

Night Birds in Migration
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“Auntie, tell us the quilt story again. Please, please Auntie. The one about baby John!” We kids would corner Aunt Beulah in the kitchen, pestering her to tell us the story she had repeated every time we cousins came to Harlem to visit. We would jockey for room around her feet, elbowing each other to get the best space to rest our backs against while she shelled peas for supper. We never got tired of this story. It had villains, scary dogs, and the hero was our great-grandfather who was just a baby. We loved that he was a kid like us.

It is very rare that a Black family has even a thread of a story about the days of slavery. These threads are tattered and worn - fragmented, like the lives of our ancestors. This isn't surprising when a people have suffered a diaspora and a great migration. Their stories get left behind - scattered crumbs. We survivors are starved for our ancestral stories; any crumbs would do.

A few lucky Black families have a tale that has been handed down from generation to generation, like a well guarded artifact that has been chipped, cracked, or developed fault lines that we tenderly finger as we wonder about the origin and design of the original. Can we even dare to imagine the hard lived experience of our courageous ancestors?

Because ours has been a religious family for so many generations, our great-great aunts, great-grandparents, and distant second and third cousins, by candle-light and then bare light bulbs in dim cabins, captured the tattered threads of our narrative family and wrote them down in old bibles. When the bibles themselves became threadbare, some elder would carefully re-copy the names and birth, marriage, and death dates that had been copied a generation before into their new bibles. In the earlier days, having no pen or ink available to them, those noble ghosts of the southern past used whatever dark juice was available, like pressed blackberries as ink. They dipped pointed sticks into the mélange to scrawl out characters of the alphabet. In the 1860's none of my ancestors could read and must have wondered at the shapes they copied: the curve of the 'C' of Clara or the angles of the 'W' for Wyatt.

I am fortunate to have held the bible that my great aunt Beulah tended. As a child, I repeatedly heard the story that was central to our familial identity, the slave escape story that was embossed on our family soul. It was a narrative that shaped our family will, perseverance, and identity. When my great aunt re-told the tale from her Harlem apartment, I would reach for her bible and read the names of my ancestors as Auntie's story unfolded. I would run my hand down the stained Bible page entitled 'Births, Marriages, and Deaths,' searching for the people Auntie spoke of. My fingers would gently alight over their names, as though the mere touch might open a dimensional door to the past. In my imagination my forebearers became alive and I followed alongside them at that very moment, when my ancestors ran into the woods with the Overseer's dog close on their tracks.

My auntie's voice would drop down to a reverential level as she intoned their mythic journey:

"Now your great-great granddaddy Wyatt was an ambitious man. He wasn't but 20 when he proved his self a very capable blacksmith." I swung my finger down the page to find his name, Wyatt b. 1830. Being an imaginative child, I could see his brown arms sweating with soot from the smithing fires, and could smell the straw, dung, and acrid horse piss of the corrals.

"When the Masta passed over, ole Wyatt had an idea. He went to the Misses and said, 'Misses, here is what I think. Yo' need money to run this place, an' I need money to buy my freedom. I'll go out and 'smith fo folks in the county and I'll split what I git paid. Haf goes to you direct, the other haf gets put down in yo' books to buy me my freedom.' Wyatt had a charmed way a speakin' – both appeasing like but also firm. 'parently the Misses, she liked his proposal, and in four years he was a Freedman. But, in the meantime, he found hisself a wife."

My index finger moved down a line. Wyatt m. Clara, 1861.

"So he went back to the Misses and said, 'Misses, you know I am an honest man an' a hard worker. You've seen what I done. I done paid my way and gave you providings. So, now I have another idea for yo'. I want to continue to 'smith the same as before, but this time, I wanna buy my wife from you.'

“Now, this Misses was smart ‘cause she knew that Wyatt had provided lots of money to support her family business when her husband passed. Their business was an Indigo plantation. Indigo was used as blue dye. It would turn cloth a warm, deep blue. So ‘course she said ‘yes’. By this time the Great War between the North and South had started and business was good for the Plantation, producing indigo to color the local cotton. It was great for Wyatt as well. He was goin’ everywhere ‘smithing for everybody. And so Wyatt only had to work another three years to pay for his wife. Same as before, every job was haf for the plantation, and the other haf to the Misses for Clara.”

Being the granddaughter of Bishop Bell, whenever I came to Virginia, I had go to Sunday school in the basement of his Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Having heard this story several times before, I knew the trouble ahead for Wyatt. It was like the Sunday school story of Job. I felt so sorry for poor Job. He was a righteous man whose belief persevered in spite of the travails that befell him. Now poor Wyatt was to get God’s attention too, God’s curious and ambiguous testing of love from His children. Clara got pregnant and the Misses said, “Now listen here. You done paid for your wife, but not for the child coming. I got a legal right to that child. If you want it, you gotta work it off for another two years.”

I could imagine that Wyatt and Clara were both heartbroken and astounded. And it wasn’t just them either. All the slaves on the plantation spoke about this injustice, whispering while stirring the large vats of indigo leaves, or talking outright to each other at dusk over supper.

Everybody was agitated; Auntie Beulah would say, “like having a tick under yo’ collar”. How was it that a Freedwoman didn’t own her own baby in her own belly? Groups of women would rail against the Misses at the well as they pumped the water for the indigo baths. The backs of their hands a sweaty-shiny brown while their palms shown a curious blue. They all thought it just wasn’t right. Every slave knew there was no such thing as fair in those days, but they knew in their bones there was such a thing as right! Their agitation led to a brewing secret rebellion.

Every slave, to a person no matter man or woman, admired Wyatt. No one had ever heard of a freed slave buying his wife! And even further, he could have gotten out and gone up North as a Freedman, but he stayed another three years for the love of Clara. They admired his character, which made

the Misses' decision, a professed devout Christian, even more spiteful. Seeing her terrible treatment of Wyatt and Clara made them realize how they themselves were similarly controlled. It was a mirror of their own oppression that could not be dismissed or argued away that she was, 'just a crazy ole White women'. That this so-called Christian could treat a charitable man of faith this way was the moment of their awakening. Derision for the Misses spread like lice in straw beds. They would not take this for their brother Wyatt. They would not take this for themselves. Wyatt and Clara and many of the slaves planned an escape; but circumstances weren't favorable until after Clara was delivered of her baby: John Henry b. 1864.

Auntie continued, "Now the Misses daughter, she also had a baby 'round about the same time and poor Clara had to take care a that baby 'fore she could take care a John Henry. Lord the Misses' daughter was a terror! If she didn't like something, she would holler and put on so bad she'd scare the chickens outta laying eggs!

"The group had planned on leaving at the next dark of the moon, but the Misses' grandbaby was taken with the colic, and poor Clara had to sit up all night with the child. The next morning, the Misses' daughter was so cranky with the baby's crying all the time, she threw her cup of boiling tea at Clara! Even though Clara ran and put on a thick coat a lard, her arm was raw and blistered for a week and bandaged for another. So the plan to leave at the new moon was pushed back for two weeks. And that was unfortunate. All this delay meant the moon would be full and even more dangerous for their escape.

"An' so the day to leave came. One of the women put up the signal quilt – the Drinking Gourd on the clothesline. It was actually the stars of the Big Dipper, you know, the constellation that looks like a ladle? Well, it was all a secret code that showed the North Star falling out of the Dipper end. If you kept walking toward the Drinking Gourd you'd be heading toward the north. Many Black folk knew that and kept it secret from the Whites. No one paid no never mind when it came to hanging washing. The Misses never came to the cabins anyway, and the Overseer didn't know from quilts. Makes me laugh! He sees Black women sewing together and has no idea they was planning their escape. And right under his eyes! Lord have mercy, that makes me laugh!" Auntie took a moment to enjoy herself. I loved seeing

her smooth brown cheeks pull up towards her ears, the smile also danced in her shiny eyes like she was looking at something in the distance.

Her voice now at a whisper, she leaned towards us cousins and rasped, “But that was the same night that a group a Union soldiers was rumored to be in the area...” Her voice trailed off ominously.

I remember the rest of the story by heart: When it looked like everyone in the plantation house was asleep, Wyatt, Clara, baby John, who was swaddled in a cloth of deep blue, and many others came from their cabins and met in the woods by the indigo field. The moon was bright but the shadows were long because it was late. They all hugged each other, and breathed a sigh of relief, as they believed they had escaped detection. Onwards they crept into the woods keeping to the shadows. They had one eye toward the heavens and the other to the ground so as not to step on a stick and make noise. The band relaxed a little more, the tension leaving their shoulders that carried a few clothes, some food and water for their journey. They thought they were safe. It was about an hour later they first heard the dogs and then the shouts of the Overseer and his men tracking them down.

The escapees were scared to death, knowing what would happen to them if they were caught. And to make it worse, baby John started crying; he must have felt his mother’s fear. Clara hugged him close to her breast to make him stop as they ran through the dark underbrush.

Someone saw a large fallen tree and the group headed for it to hide beneath the shadowed branches. Each of them stooped down low and covered themselves from the moonlight. You could smell their fear! Wyatt lay next to Clara and squeezed her arm, his eyes begging her to stop the baby from making any noise. Clara held her hand over baby John’s mouth praying that he would stop whimpering. Praying that she didn’t suffocate him. She could hear the Overseer and the dogs close by.

Just then moonlight broke through the canopy and highlighted them in their hiding place, Clara looked up and saw the Overseer’s face through the foliage. Her body shook violently and baby John cried out. The man above her looked startled, reeled backwards, turned and abruptly ran towards the others. “Git out, git out!” he yelled. “There are Blues all over here! Run from the Yankees!” The Overseer, the men, and their shadows raced away. They were absorbed by the forest.

After a few agonizing minutes, the escapees slowly moved out from their hiding place. What had just happened? They didn't have time to make sense of it right then. The only thing on their mind was to forge ahead through the night as fast and as far as they could. They made use of the remaining moonlight to guide them through the woods. They stopped as the sun was rising, gathered in a circle, ate some food, and Wyatt led them in a prayer of thanksgiving. The Lord could be harsh and the Lord could be merciful. They thanked Him for this moment of mercy. After considerable discussion, the only thing that made sense to the band of runaways was that when the moon cast light on John's indigo blue swaddling at the same moment that he let out a cry, the Overseer must have thought he was a Union soldier lying in wait for their posse. Figuring they might be outnumbered, they high-tailed it outta there! Baby John had saved them. They walked with wonder the rest of the way north and west to Union held Memphis, Tennessee, retelling the story with pride and esteem at their own audacity. Sometimes God seemed against you and sometimes His acts caught you by surprise. They felt they were in the Lord's favor for their courage to leave the Misses' unchristian household.

And so this bright heroic story became a patch in the quilt of our family narrative. Baby John led us to the Promised Land. Wyatt had the patience of Job and was finally rewarded. The theme that became the connecting cross-stitch over other patches of our family narrative was what Granddad called "a Purposeful Life"- the personal strength, perseverance, and integrity of our ancestors to which many of us progeny have aspired. Baby John, with the weight of his history of leading his people to freedom, became an itinerant minister in Tennessee, little knowing that in the future, his son, grandson, and great-grandson would each met with a different U.S. President to advance human rights: Bishop Bell with Truman, Bill Bell with Kennedy, and Carl Bell with Clinton.

John's son, my grandfather Bishop Bell, also chose the ministry to enact his social justice vision, becoming one of the first Black men to get a Ph.D. from Yale in 1924. I followed in their ministerial and social justice footsteps, becoming ordained in 1996, and earning a Ph.D. in 2000, working for global justice – a hundred and thirty six years after God smiled on our 'Purposeful' family.

It was sometime later that I learned that quilts played a large part in the Underground Railroad. It wasn't just our family symbol. Courageous enslaved women would hang the Drinking Gourd quilt on the clothesline as a signal that that night a migration of black birds would fly north. These brave brothers and sisters would pack their lives on their backs, cradle their children to their breasts, and march together through the fields and dark forests as they sang the ley-line song to freedom:

Follow the drinking gourd,
Follow the drinking gourd
For the old man is awaitin'
For to carry you to freedom,
Follow the drinking gourd.

Now the riverbank makes a mighty good road,
The dead trees will show you the way.
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,
Follow the drinking gourd.

Follow the drinking gourd,
Follow the drinking gourd
For the old man is awaitin'
For to carry you to freedom,
Follow the drinking gourd.

Now the river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd.
There's another river on the other side,
Follow the drinking gourd.

Follow the drinking gourd,
Follow the drinking gourd
For the old man is awaitin'
For to carry you to freedom,
Follow the drinking gourd.