

Israel's Pig

by Guy J. Tirondola

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

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

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

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

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

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

The shack sat on land owned by four generations of Israel's family, Gullah folk, descendents of slaves from Angola, Africa. The land was part of a plantation confiscated by the Union Army in 1861. Ten acres of the plantation were purchased by Israel's great-

grandfather with bonus money he earned by joining up with the Union soldiers. Over the years, most of the land was sold off to pay taxes. Only two acres remained in Israel's possession, two acres that contained patches of corn, tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, cabbage, radishes, and cucumbers.

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

"In a few week de cotton be ready fuh harbest," said Israel. "I can hire on an' mek some money pickin'. Den we can buy food fuh de boy."

"Noah ain' got a few week. Dat be too late fuh 'im."

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

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

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

"I's 'fraid when yo' go dere. If dey catch yo', dey tro yo' in jail. Den what me an' Noah do?"

"Dey can't catch Isril. I's black as de night, quiet as de snake, and swift as de owl." Israel stood with his lean, muscular arms outstretched like an owl's wings. He watched Mina admire his body. A slight smile caused her lips to barely separate. The opening, no thicker than a ribbon, revealed white teeth behind black lips. For a moment, he forgot why he was standing there with his arms in the air.

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

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

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

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

A moan came from the bedroom.

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

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

Israel's destination, Parris Island, was just south of Port Royal Island where Israel lived. A causeway connected them. Parris Island, six miles long and three miles wide, was the home of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot where 7500 recruits were enduring boot camp in their mission to become fighting marines and to defend their nation's honor in Korea.

Like the marines they trained, the base on Parris Island strove to be self-sufficient. It had its own vegetable farm, chicken farm, and hog farm to help feed its many hungry young men.

Israel traveled south on the Beaufort River two miles to the tip of Port Royal Island; crossed the mouth of Battery Creek, which separates Port Royal Island from Parris Island; continued four miles along the coast of Parris Island; and then turned right, into the Broad river, following the southern coast of Parris Island another four miles to the mouth of Edding Creek. Turning into Edding Creek placed Israel on Parris Island proper. His objective was a tributary called Ribbon Creek.

These sea islands were surrounded by marshes. The creeks snaked through the salt marshes like varicose veins. Each creek had a central channel flanked on each side by mud flats where tall cord

grass grew. The mud flats were exposed at low tide only. At high tide, the water reached to the creek bank at the edge of the island and left only the tips of the cord grass uncovered.

On Ribbon Creek, Israel cut the engine and started rowing. With the tide in, he was able to follow close to the bank. He passed behind the rifle range which was dead quiet. Israel was confident there'd be no recruits training. It was Sunday, their day off, and it was close to midnight. The recruits had to be in bed by 10 P.M. when the bugler blew taps.

Around a bend, the Wake Boulevard Bridge came into sight. It spanned the salt marsh that bisected the island. The hog farm was on the other side of this overpass.

The bridge was illuminated by street lamps on either end, and Israel was surprised to see men marching across it. He approached slowly and quietly. He would pass under when the men were gone.

As he sat and watched, he realized it was a platoon, seventy-five troops fully outfitted with all their gear. The faces of the young men were still swollen with sleep, and their heads were dripping with sweat from the oppressive, humid air that relinquished almost none of the day's heat.

A drill instructor stood at the center of the bridge, yelling at the recruits as they passed by. He wore khaki trousers, a sleeveless white T-shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat tilted forward to the bridge of his nose. His arms were muscular and covered with tattoos, the most prominent of which was the Marine insignia, an anchor-pierced globe below an eagle, on his right shoulder. The frame of his body was angled forward, unnaturally. Israel wondered what kept the sergeant from falling on his face.

"Keep it movin', ladies!" the sergeant screamed. "I'll teach you bastards not to let me down! You're the lowest scoring platoon in A-Company! You bunch of pansy-assed girlie-boys are not gonna jeopardize my promotion to staff sergeant! Poor performance will be rewarded with punishment! So, get yer minds right, ladies! It's all about motivation! You *will* make me look good, or you *will* die tryin'!"

Before the last recruit was off the bridge, Israel passed under it. He had to move quickly. The platoon was headed for the rifle range. If they started shooting, it would wake the pigs.

The hog farm was fenced in on three sides. The creek bank served as its back border. Israel tied off his boat, took his sledgehammer, and, staying low to the ground, surveyed the surroundings.

The barn was a large Quonset hut. Due to the heat, the pigs were sleeping outside in the cool mud, as Israel expected. They were scattered about the yard. He selected a pig that was sleeping alone and wasn't too large to carry. Before he made his downwind approach to the pig, he noticed that the lights were on in the barn. The farmers were not asleep, and Israel was afraid they might come out at the wrong moment. He had to investigate.

Israel crept to the side of the Quonset hut and peered in an open window. Two men were playing cards. Israel guessed they were too hot to sleep.

"What's with the night maneuvers?" said the short, pudgy man with brown hair, before he spit a cheek-full of tobacco juice on the hay-covered floor.

"Dunno," the other man said. He was lean, with sandy hair and a blank expression. "First time I seen that in the twenty years I been here."

"Maybe the noise will keep the gators away," the pudgy man said.

"What gators?"

"We been losin' a pig every month for the past few months. They think gators are takin' 'em. That's why the base commander ordered the hog farm be moved across the road, away from the river. We'll be next to your chicken farm, all fenced in."

Israel's heart sunk. This would be his last pig. He decided to take a larger pig, even if he strained his back carrying it.

The night was dark, but light from the window and from distant street lamps enabled Israel to select just the right pig. As he moved without sound, he remembered telling Mina he was quiet as a snake. He strained against a smile. It was time to focus. The pig

was snoring as Israel got within striking distance. He raised the sledgehammer. His blow was perfect, square in the center of the pig's skull. The bone shattered with a sound that reminded him of dry twigs cracking underfoot as he walked through the woods. The pig's body stiffened, shook with tremors, then was still.

Israel dragged the pig by his two front legs to the edge of the creek. The pig was almost too heavy to handle, and he barely got it in the boat.

His small rowboat sat low in the water as he rowed out with his prize. The rowing was harder and he was thankful the tide was starting to go out.

He made it under the bridge and around the bend undetected. As he approached the rifle range, he heard a commotion up ahead. He strained to see by starlight, and couldn't believe what he saw.

The platoon did not go to the rifle range. They were behind the rifle range. They had entered Ribbon Creek in a two-man wide column, walking parallel to the edge of the creek bank. The water was three feet above the mud flats. The recruits, wearing fifty-pound rucksacks, were sinking two feet into the mud. They struggled to move forward with water up to their necks and rifles held high over their heads. In the dark, in the confusion, some of the young men wandered too close to the channel. Their feet slid down the channel slope and they went under.

Israel heard recruits crying out for help, trying to keep their heads above water. Some men removed their rucksacks and swam out to help the others, only to be pulled under by their drowning friends, panicked for lack of breath. He heard the drill instructor ordering everyone ashore. He heard men grunting as they strained to free their legs from the mud. He heard the water-muffled screams of men drowning.

Israel was frozen, not knowing what to do. Should he try to help? What about the pig? Would they throw him in jail?

Before he could figure it out, the noise subsided. The living reached safety and the dying were dead. He sat in his rowboat trying to make sense of what happened, when bubbles gurgled to

the surface beside his boat. He stuck his arm straight down into the water and felt the top of a recruit's head. Israel pulled the recruit up by the top of his rucksack. The boat could not stay afloat with the added weight of another body. Israel held the unconscious recruit's head out of water with one hand while he tried to get the pig overboard with his other hand. He skillfully used an oar as a lever and the side of the boat as a fulcrum to roll the pig into the water. Israel then pulled the recruit into the boat, removed his rucksack, placed him face down and squeezed water out of his lungs, turned him on his back, blew air into his lungs, turned him over again, squeezed the water out, over and over, all the while keeping an eye on his pig floating alongside the boat, gently moving downstream together as the tide began to turn.

Finally, exhausted, Israel sat up. The young man was dead, and Israel lost sight of his pig. Israel rowed to a sandbar in the middle of the channel. He left the body on the sandbar so that it would be spotted in the morning. Israel rowed hard downstream searching for his pig. He made a zigzag pattern in the water, but it was too dark to see beyond a short distance from the boat. He became frantic. In spite of the danger of being heard, he started the engine. To cover more area, he maneuvered the boat in widening circles. To no avail.

Israel's low supply of gas forced him to begin the trip home. Crossing the stretch of water between Parris Island and Port Royal Island, he saw three ambulances from the Naval Hospital in Beaufort speeding across the causeway.

He thought of his pig. He thought of that sweet, pink flesh drifting away to become fish food.

Wasted.

He thought of the dead recruits.

Wasted.

He thought of Noah.

Israel began to cry. He cried for Noah, and for the dead marines, and for losing the pig.

The return trip up the Beaufort River was a struggle. A head breeze had raised a chop on the water. Israel strained to see through tears mixed with water splashing off the bow. He couldn't see the shoreline. He slowed the engine and navigated closer to the riverbank, risking collision with a sandbar. When at last Israel reached his landing, he tied off the boat and collapsed on the landing deck. Almost too weary to move, he roused himself to make the walk home through the woods.

No pig. Mina would be crushed.

Israel approached his front door in total silence, his instinct for stealth functioning even in grief. He found Mina at the kitchen table, praying.

"Praise Jedus!" she cried as she ran to embrace him. "Home safe. De base police an' de haints can't catch my man."

Israel's arms remained at his side.

"What de matter? What dat in yo hand?" Mina asked.

He tossed the rucksack to the corner of the room. "It's what left of a dead marine."

Mina began to shake. "No ... Lawd ... no, no. Yo' kilt a man?" She fell to her knees.

Israel caught her before she slumped completely to the floor. He helped Mina to a chair at the table. He knelt before her and held Mina's face in his hands.

"No, darlin', I's kilt no man. Dere been a terrible accident at de base. I try tuh save a man from drownin', but all I could rescue was dat wuthless pack. An' ... I lost ... de pig."

Mina wept softly as Israel related the horrors of the evening.

"Somebody mek a big mistake," Israel explained. "I dunno why those men be in de water. Somebody mek a big mistake."

"Po' Noah," Mina sighed. "My po' baby. I tell 'im he'd hab a belly full of pork ribs tomorrow. It mek him stop cryin' an' fall asleep."

Israel grew angry. "I'll rob de Piggly Wiggly if I hab tuh," he said, standing to his feet. "My child won't suffer hunger one mo' day," he proclaimed as he turned toward the door.

Mina grabbed his arm. "Don't be foolish. The Lawd be providin'."

"De *Lawd*? Where be de *Lawd* when those drownin' men be chokin' out dere las' breath?"

"Now yo' be talkin' crazy. Come. Yo' tired. Let's go tuh bed. Tomorrow we tink clear."

They quietly prepared for bed, careful not to wake Noah, asleep in his bed across from theirs.

Israel couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned from heat, frustration, and the images in his mind.

The sunrise wakened Noah. Israel saw him get up and go into the kitchen. Israel's heart sunk with the knowledge that his son was probably looking for breakfast. Israel closed his eyes and prayed for sleep. His mind began to succumb to exhaustion. He drifted from consciousness.

An unfamiliar rustling and clattering coming from the kitchen pulled Israel back from the brink of blissful oblivion.

"Mina," he said, shaking her awake, "go see what dat boy git intuh. I's tryin' tuh sleep."

Mina sat up, placed her feet in her slippers, stood to straighten her night dress, and shuffled into the kitchen.

After some moments, Mina bounded back into the bedroom. "Come! Come an' see de *Lawd*'s wuk!" she exclaimed as she pulled Israel's legs to the edge of the bed, then grabbed his arms to help him up.

"Papa, see de castle I mek," Noah called from the kitchen.

"Not jus' yet, boy," Israel replied. "Yo Mama need me."

Israel staggered into the kitchen rubbing his tired eyes, trying to focus. On the kitchen floor, Noah had fashioned a wall from stacked cans of spiced ham. The rucksack was open, its contents were spilled across the floor.

"What all dis?" Israel asked.

"Gawd's provision," said Mina. "Dat pack yo' rescued? It be full of food!"

Israel was confused. He picked some items off the floor, a can, a package, a box, and examined them. He gathered the booty and placed it on the table. There were five waterproof cartons made of

waxed cardboard, three still unopened by Noah. The cartons were marked *K-rations*. Israel understood. "Dis be fibe days of food!" He continued his accounting. He discovered powdered eggs, hardtack biscuits, rock-hard chocolate, powdered coffee, bouillon, sugar, cigarettes, gum, fruit bars, and more.

Mina wondered. "Dat be lots a food fuh one man."

"Not if yo' be a fightin' marine," Israel said. "Dem boys can eat!"

"I 'spect little Noah could eat off dis fuh weeks. 'Til de cotton harbest," said Mina.

"I 'spect he can." Israel barely got the words out. He turned his face to blink away the tears, ashamed to show weakness.

"Papa? Don't yo' like my castle, Papa?" Noah asked.

Israel picked Noah up, spun him around, and kissed him hard on the forehead. "I love yo' castle, son." Israel took the can of spiced ham from Noah's hand, held it out to Mina, and said, "My boy gittin' pig today after all."

The dead young man whom Israel left on the sandbar would not be found the next day, nor for several days after. Israel had miscalculated. As the outgoing tide had reached its peak, the swift current shifted the sandbar and the body was washed away.

On Thursday, the captain of a shrimp boat found the recruit's body tangled in his shrimp net, along with what remained of Israel's pig.

