

Believers

It was one o'clock, and Denzel and his mother, Avis, had just arrived at Ben's. They had planned to go earlier to beat the morning rush, and to escape familiar faces. Instead they had spent the morning considering whether they should go to Ben's or wait.

They sat in Ben's yard underneath a big mahogany tree. The spacious yard had a concrete house in the middle; to the left was a detached kitchen, and between the house and the mahogany tree was a hole in the ground. A plume of smoke wafting the stench of burning feathers billowed from the hole. Six other people sat in the yard. Denzel recognized two of them from his district.

Pauline and her brother, Kenry, were there to find out about their seventy-eight-year-old mother, Clara. Clara had recently been found lying on her veranda foaming at the mouth, unable to walk or talk. The doctor said she had had a stroke, but there was something peculiar about it. Some thought it could be the result of voodoo, or that perhaps Clara had come in contact with a ghost. They weren't taking any chances.

"I hope he's all right," Avis said. "I hope he's all right."

Denzel shared her sentiment about his father who was missing. But at the moment, the smell coming from the hole was nauseating him. Yet he was determined not to be the first to show his disgust of Ben's place. He refrained from covering his nose. Denzel had heard that if you passed bad remarks or did anything insulting while on the premises, Ben's ghosts would follow you home. Just as you turned off the lights and were about to doze off, the ghosts would strangle you. One of Denzel's friends had died that way.

Denzel could tell his mother was tired and impatient. She was crossing one leg over the other and turning her head from side to side as she waited her turn, anxious to know her husband's fate. Dressed in frock and boots, her head tied with a cloth, she had walked two and a half miles to Ben's house.

"What time is it?" Avis asked her son.

“1:01,” Denzel answered, setting his face in a grimace against the smoke and smell. Denzel wore torn khaki pants, a T-shirt, and broken-down sneakers. He was sixteen years old, very active, and had scrambled up Ben’s stony walkway.

Just then Ben’s helper walked by with a live chicken and a machete in her hands. She went to the hole and stopped at an empty basket turned upside down. She put down the machete and lifted up the basket to put the chicken under it. The chicken protested, flapping its wings and squawking as if it knew it was about to die.

The woman held the chicken underneath her left arm, bracing its wings against her side to keep them from flapping. With her right hand she held the chicken’s neck to control its noise, and then maneuvered it under the down-turned basket.

The body of the chicken was now inside, under the basket, and its head was sticking out. She forced the basket down onto the chicken’s neck. She laid the chicken’s head on a wooden plank, holding down the basket with one hand. With the other hand, she picked up the machete. As the chicken squawked, she chopped off its head.

The chicken flopped awkwardly, and blood spurted through the basket holes. The woman put one foot on the basket so she could straighten up to prevent the blood from splashing on her face. When the chicken’s flopping had subsided, she picked it up and held it in the air by its legs so the blood could drain out. While the blood drained, she threw pieces of wood into the hole to feed the fire.

The chicken was white, fully grown, its feathers now discolored by its blood. When it stopped moving altogether, she threw it into the blazing fire. Then she picked up its head and tossed it in too. The flames flared up as she walked away, leaving the blood on the ground undisturbed. The sacrifice was completed.

Denzel — forgetting all he had heard about Ben’s ghosts — suddenly felt an irresistible impulse to cover his nose. He slapped his hands over it, but that didn’t stop the smell of the burning chicken feathers. Smoke coiled through the air. Denzel was even more nauseated than before. He stifled the vomit that rose in his throat.

Pauline and Kenry were inside the house. They were both shocked at hearing what evil had befallen their mother.

Ben began: "There was a frog on your mother's bed, not too long ago."

"Yes." Both Pauline and Kenry remembered. Neither asked him how he knew.

"What happened to it?"

"We tried to kill it, but it jumped and went under the bed, and we lost it."

"It vanished, you mean?"

"Yes."

"It was her husband."

Both Pauline's and Kenry's eyes opened wide. Their father had died thirteen years ago.

Then, as though he knew what they were thinking, Ben said, "Yes, I know. He's dead."

"A long time," Pauline whispered.

"Your father lives under her bed," Ben announced. "He was having sex with your mother."

"What?!" both Pauline and Kenry burst out.

"Yes, that's why she was foaming."

"What a wicked man." Pauline's mouth twisted. "Poor Mama."

"How cruel," Kenry said, looking at Ben.

Ben inquired, "Was she wearing red underwear?"

"No." Pauline looked at him, then at Kenry. "She took them off."

"Your father didn't mean your mother any harm." Ben paused. "He just wanted to have sex. If she doesn't protect herself, he will do it again. Wearing red underwear is a defense against the sexual impulses of the dead."

Ben gave Pauline and Kenry some frankincense to burn. Its fragrance would ward off ghosts. In return, they gave him a small contribution and left the house. Ben wasn't just a palm reader; he had surpassed that. He didn't cast spells. He was an obeah man. He practiced healing by voodoo.

Pauline and Kenry came out of the house and walked to the mahogany tree where Denzel and his mother were sitting. They all came from Aberdeen, a small town where everyone knew each other. So everyone in town would know that Pauline and Kenry had gone to Ben — just as they would know that Avis had gone.

"Avis," Pauline began, "it was papa, he ... he ... molested—"

"He was having sex with mama," Kenry broke in.

It was now Avis's turn to see Ben. Just then, the same helper walked by with a rooster and a machete. She went to the fire to perform another sacrifice. Seeing this, Denzel jumped at his chance to go into the house. He walked hurriedly, with his mother beside him.

"Howdy." Ben looked at them.

"Howdy," they replied.

Ben pointed to a table. He sat at the far end; Avis and Denzel sat near the opposite end, facing each other.

As Denzel sat down, an eerie feeling came over him. The hair on the back of his neck was standing — standing as sharp as needles. He sensed that they were not alone, that omnipotent powers, spirits, were with them.

Candles burned everywhere inside the house. The smells of medicine and ointment were hard in Denzel's nostrils.

"Winston left two days ago for the hills," Avis started, "to look for material to make wicker baskets, and he ain't come back."

"Alone?"

"No, he went with three others, but they came back."

"What did you bring?"

"A shirt." Avis took one of her husband's dirty shirts, smelling of his sweat, from a small bag and handed it to Ben.

Ben spread the shirt over table. He opened a notebook in front of him. He took a pen from his breast pocket and began marking artlessly in the book, quickly moving the pen first up and down, then from side to side. He started to draw a circle in the middle of the paper. Avis and Denzel looked on. Ben continued to draw the circle, bringing the pen around and around. When he'd finished, the circle looked more like an ellipse. He began interpreting images there only he could see.

Ben pointed with the pen to the middle of the ellipse. "There ... there he is," Ben said. "He's not alone."

Avis and Denzel stared at what Ben was pointing at. Though they saw nothing but a marked-up page, Avis took a deep breath of relief. "Thank God."

"His companions appear to him to be his friends and family."

“What companions?”

“Ghosts.”

Avis looked frightened. “Ghosts!?”

“Yes.”

“Winston’s kidnapped by ghosts?”

“Taken. They provide for him,” Ben said. “They’re in the woods about three miles from the road...” He looked from Avis to Denzel, then to his marked-up page, studying the images of Winston, whose whereabouts only he could see. “Other than that, he’s OK ... but wait.”

“What?”

“A coffin. I see a coffin.”

“Winston’s coffin ... but you said he’s –”

“Not his. He’s all right,” Ben said.

Avis sounded exhausted. “All right? ... Ghosts ... And he’s all right?”

“I’ll have him home by morning. He’ll be guided home.”

The next morning the three men who had gone into the hills with Winston came to Avis. Avis and one of her daughters served them tea. Roy, the tallest owned a gun, which he had tucked in his waist. He was a good shot. The second one, Finzie, was a thief. He was short — about five feet — and skinny, with a mole on the left side of his cheek. It was said that through voodoo he was made to steal by someone he had stolen from; he would steal until he was killed for stealing. He had his machete with him. The last, Albert, was of medium height and dark-complexioned, and was known for his

heavy drinking. A strong odor of rum emanated from him. He uncorked a bottle, then sat and drank. His machete leaned beside him. They knew who Ben was — everyone in town did — so they were confident that Winston would come back.

“Ben will guide him with his ghosts, huh?” Albert said.

“Yeah,” Roy said.

They waited until midday. The sun was high. All three sat without saying anything.

“Ben will guide him,” Roy whispered. “Right,” he said aloud.

“Right what?” Finzie asked.

“Nothing.”

It grew hotter. From what Ben had said, Winston should have been home by now.

“We better get going,” Roy said, getting up. The rest followed.

“I’m coming,” Denzel said.

“Naw,” the drunk said, “we’ll take care of it. We’ll find ‘im.”

“You’ve done good so far,” Denzel said as his mother came out of the dilapidated kitchen.

“If you’re coming,” Roy responded, “we better start walking.”

They left to look for Winston. The way to the hills from Avis’s house was through a privately owned grazing field. From there a narrow track skirted the woods, then a steep hill split up into tracks. They turned left, climbing over rocks and broken-down bushes. Albert had his bottle of Jamaican rum. He was walking in front of Denzel, one minute straight, the next staggering.

“Why don’t you give the bottle a rest, eh?” Denzel said. “You’ll be drunk before we even get there.”

Albert straightened up, lifting his feet higher as he walked. It was as if he felt lighter.

They walked through thickets and scrambled over stones, now climbing up, now staggering down, now turning from left to right. They came to a thick and shady forest. The trees stood tall and the leaves were in full green, blocking the sun. A cool breeze came through the branches. Still, here and there, where the trees were sparser, the sun shone through.

As they walked further, there were fewer and fewer standing trees. Those that would have served as a protection against the sun now lay lifeless. Trunks of cut trees had been left to rot. Here, now, the sun was the prevailing force.

“Al!” they called.

All four felt the heat. They walked one behind the other, going around or climbing over the half-rotten tree trunks. The drunk stumbled and fell, then hurriedly got up. Around them, birds sang and trilled. Others tried to make nests by digging with their beaks into dead trees that were still standing. Some dug worms out of rotten wood.

“How much farther do we have to go?” Finzie asked.

“We’ll go another quarter-mile, then circle around,” Roy answered.

Above them, parakeets flying in group formation landed in an oak tree.

“Shhh,” Roy signaled.

Everyone was quiet now. The good shooter crossed his left hand in front of him, to his right. His gun in his right hand, he placed it over his left forearm. He picked out a bird – the easiest target. The parakeet raised up its head, exposing its chest. Taking the opportunity of a clear shot, Roy aimed right below its neck. As Roy’s finger started to

come down on the trigger, the drunk ran in front of him, pushed him aside, and yelled, "Al!" The parakeets disappeared among the trees as quickly as they had come.

"What ... where?" the rest began.

Albert stopped at a tree where everyone would have seen Winston — had he been there.

"He was here ... behind this tree."

"Fool. You're drunk," Denzel exclaimed. "You almost got shot."

"I'm not drunk. I saw 'im."

"You saw him. Where?" the thief asked.

"Yes, alright." Roy said, putting his gun away. They found a narrow track and walked westward, pushing away bushes that were thick on both sides. High above, a hawk circled and screeched.

The track gave way to an open area. There stood a small hut with a straw roof. It leaned to one side and the roof was falling apart.

"Al?" the good shooter called.

Denzel hurried up front. "Papa?"

Roy, not receiving an answer, pointed the thief to the back of the hut. He and Denzel went inside. Empty. They started looking for traces of Winston. Then a sudden pained scream came from behind the hut.

Denzel and Roy ran around to the back. They halted as Albert landed another chop to the ghost's head.

“Jesus! Jesus Christ!” Denzel shouted.

Finzie lay on the grass, covered in his own blood. A piece of his head lay to one side. Upon seeing Roy, the drunk pointed at the thief, the supposed ghost he had just mutilated. Roy pushed aside the drunk and bent over to look at the corpse. Albert was looking at them.

“What the hell ... what did you do?” Roy shouted at him. “What the hell happened?” He turned to look at Denzel, who stood with his whole body rigid.

“Coffin,” Denzel whispered. “Ben saw a coffin.”

Albert came closer to them. He wasn’t afraid. At first he had taken them to be Denzel and Roy, but now, as he looked at them, things became clear: they were ghosts. The drunk lifted his machete in the air, over Roy’s head.

“Look!” Denzel screamed.

Roy spun around, pulling his gun. He saw the blade over his shoulder, and he fired a shot. As the blade cut through Roy’s shoulder, the bullet pierced through Albert’s chest. The drunk fell to his knees, then onto his side. He lay there on the bushes and rocks.

Roy staggered toward a tree, his right shoulder drooping to one side. He used the tree to slowly lower himself to the ground, and then his eyes closed.

The drunk lay on his side, his shirt-front covered with blood; blood filled his mouth.

Then, as if coming to some sudden realization, Denzel started running — running as fast as his feet could carry him. It wasn’t long before he reached his house. Out of breath, his pants and T-shirt sweaty and tattered, his legs scratched and bleeding, he stopped in the yard, bent over with both hands on his thighs, gasping for breath.

His mother and father hurried to him and helped him to the steps where he sat with the sweat running down his face. "Can't we live someplace else?" he asked her. "I don't want to live here anymore."

"There're no place else," his father said. "What happened to the others?"

"They're dead," he said, breathing heavily. And after he told them what had happened, he repeated, "I don't want to live here anymore."