

Calling Forth
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Western North Carolina, 1840

Late one night, after everyone at Dark Level Farm slept, Gabriel stepped outside the slave cabin he shared with his wife, Oglatha. His footsteps were muffled by heavy rain as he walked to the nearby shed. A blanket's coarse wet wool raked Gabriel's naked shoulders. Though only in his thirties, his back was already bent from years of fieldwork. Nearby he heard sounds, cloaked in the shadows of wet leaves, of those beasts that were still wild, hunting, their hungry tongues licking sharpened teeth.

Gabriel passed a scarecrow he had staked out at the edge of the garden. The bleached white face, carved from a gourd, resembled a skull, fierce enough to ward off any crow. *White folks think gourds and old rags be scaring crows off their corn. But they busy keeping evil away,* Gabriel thought. *Haints always be trying to sneak in and steal a life cause they ain't got one of dey own.*

Similar figures dotted most farms scattered across the countryside but few, other than those enslaved, knew that the scarecrow's secret origin was African. It was clear neither Miz Suzannah, the woman who claimed Gabriel and Oglatha as her property, nor her husband, John, knew anything of this hidden practice. Across the South, a great variety of altars--bottle trees, rock

cairns, and any number of icons-- had been subversively woven into the fabric of farms and plantations. Each served as a clandestine appeal to the all-powerful Yoruba God, Obatalá--a prayerful request for a life of purity and peace. That elements of Christianity were woven into the fabric didn't sully the intent. Suzannah had made her expectations clear. Each Sunday the slaves were to sit in the back of the small community church and listen to stories of burning bushes that talked, seas that parted, and men who walked on water. Yes, the slaves nodded each week. They, too, had witnessed such things.

For Gabriel and his wife, the spirit world was big enough for it all. Like water, spirit was a gathering of streams, each searching for a welcoming bed. Ultimately, in the confluence, there would be no distinguishing one stream from another. This wasn't something the couple ever spoke of; it was just something they knew. Because they knew everything had a spirit, and was alive.

Gabriel entered the small tool shed behind the barn. Inside, the damp air hung close with the blood taste of iron. He drew in a deep lung-full and rubbed his short beard, already flecked with gray. His footprints quickly vanished into the fine silt of the dirt floor. Rising up before him was his shrine to Ogún, one of the faces of God. The altar had gone undetected by both John and Miz Suzannah because it appeared merely as a heap of scrap metal

piled around a block of cordwood. The wood was embedded with a variety of seemingly random metal refuse.

Gabriel pulled a muddy metal shard from his pocket and wiped it clean. Earlier in the day, his shovel had clanged against the metal bone of an old spade, its long wooden arm broken and decaying into dirt. He understood the discovery meant Ogún had summoned him. Using a stone, Gabriel now sharpened the blade until a keen edge flashed in the light of his lantern. Placing the weapon on the altar, Gabriel's breath rattled as an anchored memory shook loose of its moorings.

Although he could not clearly see her features, he knew it was his mother's face that was emerging. His image of her was dim; sometimes it was only a scent--the smell of wood ash in a woman's clothes--that brought her back. Gabriel was only nine years old when he had been sold by her owner. Yet some part of his mother remained, tucked deeply into the folds of his memory. Now it was her voice, low and certain, which echoed.

"Gabriel, come here," she growled as she sat on a rock outside the small windowless building where they and eleven others had slept. "Now!"

Six-year-old Gabriel knew he was in big trouble but not why. Head down, he slunk over and stood in front of his mother. She reached up and, without warning, slapped him across the head. It wasn't the first time she had lashed out to punish her son, but this blow was, by far, more severe.

Gabriel reeled backwards, stunned. His face burned from the back of her hand and tears welled up in his eyes.

“You can’t be looking a white woman in the eye,” she shouted. “You hear me?”

Gabriel flinched at the screech of his mother’s voice. It reminded him of the owls he’d heard screaming at night. In terror, he shivered as goose bumps raced up his spine. His mother glared at him, her eyes locked onto his. He was trapped.

“How many times you been told?” she continued.

Gabriel shrugged, choking back tears. He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what she was even talking about. His mother’s body shook with an anger that terrified him.

“Miz Eunice say you been sassing her--say you looked her straight in the eye.” She grabbed Gabriel by the arm and shook him hard. “You can’t be doing that--not ever.” Her narrowed eyes burned through him. His mother’s strong fingers tightened like claws around his stick-skinny arm.

“You hear me?” She gave her son another strong shake, her grip tightening.

Gabriel nodded, though he still didn’t recall his offense. His small body shuddered, but he said nothing.

“Don’t give ‘em a reason to sell you off! I got to keep you with me!”

Again he heard her owl voice scream out.

Gabriel didn’t know that just over in the next cabin, another woman’s child had been taken that very morning. Taken while the child’s mother worked in the fields. An eight-year-old boy, stolen from his mother and sold at auction to the highest bidder.

“Can’t you see?” his mother pleaded. “You’re my only boy.” She reached for her son, but Gabriel took a step back. His mother began to cry, and he watched great drops of water course down her cheeks. “I can’t let ‘em sell you off. I just can’t.” His mother’s head sank into her open palms.

But Gabriel was sold--placed on a scale, his price determined by his weight. Then, as part and parcel of Colonel Stonewaller’s property, Gabriel and many others were listed, not by name, but counted as one of so many livestock. As Gabriel grew older, his mother’s scoldings gave way to cruel punishments doled out by the overseer who worked for Colonel Stonewaller. An Indian fighter, Stonewaller had taken a Cherokee woman for a wife so as to hold title to her land. It was from them, Suzannah’s grandparents, that she inherited Gabriel and Oglatha. But, no matter how many beatings Gabriel had endured, his spirit hadn’t been destroyed. And now Ogún, the warrior spirit of his ancestors had summoned him.

A strip of red cloth, tied to a hoe handle on the altar, fluttered. Oglatha had given him the red fabric, a small remnant from her mending. Slowly,

Ogún came to life. Gabriel reached out and pulled the crimson cloth to his face. The fabric was warm, like the beating of a heart. He opened the small cloth bundle he had carried from his cabin. Tucked inside was a slab of fried fatback and a wedge of cornbread. A dark stain seeped across the red bandana. Gabriel stared at the greasy bruise as if it were blood from a wound. Lifting the food to his nose, he inhaled the sweet fragrance of the supper he was now offering to Ogún in sacrifice.

In a low voice, he began chanting: "*Oloju ekun,*" Ogún, the cold. "*Oloju ekun,*" Ogún, the hunter. "*Oloju ekun,*" Ogún, the one with the unblinking eyes of a leopard.

Gabriel stared at two pitted brass rounds he'd found and had hammered into the wood. They glowed like eyes aflame. Rocking and humming, he summoned the power and protection of this Yoruba warrior among warriors. In this way, Gabriel held fast and was not broken, even though he was forced to live his life enslaved.

Lifting a heavy stone amid the pile of apparent detritus, he exposed a deep hole. He reached his arm into the opening and pulled out the various metal pieces he had buried. Then Gabriel felt for the cinched bag that sat at the bottom. It was filled with every coin he had ever earned. When Gabriel and Oglatha had first arrived, John had told Gabriel he was not to call him Master. In the early days, John had even paid Gabriel for his labor. As Gabriel

came to understand John's ambivalence toward slavery, he'd resolved to use it to find a way to buy freedom for his wife and himself.

John had told him he needed \$500 for Oglatha's freedom, \$1,000 for himself. Oglatha's freedom would come first. With the weight of the bag resting in the palm of his hand, he told himself, *She's halfway to freedom.* Then, in a low voice he sang his map song to freedom.

*Follow the drinking gourd, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to take you to freedom.*

In the night sky, the big dipper--the drinking gourd--always pointed to the North Star. It would guide him to the river and then to freedom.

*Follow the drinking gourd, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to take you to freedom.*

Carefully, he returned his treasure to the hole and covered it with what appeared to be discarded metal shards. He sealed the hole with the heavy stone.

Next, he picked up a hammer. As heavy rain beat against the roof, he pounded the thick splinter of a broken nail into the wooden block of Ogún's body. The wood did not split; Ogún's barbed shield bristled in the night. With each strike of his hammer, Gabriel grew stronger. Whatever it took, Gabriel knew he would fight for freedom.

* * *

The next morning, Gabriel, in bare feet, stepped out of his cabin into knee-deep muck. With each step, the fierce spirit kindled during the night dampened. He saw Tsani, the Cherokee man who also labored at the farm, standing on a rock, his moccasins muddied. Tsani faced east, his eyes closed. He was one of the few Indians who had not been captured during the 1838 government roundup and expulsion of the Cherokee people from their native land.

Gabriel frowned, unsure of this man, a recent addition to the farm. The hue of both men was similar. Gabriel's skin was the color of ripe chestnuts, while Tsani's evoked the color of a clay bank exposed by angry water. The two men had been told they were to work together to repair the pigpens. Slick mildew gnawed at the pigpen's shingled roof. Black water dripped off the eaves, each drop plunking heavily into the pigs' water trough.

Gabriel shook his head remembering the day Tsani, nearly starved, had reluctantly come out of hiding. It had taken a couple of weeks for Gabriel, speaking in the Cherokee man's native language, to convince Tsani it was safe to accept the food offered by Miz Suzannah. As a boy, Gabriel had a knack for the local dialect and, as a result, he had always been the one sent to barter with the Cherokee for fish and berries. During those times, Gabriel had only caught a glimpse of Tsani in passing. But that was before the removal of his people.

Tsani stepped off the rock, and the two men headed over to the pen. The hogs grunted as a sow pushed up against Tsani. He frowned and shoved the beast back toward the center of the pen. The sallow-eyed sow waddled over to the feeding trough, the sacs of her swollen teats dragging through the mud. Though it was still early, already the sun beat down, hot and heavy. In the stagnant damp air, a thick cloud of steam rose up from manure piles, freshened by rain. The men choked on the stench.

Tsani, the shorter of the two, turned to Gabriel. “These *a dv si qua*,” he said, his voice filled with disgust as he aimed his shovel at one of the filthy animals.

Gabriel nodded and said, “Hogs not from around here. Invaded the place with de Soto--way back.” Because Gabriel spoke to Tsani in Cherokee, it gave the men a place of shelter, a language no one else understood. “Hogs sure have invaded the place--just like white folks.”

Tsani offered a wry smile. “They make the deer vanish,” he sneered, waving his arm in an outward expanse. The sharp blade of his black hair sliced the air. “Nothing left.”

Gabriel knew Tsani was talking about both hogs and white men as he looked out at the land. The rain had reduced the place to a smear of red clay. It looked as if a festering wound had opened. The field of recently harvested corn stood forlorn, with the stubble of stalks broken and bent. The crop had been disappointing; too many ears were puny, with kernels that were mealy

and tough. Off on the ridge, lush green trees teased like the mirage of distant water.

A hen flapped her mud soaked wings in a futile effort to gain purchase on a dry roost. Sweat seeped from Gabriel's every pore. Needles of salt stung his bare back. With each passing day Gabriel was supposed to teach Tsani how to farm--how to live as a foreigner in his native land. Yet, Gabriel's efforts to convert the Indian man were met with constant resistance. Soon it became clear that Tsani was a man whose life would abide neither calendars nor clocks. Time followed the cycles of moons, shadows cast by the sun, and the whims of rain and wind. It wasn't long before their roles were reversed and Gabriel quickly learned to watch Tsani for signs.

One day, without warning, Tsani stopped work and stared into a clear sky. "Storm coming," was all he said. Gabriel scanned the horizon--no dark clouds had gathered. But the two men set to rounding up the chickens and tucking them safely into their coop.

Soon everyone began to depend on the native man's senses. Often it meant the difference between a gathered or a ruined crop. Without realizing it, all at the farm had left their European ways behind.

Day after day, the two men worked side by side. Then one night, Tsani pointed to the moon. "*Galoni*, the fruit moon," he explained. "Time to gather."

Early the next morning, Gabriel stood at the edge of the cornfield, the invisible boundary he could not cross. Both men worked for a share of the harvested food, but, unlike Tsani, Gabriel could not leave the farm without a pass. To do so could mean capture. Bounty hunters were known to round up slaves who didn't have the necessary script and take them further south for resale to large landholders. Gabriel knew their cruelty first hand. Colonel Stonewaller had owned a large plantation, and Gabriel still bore the scars from the vicious lashings he had endured.

As Gabriel watched Tsani vanish into the forest, he angrily worked a strip of Ogún's red cloth tightly between his fingers. Watching Tsani slip freely between the trees only reminded Gabriel he was enslaved and, in that moment, envy crept up his spine like a green serpent. He felt betrayed by the Cherokee man.

When Tsani returned, carrying bundles of herbs for medicine, Gabriel avoided him. Toward the end of the day, when Tsani came into the barn to help Gabriel with the evening chores, Gabriel snarled, grabbed an empty bucket, and proceeded to pull angrily at the milk-heavy teats of the old swayback cow. Tsani kept his distance and said nothing as he brushed down the mule.

After a few days, Gabriel's anger receded, and once again the two men worked side by side. The rains had given way to weeks of drought. Tsani looked down and toed a shard of dried red clay. "Come next spring, I expect

I'll need to teach them how to plant beans and squash. Plant during dark phase of *Anisguti*, the planting moon. Harvests will triple."

Gabriel imagined bushels of beans and squash. "A good harvest-- wouldn't that be something?" he said.

Years ago, John had allowed Gabriel to sell some of the okra he had grown beside his cabin and keep the money for himself. But as times grew leaner, John declared the okra, too, had to be part of the crop they sold in order to pay taxes.

"White folks always hungry. They want what you got," Gabriel said with bitterness.

Tsani glanced in Gabriel's direction. "True enough. They take everything; then start talking about God. Heard it all my life. Guess you have, too."

Gabriel nodded. "The more I see, the more I think they don't know nothing." He squinted and looked at the cornfield; a few dry stalks remained. The scarecrow grinned back at him. *Hidden in plain view*, Gabriel thought.

He looked up at the sky. Black clouds gathered along the ridgeline. He could smell the sharp metal scent of lightening. Ogún was with him.