hard I thought it was going to jump out my chest and swim upstream. I knew they could only be one thing: patrollers.

Sometimes we called them buskrys, poor white folks who had no slaves of their own, but who tracked runaway coloreds. Iffen they caught a lone colored out by themselves, with no pass—cause you had to have a permission slip to be off or away from your Marse’s property—they would catch you and whup you or just sell you to a trader themselves. Iffen they returned you to your Marse’s, he’d turn around and give you a proper whupping for running off.

So I held my breath and crept along.

I listened carefully, trying to figure out where the voices were coming from, then I heard this woman speak with a slow, deep voice that made you snap to attention. I recognized her voice, which boldened my steps to find out who she was meeting with. I crept and I crept, not noticing the drop off til I was already tumbling down.

“Land sakes, Viney.” Aunt Clara wanted to yell at me, but afraid of being heard, it came out like a stern whisper. “You gave us a start. We thought them patrollers had us for certain.”

As I dusted the leaves and dirt from me, a round-faced little boy crouched behind her. “It’s all right, Frederick, it’s just Viney. She’s clumsy and noisy, but we’re safe. Me and Frederick were trying to figure out how to get this here paddleboat cross the river. Think you could get him to the other side?”

“That li’l thing. I rowed bigger’n that for Mrs. Annalynn. I’m stronger’n most men after working in the field for so long.”

“His mother’s waiting for him over the river.”

Frederick’s big brown eyes would haunt my dreams forever iffen I said “no.”

The current was strong, but it hadn’t rained in a spell, so we weren’t in for too much paddling. My skinny little arms trembled every time I set my oar to water. It wasn’t the cold that sent

a shiver up me and gave me gooseflesh, it was the whupping I knew young Marse Chapman waited to give me should I get caught. Too scared to dare whisper to Frederick, I locked my eyes on the nearing shore, focusing on what Aunt Clara told me to tell them when I got there.

As soon as the boat bumped the shore, I started praying. Frederick clutched the back of my dress, wrapping up in the folds as if they were curtains. The dark had a funny way of pressing in on you from all sides. Even tree limbs seemed stark and unfamiliar in the gloom. I knew I wasn't alone. Hands reached down and started to pull me up. I swooned, nearly dead from faint.

“Menare.” I yelled what Aunt Clara told me. She said it was from the Bible. “Menare. Menare. Menare. Menare.”

“Shh, girl,” the bushes whispered with urgency. “We heard you the first time. Who else would be out here?”

That was when I first saw him. Zias.

He was a great big buck of a boy. No scars ran along his fine, dark skin, near as I could tell. And his soft brown eyes had a sparkle to them. Full of hope. And freedom. Weak as I was, I slumped in his huge strong arms.

“You hungry?” he growled. His gruffness held a gentleness in it, like he didn't know how to sound tender. But he tried.

“Yes” was all I trusted myself to say. I trembled as I ate. I don't know why. I wasn't cold, and I no longer feared young Marse Chapman's bullwhip.

After that night I rowed poor colored across the river, most every Saturday afternoon and Sunday night, just to see Zias.

Aunt Clara taught me lots of things about men and women. Told me that some Marses handed out permission slips for colored to get married.

I only knew Zias once. It was beautiful and I didn't need no Marse's permission for it.

Young Marse Chapman, not so young by then, was quick to stop men. "Whose colored are you?" he'd always ask. Iffen the slave was reedy or sickly looking, young Marse Chapman would say, "You can't see my gals. You ain't good stock." Zias belonged to Marse Chapman's Uncle Silas, who started sending him around to the farm. Marse Chapman took one gander at Zias, tall and husky, like he was bigger and stronger than a horse. Normally he'd have planned to use him as breeding stock, studding him worsen a horse. But Marse Chapman didn't like how Zias and me snuck glances at one another. His eyes got full of the devil whenever Zias came around.

Every colored in the field knew that Marse Chapman was a thundercloud waiting to break wide open and rain anger on us all. His eyes followed me everywhere, burning worse than the noontime sun. One day, without warning, he spat and cussed something fierce, yelling about how we coloreds have forgot who was in charge. Leaping down from that big horse of his, he went after Zias. He didn't care that Zias wasn't one of his own. He was property and Marse Chapman could always settle up what he owed. All the ruckus drew Mrs. Annalynn and Aunt Clara from the house.

Uncle Moses brought his arm up high and held his bullwhip there. All the field coloreds gathered around. We'd recognized that delighted glint in his eyes, like a preacher caught up with the Spirit. He waited until he had our full attention, and let that whip fall hard on Zias' back. The first stroke was always the loudest, the one that made everyone jump. Lord Jesus, that first lick. He let loose a soul scream, crying out for all of us. His skin split open, a busted seam along his back, sputtering blood like a gutted hog.

His back arched, drawing away from the bite of the whip. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the air. Tears rolled down his face.

Marse Chapman whipped him with the passion of a man knowing his wife.

Some turned away, they knew how things usually went: the thirty lashes, rubbing salt over his wounds, throwing the poor colored in the stock house, maybe chain him up a couple days with nothing to eat iffen the punishment was to be more severe.

Two words formed on Zias' lips. "Pray, Marse."

Young Marse Chapman paused when Zias murmured that. Then he said, "You coloreds have forgotten how to work and I aims to teach you."

He hitched Zias to a plow. Slipping a bit into his mouth and jerked him about by it, he worked poor Zias like a mule, beating him bloody and sore. Suddenly his big body slumped. Zias was dead.

Marse Chapman told us to leave him where he lie, as an example, and iffen we moved him, he'd do the same to someone else. So no one touched him.

Lord have mercy on my soul.

To hear Aunt Clara tell it, when the universe was created, powerful stones soaked up the magic of creation. Like lightning striking the earth, they fell, bringing with them sparks of magic. Life and spirit fused, things of power. Aunt Clara taught me about them. No, a spirit stone wasn't like a head stone, though sometimes it feels like a grave marker. A spirit stone kept a part of a person's spirit so that they were bound to whoever owned the stone. Lord, how she'd hunch over one of her chosen

stones, painting it, doting on it like it was a baby. I wanted her to help me make one not too long after Zias died. It was a way to capture a piece of a person, to always remember them. I asked, “How do you know which stones have power?”

“You’ll know. It’s like the stone chooses you,” she said.

The midnight creak didn’t send a shiver through me. I’d snuck out like I was due to help someone across the river. Instead, I went to the big house. Aunt Clara let me in, but didn’t meet my gaze. I slinked up to young Marse Chapman’s room. He snored lightly beneath me, wrapped in his privilege of being born a Chapman. He’d known birthdays, his Poppa, his Mammy. He’d never tasted a bullwhip. He might find a love and have a child and be able to know them in peace.

He was allowed to dream.

The stone grew heavy in my hand. I smashed it down on his head hard as I could. Marse Chapman raised up out of bed, his arms flailed in his sheets like a ghost flapping in the breeze. I brought the stone to bear again, but the light had gone out of his eyes. He tumbled forward, toppling off the bed, bashing his head against the nightstand.

I was certain he went to hell, even though I didn’t know how the devil could stand him.

I waited all the next day for them to come round me up. I prepared myself to cross the Jordan and meet my Lord. But no one came. Mrs. Annalynn found him. Told everyone that he had a spell and fell out of bed.

No, I don't know how I felt. Sometimes you were better off not feeling. Feelings could grind you up, leaving you nothing. But I feared the hate. I feared that hate might one day eat me up. The truth had a way of coming out, no matter how long you let a lie settle into you. So I vowed I'd always remember how easy it was to hold a life in your hand and what not cherishing life could drive a body to do.

My spirit stone chose me and I chose Marse Chapman. It was Zias' grave marker since Marse Chapman wouldn't allow no proper grave. So now he watched over Zias.

Lord Jesus, it was an awful business belonging to folks body and soul. Then one day, one of them Union boys, all tired and pale, came up to us.

“You're free,” he said.

Lord, how we sang and danced. I wanted to move across the river to put the plantation behind me and explore the world. But the Chapman house was all I knew and I was afraid to leave it behind. It had broke and bowed everyone. They never walked the same, a bent to their spirit as if they'd never be quite whole. At night, low moans and cries might snap you fully awake, each sob picking a scab on your soul. Just cause some law said we weren't a slave no more don't mean everyone obeyed it.

So I left. But once a year I return to that place, to minister to my spirit stone. A memory kept for safekeeping. A pain so deep, it lost all meaning. A bit of Marse Chapman's spirit bound to it to remind him that he was bound to me. Kept. Owned. In the cool of night, I could still feel the heat of his hate, but that was all right. I brushed the leaves from him and let him rest.