

## Lincoln in Frogmore

by Andy Duncan

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*From the Federal Writers’ Project interview with Shad Alston at his home on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, September 21, 1936. Interviewer: Miss Jordan Matthews.*

Younguns these days, they don’t want to hear bout no slavery, they don’t want to hear bout Mr. Lincoln. And he was just down the road a piece here, in that swamp yonder. I saw him with my own eyes, and they were good eyes then. You’d think it’d all happened to a bunch of strange niggers up in Philly-Me-York, stead of to their own blood kin, their own folks.

I start telling bout Mr. Lincoln coming down here, and what do I get? “You lying like the crossties, Mr. Shad. You lying up a nation.” “Shame on you, Mr. Shad. You done quit lying and gone to flying.” Huh!

Anybody ain’t got sense enough to know what slavery was, won’t be able to see it coming back, will they? Be slaves again and not even know it.

Now I’m gone tell you a true thing. I’ll tell you bout Mr. Lincoln, just the way it happened, and you can put it in your book. That’s how true it is, now: True enough for a book.

*“Once upon a time was a good old time,  
Bit by a gator he’d spit turpentine.”*

That’s how we’d start a tale when I was a youngun. I don’t rightly know how old I was when it happened, but I was bout *that* high up against the doorframe, and all longleggedy like a granddaddy spider, and fast! I could outrun a coach whip. And you better believe I sure hit it a lick that evening when Maum Hannah called me from the house.

“Shad! You, Shad! You better give it the book back on here to this yard, boy, or I’ll be all over you like gravy over rice.”

When I heard that, I was in the edge of the woods, holding up a bright green gopher turtle in the air real still-like, to see would it think it was back on the ground,

and poke its head outen its shell. But my arm had gone numb on me, and I reckon that gopher woulda outlast me even if Maum Hannah hadn't gone to fussing. I put the gopher back down in the bresh where I got him and beat it on back. Maum Hannah didn't move so quick, you see, and her voice took some working before it got loud enough to carry, so I knew if she was already on the porch and yelling loud enough for me to hear in the woods, she'd done been calling for ten minutes and was hot as a pine knot. Man! Believe me, I hauled the fast mail.

"You, Shad! I swear I'll put the water in your eyes, boy. I'll whip your sorry head to the red."

When I got to the yard she was on the porch, a-sitting on the far end of the joggling-board 'cause she was too heavy for the middle, she'd hit the planks and couldn't get up. She had her pipe in one hand and her walking stick in the other and blue smoke all around. She had her head down to her knees, like she'd wore herself out, but was just opening her mouth to tune up again when I cried, "Here I am, Maum Hannah, I come just as quick as I could."

"Child," she said, "where you been?" She stuck the pipe back in her mouth and sucked on it loud. I was bout to tell her when she went on, "I *know* you ain't been fooling with crawling varmints down in them tick-filled woods that I told you to stay outen."

"No, ma'am, I ain't," I said, sitting down real careful on the far end of the joggling-board, past the reach of her stick. I hadn't figured on her blocking off the truth like that, and leaving me to think up a lie with no notice at all hardly.

"Well, thank the wonder-working God for that," she said, all cast-down and quiet again. Maum Hannah was a big old gal when she was hollering, but when she was done she'd fold back down like all her air was gone, and look small. Lately she was looking smaller and smaller when she was quiet, but maybe I was just getting biggedy. Anyways, I knew she wasn't gone take a lick at me now. I eased on down the board toward the middle, started joggling up and down. Maum Hannah closed her eyes like the joggles was making her tired, but I ask you, what's the good of a joggling-board if you ain't joggling? Might's well have a rocking chair without a rock, a swing with no swang.

"I got to go on a errand this evening," Maum Hannah said, joggling there on the end of the board, her eyes closed, her knobby hands working the end of her stick. "May be I won't get back till dark, may be black dark. You stay here in the house, child, you got me? Not in the yard, *in the house*." She thumped the porch with her stick, and our fice dog run out from underneath, carrying something in its mouth, into the bresh. "The roads and the woods are too dangerous these nights, you hear me?"

"Yes, Maum Hannah," I said, straining to see what it was the fice had got.

She was right, too—those were dangerous days, for white or colored, slave or

free. Me and Maum Hannah, now, praise Jesus, were free, like a lot of colored folks around the island and in Frogmore town. But that didn't help the poor folks none on Mr. Ravenel's plantation, or all the other plantations up and down the Sea Islands, or all the folks who were owned in the cities and the towns. But it wouldn't be slave times for long, no Lord, even the field niggers knew that. Mr. Lincoln's Navy was just off the coast, a thousand ships in a line from New Orleans to Norfolk, each one in sight of two others, and not even a piragua could sail any supplies through without getting blown to kindling wood. Mr. Lincoln's Navy was just sitting there, but his Army, it was getting the *job* done. They done took Savannah just before Christmas-time, and here it was January, and everybody figured Charleston was next, and there was me and Maum Hannah and all of St. Helena Island a-sitting right in the middle.

I guess that's why everybody was on the move that month. It didn't matter how many of Mr. Ravenel's niggers got whipped or hung, every day more and more of 'em just turned up gone, headed toward Savannah hoping to hook up with the bluecoats, or heading into the woods hoping to hide out till it was all over. The bravest, we'd heard tell, were rafting or swimming out into the Sound, hoping Mr. Lincoln's ships would take 'em aboard and give 'em a medal, I reckon, or leastways a job putting flint to the fuse. And paterollers were combing the country looking to string up or cut to pieces any coloreds they could find, whether they were the ones who'd run off or not—and gator-black wild niggers were living half-starved and crazy in the marsh—and Sesesh deserters, in twos and threes, were trying to get to Charleston by the back roads, or through the woods and swamps—and some said a boatload of drunk bluecoats come ashore some nights, in the fog, bored with sitting in the water and playing coon-can for nickels, and hot for some devilment. Blue can hide in the woods at night as easy as gray, and kill you just as dead.

So it was a wild time, but did I care? I was a youngun and a longleggedy jackrabbit, as I said, and my daddy was sold before I was born and my mama went away when I was little in Master Ravenel's own buckboard, wearing a pink silk dress fit for a white woman, and Maum Hannah was old and moving slow—so I ask you, who was gone stop me? I was in them woods, and in them swamps, ever chance I got, hoping I'd have me an adventure, and see for myself some of the big things a-doing in the world.

"I done fixed your supper," Maum Hannah said, her eyes open now. "It's on the stove for when you want it. Rabbit stew and beaten biscuits and black-eyed peas and gumbo and a crock of bluejohn to wet it with, and don't you push it all down that worthless dog out yonder neither. You need it more'n he does."

"Yes, Maum Hannah," I said, figuring the fice wasn't gone need no supper, the way he was working at something out there in the bresh. "You gone eat when you get back?"

"I done fixed me a bucket," she said. "I'll eat when I'm ready, I figure." She waved for me to come help her stand up. She managed it, leaning on me with one

hand and her stick with the other. Didn't seem to me she needed to be going noplace.

"Where'd you say you was bound for, again?" I asked her, thinking I was being clever-like.

"I didn't," she said, "and I ain't gone to.

*"Don't you like it, don't you take it,  
Here's my collar, come and shake it."*

She swatted my rump. "Hand me my bucket, yonder beside the churn. I got to get on. The day's waning." She teeter-tottered at the top of the steps, fussed with the bonnet knot neath her chin, looked into the sun a-setting. "Yes, Lord," she said. "The long day is waning, and Your great work is nigh on done. Thank you, child," she said. The bucket was covered by a oilcloth, but couldn't a been much in it—it didn't weigh far from empty. She set it on top of her head, said, "Umph, umph, umph," and went off down the steps, blowing pipe smoke ever which way. "I want to hear you slam that front door behind me and lock it before I get outen the yard, you hear me?"

"Yes, Maum Hannah," I said.

This was big doins for *sure* enough sure. She hadn't in the longest time had me lock the front door. Excited now, I turned my back on her and ran to where the big old key hung on a nail above the fireplace. I slid a chair under it, climbed up there, passed the key on the way up, and stood there feeling like a mullet head. I had grown since last time we used that key; I didn't need that chair at all, now. I jumped off, reached up and snagged the key off the nail, done! Maum Hannah had reached the edge of the yard, but she didn't look around as I slammed the front door and locked it, just like I promised I'd do—cept I was outside the door, on the porch, when I done it. Now Maum Hannah was just outen sight, past the first stand of trees, just a little blue streak curling back to show she'd been there. I was set on slipping around behind her, seeing where she was going. But first I was gone see what the fice had hold of.

I tipped across the yard, trying not to mess up the sand I'd just raked that day, and not to make noise that would call Maum Hannah back down on me. "You, dog," I whispered. "What you got there, huh?" It growled at me and shinnied backward in the bresh, but switched its raggedy tail, too, like it wanted to play. "Gone get it," I whispered, on my all fours now. "Yessir. Gone get it. Gone get it. Gone *get*—!" I snatched at the near end of it and the fice jumped all feet up in the air and backwards and held on to the far end as it stretched out between us—a tore-off rag of black cloth, thin so you could see through it, and as long as my arm, or longer, cause it was mighty stretchy. I set to worrying it away from the fice. "Let go, you thin-brained thing," I said, and he said *rrrr r rrrr*, like a fice does. I stuck a stick between his teeth and he let the rag go to gnaw on that. I held the rag up close and pulled on it and looked through it and rubbed my hands together with it in the

middle—man, it was *smooth*. Pretty, too, even raggedy and dirty and full of trash from who knows what all it had been dragged through.

I figured it musta come off somebody's clothes—a shirt or a dress or a pair of britches, maybe—but whoever it was musta been one rich buckra. All the colored folks I knew, and most of the white folks, were poor as owl harkey, and my own shirt and britches felt like croker sacks next to this. The field hands' clothes didn't get soft like this even on washday till they were next to rotten and no good no more. I rubbed the black scrap against my cheek. Betcha my mama is wearing a dress this fine, I thought. Then I stuffed it in the back of my britches so it hung out a little, like a rag I'd blow my nose on, and knelt down to talk to the fice, which was wagging his whole butt end. I didn't need him yapping behind me and bringing Maum Hannah down on us like Moses.

“You, dog, stay put, now,” I whispered. “Take care of the place, you hear? No, *stay*.” I chunked another stick a far ways beneath the house, and when the fice went after it, I set off down the lane.

Didn't take long to catch Maum Hannah in sight again, and after that I kept to the edge of the woods, picking along and scaring up critters, just in case she looked back round at the road. But what was behind her didn't concern her none, no ma'am. She was focused on the great blue in-front-of, was Maum Hannah that evening as the shadows got long, and she was stepping along right smart, too—for her. There were other people on the road, too. Ahead of her were three younger women, and when they saw Maum Hannah coming they stopped to wait on her to catch up. But she didn't stop in the road to do no bookooing, no, they all set off together, and I was way too far back to hear what they said. Between the trees it was near black dark now, though the sun would still be low on the Sound, and the bird Maum Hannah called the *kambaboli* would be calling in the tide—*Whoot! Whoot!* And the darker it got, the more people seemed to be on the road—way up ahead, and stepping out from the trees all around, like shadows grown legs and gone to walking. And finally I stepped out there in the road, too, cause no way Maum Hannah was gone spot me now, in the dark, and I walked long with everybody else, more and more of 'em all the time.

Some woman nearby said, “We ain't gone be late, is we?”

A man said, “Naw, we be there in good time.”

Musta been some shindig indeedy come to pass, get all these colored folks out in the road like this with the paterollers no telling where. Course, we'd be able to hear the paterollers up the road a ways off—*clumpety clumpety clump*, and their shackles and chains all a-jingle.

As I walked along, not studying bout the people just ahead of me or just behind, I kept yanking at the shoulders of my shirt, cause they chafed me. Oh, man, go in the creek, I thought. Quit that. Ain't nothing wrong with your clothes. I knew

what Maum Hannah would say. *Always making the big-eye bout what rich people's got. Ain't your shirt clean and fresh patched and don't it fit you good? Them rich people's mouths is cut crossways just like yourn, ain't they? Lord, for truth, you is a backslid and head-pecked child. You ain't thankful for all the things God sent you down, God gone snatch you up. Gone go in your bed and take you out.* I studied on it some, and I decided it was that soft black rag I got hold of, was making my shirt feel bad on me. I didn't think nothing bad bout my shirt before I found that. "Who needs this damn buckra cracker rag anyhow?" I said out loud. "Dog damn it." I yanked it outen my britches, made like to throw it away, then put it back where it was. "Double dog damn it," I said.

Somebody next to me said, "You mighty little to be talking such a way."

He was big and stunk like dispensary liquor, and I didn't want nothing to do with him. But he got right up longside me and said, "Ain't you is Maum Hannah's Shad?" And then I knew him, too, cause everyone on St. Helena knew old Fuss-X Quall. We called him Fuss-X cause that was the cheapest liquor there was. Even the crackers wouldn't drink nothing cheaper than Two-X, and that only if some straw boss wouldn't buy 'em Three. He grabbed my shoulder and leaned on me while he was walking—like on a crab boat in bumpty water. "You, Shad. You know old Fuss-X, don't you?"

"Yessir, I do," I said, cause Maum Hannah said God wants children to make their manners to their elders, even if that there respectular elder ain't good for nothing but drawing lightning and murdering groceries.

"You don't mind, do you, Shad, if old Fuss-X walks along with you a ways? Old Fuss-X don't want you getting lost in the dark, now, and missing out on these big doins."

"Nossir, I don't mind it, I guess," I said. I wanted to ask him what the big doins was, but I was ashamed to say I didn't know. My stomach went *rrrr r rrrr* like the fice, and I thought bout those good vittles back at the house on the stove, waiting on me. If I had me a bucket now, I could surely make that biscuit *moan*. Too late now. I done aimed high and had to follow it through.

*Hold it high, sweep the sky.  
Hold it level, kill the devil.*

"Yessir, big old doins," Fuss-X said, like to himself. "Bout the biggest doins ever round Frogmore town, I'd say. Wouldn't you say so, Shad?"

"I reckon so, yessir." I wished he'd nail it shut, cause ever time he said something he squeezed my shoulder like he was gone pinch it off, and his breath stank like asafetida root.

"Almighty big doins," Fuss-X said. Then he got down in my ear and whispered:

“You wouldn’t lie to old Fuss-X, now, would you, boy?”

“Nossir.”

“To poor old Fuss-X, who’s had such a hard shake of it, and who ain’t so many these days, who can’t walk hardly since the paterollers bout killed him alive, who goes to his knees ever night to pray, and who didn’t never do you no harm, nor do any harm to any other of Aunt Hagar’s children—no, nor the white folks either, no harm to any man, woman, or child in this sin-sick world?”

Somewheres in there his question got away from him and he started crying, the way a stambling old drunk will do, till he couldn’t talk no more and blew his nose on his sleeve. I was beginning to think he’d run out of Fuss-X and done filled up instead of home-brewed coon dick, which meant any time now he’d be fighting whatever come near, thinking he was crawling with monkeys. I tried to speed up and get away from him even as I said, sorta desperate-like:

“I wouldn’t lie to you, nossir, Mr. Fuss-X, I swear I wouldn’t.”

“Well, tell me now for the truth, then, Shad boy,” he whispered in my ear again. “When we all’s get to where it is that we’s going this evening ... uh, where, exactly, is that gone be?”

I stopped in the road so sudden he walked on past me a step or two and nearabouts fell turning around. “Why, Mr. Fuss-X, you mean to tell me *you* don’t know where we going, either?”

“I’ll tell you *both* where you going,” said a big old bald man who come up bout that time, and grabbed hold of me in one hand and Fuss-X in the other. “You both going into one of these trees with your heads knocked together if you can’t stay quiet.”

The little squawky woman with him said, “You two fools want to bring the paterollers down on us?”

Fuss-X started getting all wet-eyed again and crying bout how he hadn’t mean nobody no harm, but I spoke up quick and pitiful: “No, ma’am, but I done mislaid my folks, and I’m scared. Would you mind if I was to walk along with y’all till we get there?” I sidled around, hanging on her skirts, till she was tween me and Fuss-X. “I’ll be quiet and good, I swear I will.”

So she got all sweet and so nice and said I was the sweetest thing, I was just a doll baby, and how dare you take hold of that child, Cephas, what’s got into you?

And she kept on a-petting me and making nice to me as our crowd massed up in the road like there was something in the way. There were a lot of hellos and how-you-beens going on, quiet-like. And then I saw our crowd had run head-smack into an even bigger crowd, a-coming down the road from Frogmore way. And all of us were turning off the road and heading into the cypress swamp down a little

narrow track, between a lightning-burnt stump and a honeysuckle thicket.

I knew this way well. It was the track to the praying ground, where the colored folks on that part of St. Helena met to have their Christian worship, far from white men and their devilments. What there is bout a colored church service that so riles up the white trash, I didn't know then and I don't know now, cept maybe they hate to see us going straight to the true Master, you know, and skipping the middleman. Now I'd heard tell that some who worshipped the older ways, the African ways, met at that there praying ground, too, but I don't know bout that. All I know is, there were a powerful lot more people making their way through the swamp that night than I ever saw at Christian service before, and didn't no one seem to be missing a step, either. They's all kind of secrets between neighbors, I guess, even on a tee-ninchy island like this.

When you walk on a track through the swamp like that, the black mud sucks at your feet like it wants to keep you around, squinch squinch squinch, and every step fills with a little water like a spring welling up. Musta been a goodly number of people gone on before, like I said, cause that track was a pure loblolly by now, like a hog wallow. And there wasn't nothing to listen to but the bullfrogs and the zingers in the weeds and the squinch of our feet, cause once we got in the swamp good and proper, didn't no one do any talking. I'd lost track of Maum Hannah and Fuss-X and everybody else. There was just that squawky woman's narrow butt ahead of me, and her man Cephas a-breathing heavy just behind. Fuss-X had had some company at the dispensary that day. We hurried on, one right behind the other, cause it was too narrow a passage to walk otherwise. But when we went over the little plank bridge that meant the praying ground was nigh, I heard somebody up ahead a-talking low. Her voice got louder, meaning she was staying put while we went ahead. It was a high-yaller gal, right pretty, and she was wearing a tight little shake-baby dress, like you don't expect to see at no praying ground—though I now know a man might pray for it, yes indeedy, pardon me, ma'am. She was standing on a cypress knee to get taller, and waving us on ahead, all the while peering back the way we'd come, with a glance now and then into the trees and bogs to each side.

"Take foot in hand, people," she said. "He gone start without you. You think he ain't got business elsewhere? He's a busy man, and no mistake. Come on, now, big man." She put her hand on my shoulder to push me along, and I felt all warm where she'd touched me, but was too young, you know, to know why just yet.

"Don't you be studying bout her," said Mr. Cephas into my ear.

"Don't *you*," his woman said, looking round. "Step it up, now. We most there."

Just then the path went between two big cypresses, and the woods fell away, and the earth firmed up and started to rise a little, and that was the praying ground. Some said it was where the Indians had scraped up enough dry earth to bury their dead folks, away back centuries before any other color man had lived on this island.

Two or three pine-knot torches here and there gave all the light there was, but I could tell there was a mess of people ringing the little hill, a hundred or more of 'em, all shuffling and muttering together, men and women and old folks and a few younguns, too. All of 'em colored people. I wondered how many were free and how many of 'em slave—ain't no way to tell, just by looking, is there? No, not to this day. But some were so ragged and dirty and wild-haired that I figured they weren't just in the swamp for a visit. I stopped studying bout the crowd when I saw that on the little hill that was the middle of the praying ground was a little rickety table holding an oil lamp, and sitting on a chair behind the table, talking to an old woman standing there, was the strangest-looking white man in Christendom.

He musta been nearabouts seven feet tall, from the way his knees was drawn up a-sitting there, and his arms a-waving around looked each as long as that, with hands on the ends the size of hams. He was as shackly built as the table, as skinny as an old swinge cat. His ears stuck out like the fice's, and the hair of his head and beard was as bristly as a hog's, and his eyes was sunk way back in his head like snake holes, and he had the widest mouth I ever saw. He laughed at something said to him, with his head rared back and his pointy knees up against his chest and his arms wrapped around them, and I thought the corners of his mouth gone meet in back and send the top of his head a-rolling into the marsh. You ever seen a chicken get up and run around when its head is gone? Well, I felt like this fella coulda done the same. It was like he wasn't put together solid, like regular folks—they was just stuff stuck on here and there, a beaky nose, a gangly arm, and if any of it was to come unstuck, well, it wouldn't be no crisis, he'd put the pieces in his carpetbag to sort out later. He was dressed all fancy in a black swaller-tail coat like he was ready for the cooling board, and as big as he was, the man he'd got the suit from musta been two sizes bigger. While I stared at him, he stood up—and up, and up—till the Spanish moss tickled his beard, and as he hugged that old woman like a bosom-friend, I saw his left shoulder was higher than the right one, and as he stepped around the table he lurched bout as crazy as old Fuss-X did. A slapped-together mess of a man, he was, and then the old woman turned to step back into the crowd, and Lord God! It was Maum Hannah, a-talking with the man himself like they were old relations. Cause I knew who he was, all right. When his splintery face passed above the oil lamp, I knew him from the illustrateds we put over the walls in winter. Besides, I knew there wasn't but one white man who could draw half of St. Helena to him through the dark bare-handed and alone.

He looked toward the spot where we come in, and so I looked too, and I saw that shake-baby gal step into the torchlight a ways, and nod her head. And then I looked back to the mound to see him looking straight at me, and it was to me that he began to talk—yes! Looking straight at me the whole time. That's how come I remember what he said so clear. And *could* he talk, Lord! I believe his tongue was hung in the middle so it flapped both ways. And I didn't stir, nor no one else in the praying ground nor no creeping flying thing in the swamp, nor nothing in the heavens and the earth, while that man said what he had come to say, in a voice that was like the voice in my head when I talk to myself, just that still and true.

“My friends, I thank you for coming out tonight, to harken to a tired old man who ain’t got much time. I’ll be as quick as I can, cause I know we ain’t the only folks abroad this night.

“Now, I’ll be frank with you folks, they’s some in Washington a little surprised, a little disappointed, too, that once I made my Proclamation, and freed the slaves, that you all didn’t take off and go, and tell Mr. Ravenel to pick his own cotton, wash his own clothes, cook his own victuals, and nurse his own babies, and put everything in a grip-sack and swarm up North as thick as cowpeas, throwing off the paterollers like flies off a bull, and leaving the Sesesh with nothing to fight for but taxes and Mr. Calhoun’s weevily wig and some turnips a-rotting in the ground. Cause what has slavery give you? Piggin to eat and oyster shell, that’s what it give you—you know that better’n me.

“And I admit, I sorta felt this way for a while myself. But Mr. Douglass, he talked some sense into me. He said, first of all, they’s some colored folks down here what ain’t slaves, whole islands of ‘em, sometimes, working and scraping for the money to buy their family free, cause free ain’t free and it ain’t cheap neither. And next of all, he said that free or slave, this is you all’s home, same as Mr. Ravenel’s, and who’s to say you got to leave it, any, some, or none, just so’s you all can be free? And Mr. Douglass asked me, how they gone buy a train ticket, or hire a room to sleep in, if they ain’t got nothing but chicken-change? Counting railroad ties ain’t a living. And Mr. Douglass also said, it ain’t like Mr. Ravenel gone kiss you all goodbye and suit up his best buckboard and curry his best horse and feed you a dinner of chicken-bosom and hang a Joe Moore round your neck and say, Y’all take good care now, and make sure’n send me a pretty postcard when you get to Philly-Me-York!

“And finally Mr. Douglass said to me, even a fly on a bull spills some blood. Whose blood you willing to spill? Yourn? Your mama’s? Your baby’s?

“And the last thing that Mr. Douglass said to me was, Huh!

“And so I saw that Mr. Douglass was right, that just cause y’all *are* free don’t mean you all can *act* free, not yet. Shoot, God thought you were free all along, and that didn’t sway Mr. Ravenel none. What’s Mr. Lincoln next to God?

“And so I studied it and studied it, and thought it was a pretty bad fix, and I took me a bottle of Five-X over to General Grant’s tent—you didn’t know the grades went up to Five, did you? Up North they do—and he sipped that good Five-X and sucked on his big cigar and he studied and studied and then he said, Well, Mr. President. If those poor colored folks can’t come to freedom, I reckon freedom’s just gone have to come to them.

“And so I’m here to tell you, friends, that freedom has *come* to Chattanooga, and freedom has *come* to Atlanta, and freedom has *rolled* down to the batteaus a-bumping the salty docks of Savannah, and freedom gone come *rolling* through St.

Helena Island any day now, and that sound you been hearing off to the west ain't no gunshot, friends, it's the angels of Bethlehem a-shouting hallelujah."

Now through all this, folks been busting out with an Amen here and a Yes, Lord there and a Praise Jesus yonder, and as they give him back that Hallelujah ten times over we all heard a rumbling toward Savannah, like thunder, and everybody went *ooo-o-o-oh*, sorta low.

Now at about that place in his sermon he started to look sorta swimmy to me, and I saw it was cause my eyes were tearing up, and burning. I sneezed a couple times, and wiped my eyes on my sleeve—cause that rag in my pocket seemed too good to use any such a way—and then I noticed the blue smoke a-curling all around my head. Then a hard old clawy hand snatched my shoulder up tight, the fingers wrapping round my long bone like it was a clothes iron, and in my ear Maum Hannah said: "Young coon for running, but old coon for cunning. Boy, you are mine."

"Now, Maum Hannah, now listen, I'll tell you what happened, I—"

"Umph, umph, umph," she said. "I'm gone shake you like a gourd, boy. I'm gone whup you till Shiloh come."

"Shhhh!" someone said, and she hushed, but didn't let up on my poor shoulder none. I was stuck like a pig on a spit, and my only comfort in the world at that moment seemed to be Mr. Lincoln's hard-timey gentle face.

"Now, y'all probably know by now that I have some differences of opinion with Mr. Jefferson Davis. I think Mr. Davis is an American, same as me, same as you all, no worse than any of us and better'n some. But the plain fact of the tragedy is, he just don't accept that honor; if it's Americans that's invited to the party, he says, nossir, I better sit outside in the dirt with my lip poked out, and be all suscautious, cause that party ain't for me. And that's how come me sitting down with Mr. Davis and jabbering with him and breaking out the Four-X ain't gone do any good to get this war over and done with. Mr. Davis was a Senator, you know, before he become a professional Southerner, and a Senator can out-talk any man—can make you think a horse-chesnut is a chestnut horse. And Mr. Davis' egg bag ain't gone rest easy till I'm willing to tell him, all right, Mr. Davis, you win, you ain't an American no more, and now that I think bout it, Mr. Davis, why, I don't rightly know who *is*, if not being an American is as easy as that, as easy as changing your flannels in springtime. And I ain't a-going to tell him that, because friends, I don't believe it. But Mr. Davis don't pay no rabbit-foot to what I believe.

"So Mr. Davis and all those Sesesh that agree with him, they gone have to be made to listen. Y'all ever try to get the attention of a mule? It ain't easy to get, is it? And once you get it, you got to keep on getting it. And that's what General Grant and General Thomas and General Sherman are helping me do. They're helping me get Mr. Sesesh's attention the only way they is to get it—to fret him and fret him, and chew him and choke him, and shoot him when shooting will do any good."

Maum Hannah was one of those who said Amen at this, and she give me a little shake besides, like this was gone be my lot too.

“We got a lot of work yet to do,” Mr. Lincoln went on, “yes Lord and no mistake. They’s places in this country so parched up the people got nothing left to cry with. Following around ahead of this army, I seen hell, I seen heaven, I seen all kinds of things I never expected to see on this earth. But God never made two mountains without putting a valley in between. And I’m counting on all the good people of Frogmore, every God one, to stand reformed and ready. And General Sherman is counting on you, and General Grant is counting on you, and what’s more, your generations here are counting on you, too. So that when you tell your babies, Honey, you were born a *slave*, and you lived through a *civil war*, they’ll look up at you and say, Mama, what’s that mean? And all your suffering will seem to them like some made-up story, from a country far away. I’m finished and through.

*“The saddle and bridle is on the shelf,  
If you want any more you can get it yourself.”*

“Mr. Cephas, will you lead us in song?”

“Yessir, Mr. President,” said the big bald man I had walked to the praying ground with, and he commenced to singing, low but strong:

*“Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land,  
Tell old Pharaoh, let my people go!”*

And others picked it up and sang along, a-swaying a little, mamas holding their babies, and men holding their women, and Mr. Lincoln not singing but walking around the circle shaking hands with people and hugging them and even kissing some of them. I never seen white and colored kiss before. I seen even old Fuss-X Quall stand up straight to shake Mr. Lincoln’s hand, with his other hand a-resting on the ragged lapel of his old tore-up jacket, looking so proper you’d think he was the mayor of Charleston.

“Mr. President, sir,” I heard Fuss-X say, “I been drunk since you was elected the *first* time.”

Mr. Lincoln laughed and patted Fuss-X on the shoulder and said: “You’re an honest man, sir. But you’ll need to be a sober man, too, if you’re going to be any help to me.”

“Yes, sir,” Fuss-X said. “For *you*, sir, I’ll be that sober man, yes indeedy. Bless you, sir.”

*“Mr. Sherman burned Atlanta town,  
Let my people go!  
The pillar of fire again come down,  
Let my people go!”*

When Mr. Lincoln got round to us, he patted Maum Hannah on the shoulder and looked down at me right kindly and said, “Why, Maum Hannah, who is this here

fine young strapping man?”

“Don’t you get too close to this one, Mr. Abe. He ain’t no bigger’n kindling, but he sparks like the Devil himself. I *told* Shad and *told* him to stay at the home place, but for all the good it done I might’s well brought the word of Jesus to a hog. I got to light his shucks a few times fore he’s fit to talk to decent folks.”

“Oh, now, Maum Hannah, I’m sure he’s not as fearsome as all that.” Not minding his fine britches, he knelt down closer to where I was, one knee mashing into the soggy grass. He still was a lot taller than me, but he’d evened it up some. He reached out and shook my hand with both hisn—big hairy monkey hands, to look at, but so gentle they held my hand like they was cradling a chick. “I’m sure this boy is here for a reason, same as the rest of us,” Mr. Lincoln said.

*“Long years to come before the dawn,  
Let my people go!  
Too soon our leader will be gone,  
Let my people go!”*

Lots of folks were still singing, but I was starting to think I misremembered the words. I didn’t much like the way they were going, neither. But Mr. Lincoln didn’t pay the song no mind. “Always obey your elders, Shad,” he said. “I always obeyed mine—till I was old enough to stop.” He winked and let go my hand. I wanted to say something back, but I just stood there rooted and dumb as a yambo, as he stood and hugged Maum Hannah again, whispering something I couldn’t hear. She finally let go my poor achy shoulder. Man! Old Sherman was a caution, but he didn’t have nothing on Maum Hannah.

*Old Pharaoh robbed us of our youth,  
Let my people go!  
But the worst robber is old John—”*

And right there Cephas stopped singing—stopped, and stood still, eyes staring at nothing, like he was harking to something a ways off. And because he was leading the song, everybody else noticed, and the singing trailed off, and then all the folks was quiet, and listening. I strained and strained, but couldn’t hear nothing but the pine knots sputtering, and a little breeze that swayed the moss overhead and made the shadows move funny in the praying ground. I saw that Mr. Lincoln heard it, too, though, whatever it was. His face was a study, like nothing I can line out for you in words. It was the face of a man who sees his death coming, and is ready for it.

Then I heard, away off in the swamp, something like a bridle jingling.

“Paterollers,” Cephas said, and not loud neither, but in the next second the pine knots and the oil lamp snuffed out and everybody was in the dark and on the *move*. I could hear the branches cracking and bushes thrashing and reeds snapping and mud plopping as that praying ground emptied out, as fast and as quiet as people could go, in all directions, path or no path, and me and Maum Hannah and Mr.

Lincoln in the middle standing stock-still, like the man in a hurricane who hears the water coming and knows there's no place to run. The coal-tip of Maum Hannah's pipe was the only light left that wasn't the moon and the stars. Even the skeeters and the bullfrogs had hushed, so the only sound in the pitch-black praying ground was the picking-up breeze and the jingle, jingle, jingling of bridles, of coffles, of chains.

"Lord have mercy," Maum Hannah said.

"It's me they want," Mr. Lincoln said. "I'm sure of it. They're between us and the Sound, too. You and this child skedaddle, Maum Hannah. Get as far into the swamp as you can, and lie low. I'll make sure they can find me."

"No!" I cried. It was the first thing I had managed to say for the longest time, and it blew out of me like the cork from a jug. Then I was pulling on Mr. Lincoln's sleeve, on his swaller-tails, on his britches leg, on anything I could grab hold of, trying to haul him away from the path we come in on. "Come on, Mr. Lincoln, please sir, you can't let 'em get you, you just *can't*, I'll show you the way, you and Maum Hannah both, I'm in the swamps all the time, Maum Hannah licks me for it but I go there anyways, I know all sorts of paths to the Sound, to Frogmore, anyplace you wants to go, why, I'll lead you to Washington town, but please, Mr. Lincoln! Tell him, Maum Hannah. Don't let the paterollers—or *whoever that is a-coming*—don't let 'em get you! Mr. Lincoln, Maum Hannah, *please!*"

The grownups looked at each other.

"The boy's talking sense," Maum Hannah said. "He knows these swamps, for sure. He's half snake, half possum, half *bobobo* bird. You keep up with him, you might make it to the Sound, sure enough."

"But this child—" Mr. Lincoln started to say.

"Don't talk back to me like I was Congress. You done enough talking for tonight. You said we had to help, now we gone help, and you stuck with it. Now get on, both of you."

"What about you, Maum Hannah?" I asked.

She sucked on her pipe, and the coal flared up a funny color, sorta purple-red, so's I could see a little of her broad, set face, flickering like it was lit from inside, like a gourd at Christmastime. "I got my own ways home," she said. "Old slow ways. Don't study bout me." She took hold of her pipe and stuck her thumb into the bowl and *hist*, the light went out, and out of the dark her voice said: "Get on, now, both of you." And then she just wasn't there no more—it was so pure dark, she coulda been a foot away, and me not known it. But I don't think to this day that she was. Maybe Maum Hannah could tamp herself down the same as the pipe, and wink out like a coal.

"Come on, sir," I said, half-crying but trying not to sound it.

“Wait!” Mr. Lincoln said, and for a second I thought he was gone, too. Next thing I knew a match was struck, and the oil lamp on that rickety table come back alive. He trotted back with something long and pipe-shaped in his hand. “That light’ll give ‘em something to aim for that ain’t us,” he said. “Besides, I’d be purely lost for sure, Shad or no Shad, without my hat.” He breshed it with his sleeve and settled it on his head as delicate as if he was on the front porch of the big house. I couldn’t see the hat too good in that light, but I could see it made him stand up a good deal straighter. He looked bout eight feet tall, and half comical, but only half, and if he got comfort from that hat, well, I got comfort, somehow, from looking at him. “What you waiting on,” he asked, “Judgment?” He snapped his fingers. “*Wake up, Jacob, day’s a-breaking.*”

I grinned and finished it: “*Get your hoecake baking and your shirt tail shaking! Yes, sir.*” I turned and ran across the praying ground, past the persimmon tree at the far end, and into the swamp, Mr. Lincoln right behind me. He made more noise than me a-going through the bresh, but less than I expected—as much as a buck deer, I guess, when it’s running flat out. And ma’am, let me tell you, any deer on St. Helena woulda had a time outrunning us that night.

We splashed through creeks and crawled through brambly places and teeter-walked over logs and scrambled up one side and slid butt-first down the other of mounds plenty larger than the one at the praying ground—and plenty older, too, I reckon—and jumped half-rotted fences and wallowed through bogs and scared the life out of six or seven muskrats, two gators, and a squinch owl, though that old owl bout took it out of us, too, hollering any such a way. We were mosquito-bit, briar-scratched, mud-plastered, and salt-crackly with dried swamp water by the time the water rose up and left us to jump from cypress knee to cypress knee. Then—whoa!—we run out of knees, and there we were, hassling like dogs and draped across a low branch and looking out across the Sound, breathing that sweet rank mud-marsh smell, the tidewater lapping at the knees neath us and something we’d awaked, a moccasin probably, a-plopping into the shallows behind. Do you know that stovepipe hat was still on Mr. Lincoln’s head—how, I don’t know. The pace we set through that wild country, I was surprised we still had our britches.

“What you reckon we do now?” I asked. I didn’t have no idea myself, but I figured, shoot, he’s the president, he must be smart. “You got soldiers waiting on you?”

“Not *with* me,” he said, and I wasn’t sure what that meant. He went on: “My boat’s somewheres on this shore. I tied it up under a rotted pier. Beside a grove of palmetto.”

“I know that place. Come on.” So we thrashed on down the water’s edge to the palmetto grove—it wasn’t more’n a half-mile south, but felt longer, the way so overgrewed and us so wore-out. There was the skiff, just like he’d said, though if you didn’t know to look for it you’d a thought it was just another old plank a-floating there. He clambered around the rotted pilings and eased the skiff on out

into the water, and undid the rope and settled down in the stern. Plumb filled the boat up, with his knees nearbouts in his face. The moon come out from behind a cloud then, and I saw for the first time that his hat was bent at a sorry angle, with a long raggedy strip hanging down.

“Your hat’s bout done its last do,” I said, not wanting to say goodbye but not knowing what else to say neither.

“I know it,” he said. “It’s a shame.” He took it off and looked it over. “I had to lie low in a thicket just after sunset, waiting on a patrol to pass by, and I left a big strip of my hat behind there.”

I realized something. I felt around behind, and sure enough, there was that strip of cloth, the one I had wrestled from the fice, still stuck into my pants. I pulled it out and handed it to Mr. Lincoln. “You mean a strip like this right here?”

“Why, that’s it exactly. Where’d you find it?”

“In the yard. The dog brought it up. I figured it wasn’t none of this island.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what,” he said, handing it back. “You can keep it, and the hat too, with my thanks.” He stood, removed the stovepipe all solemn, and handed it over with a little bow, like he was offering me a crown. Nearbouts swamped the boat. “Whoa,” he said, settling down again. “Shad, I thank you again most kindly. I got to get back out to my ship, before the sun catches me. Will you be able to get back home all right?”

“Yessir, it ain’t far,” I said. What I wanted to say was Take me with you, but I didn’t say it, and he didn’t offer.

“Well, thanks again, and goodbye,” Mr. Lincoln said, and commenced to pull on the oars.

I don’t know why I asked it. I guess I was just trying to keep him there awhile longer. What I asked, standing straddle-legged on two old pier pilings, was: “Do you like being the president?”

That stopped him, and he laid down the oars in his lap and thought bout it, the skiff drifting sideways, already caught by the current and heading out to sea. When he finally made his answer, his voice got louder as he got farther away. “Shad, I’ll tell you like this. There once was a man who’d got powerful unpopular, so unpopular that all his neighbors grabbed him and tarred him and feathered him and run him out of town on a rail. And in the middle of it all, one of the neighbors that tormented him so, asked him, Well sir, how do you like it? And the man said back, Frankly, sir, I’d just as soon walk, if not for the honor of the thing. Goodbye, Shad.”

“Goodbye, sir,” I said, but he was way out in the Sound by then, a-pulling on the oars, and probably didn’t even hear me. Just before he was out of sight, there

was a flickering in the sky, and a rumble of thunder, and I heard him say: “God, how I love a storm.” And then he was just one more dark patch against the far shore, and then he was gone. Least I never saw him again. So I turned around and dragged myself on back home, got there just as the sun was coming up, and Maum Hannah was a-sitting there—

No. I ain’t gone tell it that way. I told you from the start, true enough for a book. I’m gone tell you the part of the story that I don’t tell the young folks, and you can spice it or shuck it, same as all else.

I stood there a while, feeling the smart cloth of that poor ragged hat between my fingers, watching and listening—for what, I didn’t know. I tried putting on the hat, but it was too big, I couldn’t see nothing that way. So I held it in my hands as I turned and stepped off that old pier and onto the muddy ground, and I hadn’t gone two paces before I saw a row of little stars about five feet off the ground, twinkling in the air between me and the trees. I stood there and blinked until the shapes around them firmed up some and I saw it was a row of soldiers standing in front of me, the moonlight shining off their buttons and hat-brims and rifle barrels.

I dropped the hat and made a sound like, “Ah,” and wet my britches like a baby—the last time *that* ever happened, let me tell you, on that end of my life. But they weren’t studying bout me. They were peering off across the water, over my head, looking toward where Mr. Lincoln went. They weren’t Sesesh. Their uniforms were too new, their boots too shiny, their voices not Southern but sharp and squawky like chickens.

“Lost him again, God damn him to hell.”

“They’ll pick him up when he tries to board.”

“Stanton will court-martial the lot of us.”

“The hell with old fuzz-face Stanton. Secretary of War, my ass. What outfit did *he* ever soldier for, huh?”

They quarreled on like that, I couldn’t understand the half of it. I started stepping real slow and careful off to the right, a-walking around ‘em. Maybe they hadn’t seen me at all, or maybe didn’t care. I was just bout to the edge of the old weed-choked road that led off from the pier through the woods, when one of ‘em said, all unconcerned-like: “What about the little pickaninny?”

I froze up and nearbouts lost my water again.

“Reckon he’ll tell what he saw?”

“I don’t reckon he could help it.”

“Looks like he stole himself a hat.”

“A Southern thief in wartime. And thieving from the Gorilla in Chief, at that. Our duty is clear, gentlemen.”

“Hey, pickaninny. Cuffee. Hey, Hercules. How fast can you run, d’you suppose?”

“Faster than a Federal can shoot?”

Then I heard a *snick-snick* sound. And then another one. And then another one.

I’m ashamed to say now that I was too scared to pray even, but if I had prayed for anything, it wouldn’t a been for what happened next. I couldn’t have imagined such a thing. What happened was a voice from the trees, a new voice but sorta familiar, and praise Jesus a Southern one, too:

“Excuse me just a moment, please, sirs. Hello, sirs? Yankee soldier gentlemen? A moment of your time, if you please.”

All the soldiers whirled around away from me and toward poor old Fuss-X Quall, who came strolling out of those black and midnight woods as natural and casual-like as at noon on the main street of Frogmore, one hand fanning skeeters with his hat. The last time I ever saw the man was the only time I’d seen him walk a straight line. Straight toward the rifle barrels a-pointing at him.

“Just one moment,” said old Fuss-X—no, *not* old Fuss-X, neither. The man’s name was Quall. Just in time, I caught that he was really talking to me. “One moment, sir, is all that I need. A single moment’s *opportunity*.”

I made use of that moment Mr. Quall gave me. I took off running, straight down that dark road. Behind me the rifles fired. Again. Again. Bullets went *zing* past my head, kicked up dust to my left, splinters to my right. *Zing. Zing.* I ran and cried and ran. Farther and farther behind, the soldiers hollered like dogs. After a while I couldn’t cry no more, but I still could run, so I kept on a-doing that. The *zing* in my ears now were skeeters, I reckon, but I ran just the same. I outran any skeeter. I ran out of those woods tiddy umpty, ran home straight as a martin to his gourd.

When I dragged on into the yard just before sunrise, I saw Maum Hannah a-sitting on the joggling board, a-talking to herself, her pipe glowing like a third eye. I tried to call to her, but didn’t have no breath. Closer up, I heard who she was talking to.

“When little Shad come down to die, I want you, Master, to be to the head and be to the foot for the last morning. When you see Shad done knock from side to side on Helena, I ask you, Jesus, to be his mother and his father for the last new day. Oh, God! Stand to him as his hair to his head. Take charge of him one more time—on the road, in the field, up to the fireside, oh, God! to the well.”

By that time I was at the foot of the steps, and so wore-out that when I tried

to climb I just fell a-sprawling in the sand. And then the fice run out from neath the porch to lick my face, and Maum Hannah was plumb all over me, mashing me into her sweat-smelling bosom so I couldn't breathe and hollering—

“Thank you Jesus! Mama! Master! Thank you Jesus! Mama! Master!”

—till the sun come up on St. Helena that day.

I reckon I'm the only one left that heard Mr. Lincoln's talk at the praying ground that night. I was the youngest one there, and now I'm the oldest one here, and the others all done died in between.

Now, hold up there, ma'am, hold up there—don't be starting in on me, pulling out your history-book learning and all such mess as that. I done heard it all. These younguns round here, they take the ferry into Beaufort, they get some free schooling and come back telling me I don't know shit from Shinola bout Lincoln or nothing else. And the Yankee schoolteachers who come out here to take pictures and write everything down, I get it from them, too. Oh, I get it from all sides. People say Lincoln didn't come no further south during the war than Hampton Roads. People say Lincoln wasn't really all that hot to free the slaves nohow, that it was all just politicking for votes and soldiers. People say we coloreds were better off before the war, when the likes of Mr. Ravenel were taking care of us. People say the mockingbirds all fly to hell on Fridays, toting grains of sand to squinch the flames. You ever hear that one? Yes, Lord, people will say just bout anything. That don't mean I have to believe it. What I see with my own eyes, that I believe. And these eyes when they were good saw Lincoln, a lot better than they seeing you now. Maybe they see him again, before too long. Maybe we be needing him again. Yes, ma'am, that's the end of that tale. You know how to end a tale, don't you?

*“I stepped on a pin, the pin bent,  
And that's the way the story went.”*

*—For Sam Doyle (1906-1985)*

*of St. Helena,*

*who painted the speech of*

*Lincoln at Frogmore*

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