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The Secret Place

The hem of her linsey-woolsey dress dragged in the dust, but Delphine didn't notice. She squatted on the cold hearthstone tracing images in the ashes. She was so absorbed in the task that she barely heard a knocking at the door. It was only when her father went to answer it, that Delphine looked up to see who the visitor was.

Papa welcomed his friend into the cabin. As always, they greeted each other in a tight embrace. Both men were handsome in different ways. Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable was sand-colored and wiry, François Thiam earth-dark and barrel chested. Jean strode across the room to tug Delphine's pigtail.

"A pleasant good evening to you, Mademoiselle Thiam," he said in English. One of the few at Shikaakwa who spoke the language, Monsieur Jean had been teaching Delphine to read and write in English, "for one can never have too many tongues in her mouth." Jean himself spoke several, including some Native dialects. He said their village name meant "stink onions."

Delphine scrambled to her feet and dipped into a courtesy. "Good evening to you too, *Oncle Jean*." She always called him uncle, though they were not related by blood. She was preparing to offer the firm handshake Uncle Jean had taught her to use when Maman came rushing from the kitchen, wiping fingers on her apron.

“Delphine Thiam, mind your hands!” Rosalie turned to their visitor. “Please forgive her, monsieur. Always playing in dirt, this one.”

“Sorry, *Maman*,” Delphine bowed her head. “Sorry, Uncle.”

“No need for apology,” Jean reassured her, “for artists aren’t generally known to be tidy.”

“Artists?” Maman scoffed. “Will art finish this one’s chores or bring her a husband when the time is ready? Better she should learn sewing, embroidery, needlepoint. That’s all the art a girl needs.”

Uncle Jean crouched to examine the images drawn in ash. “Are these rabbits, Delphine?”

“*Mais oui*,” she nodded proudly, then remembered to speak English. “Why, yes, Uncle Jean. A family of rabbits, they are mother, father and baby.”

“Finger drawing is a place to begin, but a serious artist needs tools.” Jean removed a buckskin pouch from his pocket. “My wife Kittihawa made these for you.”

“*C’est vrai?*” Delphine exclaimed. “She made them from what?”

“Berries, fruit skins, tea leaves, charcoal, and a pinch of Potawatomi magic,” he winked.

“Magic!” Rosalie gasped. “Surely you jest, monsieur.”

Before Papa purchased her freedom, Maman had served a Québec City order of Augustine nuns. Unlike her husband who prayed to Allah, Rosalie was a strict Roman Catholic. She barely tolerated François’ practice of Islam and flinched at any talk of witchcraft.

“By your leave, Madam Thiam,” Jean gave a little bow. “Please forgive me, for I am known to be a tease. You see, this is no witch’s wand, just boar’s bristle tied onto twig for a child’s paintbrush. She may practice her work on these sheets of birchbark. In the next parcel from Québec, there’ll be proper paints and canvases.”

“You are too kind,” her mother told him. “Thank monsieur for the gifts, Delphine, and offer regards for Madam DuSable. Then leave the parlor so your father can visit with his guest.”

It was an exaggeration to call that corner a parlor. The horsehair settee and wooden bureau grouped around the fireplace lay opposite the kitchen. While her mother finished preparing dinner, Delphine quietly unpacked her new art supplies and eavesdropped on the men’s talk.

“You are ready for the trading expedition to Kokomo?” Uncle Jean asked. “We leave tomorrow at first light.”

“Kokomo? Since when did the Miami camp so far from their hunting grounds?”

“Ah, but Kokomo was once a Miami village, before the warring Yankees, British, and Ottawa came. Among them all, it is the Yankee that I fear most.”

Delphine had heard of the wars raging among English rebels, the British and some of the Native tribes. She knew of a few English that had recently settled in their village. Some of them were gentlemen, others outright louts. Delphine couldn’t tell if they were British or Yankee, for all English speakers seemed the same to her. Yet as wealthy and powerful as Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable was, she couldn’t understand why he would fear any man.

“They do not respect me though I am headman here.” Jean almost seemed to answer her unspoken question. “They look at a Black man and only see a slave. It was the British that accused me of being a spy for the Yankees. They seized my land in Michigan and sent me off to prison.”

“The rogues!” her father exclaimed. “I never knew about this treachery.”

“*Écoute-moi bien!* Mark my words, François. Once the war with their British masters is done, the rebels will be moving westward. Life will surely change for us here in Shikaakwa.”

“What do they want from us, Jean?”

“Land, beaver skins, power. However acquisitive, Yankees are an enterprising lot. They have built great cities, yes? Boston, New York, Philadelphia. Surely you know of them.”

“None finer than Québec City,” her father insisted, proud of the place that had once held him captive.

“Oh, much greater, François. Huge, stone buildings. Fancy horse carriages driving brick paved roads. Gas lights that make night seem like day. In time they’ll be here in great numbers, bringing with them all their greed and enterprise.”

“Shikaakwa will be a much different place, for the better or the worse.”

“Only time will tell, my friend.”

Rosalie called her daughter to help set the table. With the clinking of cutlery and clack of crockery, Delphine could no longer overhear the men’s conversation.

“When will Papa and Uncle Jean be back from Kokomo?” Delphine yawned.

“Do not worry. They will return before you know it.” Maman tucked the coverlet around her daughter. “Now sleep, *mon enfant*.”

As soon as her mother left her, Delphine threw off the bedclothes. The late May weather was unseasonably warm. She took a charcoal stick from the buckskin pouch she had brought into bed with her. By the crescent moonlight slanting through the curtains, she sketched onto the wall the figure of a deer nibbling a bough of flowering dogwood.

Delphine flinched at a noise outside the cabin, perhaps a cone falling from the pine tree. Then a sudden flash of green light obscured the waxing moonlight. She giggled with delight to see her charcoal drawing come to life. The deer wiggled its nose and twitched its tail before

scampering across the wall. The image seemed to draw her toward it like a sinkhole. Delphine was reaching out to touch it when a furious pounding rattled the cabin door.

“Open up in there, I say,” an English voice demanded, “or I’ll break this door apart.”

Maman rushed to her daughter’s bedside, a lighted candle in her hand. “*Dépêche toi, Delphine!* Hurry to the secret place and stay until I say so. Do not make a sound.”

With the pouch clasped to her chest, Delphine scampered into the parlor. There was no light at that end of the room, so she felt her way across the beadboard wall. Finding a loose panel, she pulled it aside, eased herself into a space behind it, and slid it shut. Hidden in the secret place, she heard the noise of bursting wood, boots thundering across the floor, her mother’s scream, a man’s shout.

“Where is the store of animal skins? Your husband is a fur trader, I know you have them here.”

Delphine recognized the voice. It belonged to one of English-speakers she knew as Thomason, the night watchman.

“*S’il vous plaît,*” Rosalie whimpered. “*Je ne parle pas anglais, monsieur.*”

It was true. Her mother spoke not a single word of English, so she had no way of knowing what Thomason demanded of her. Sobbing into her left fist, Delphine fished out a charcoal stick with her right. *Huge, stone buildings. Fancy carriages driving paved roads. Gas lights that make night seem like day.*

Furiously, impetuously, she began to sketch. She heard something breaking out in the parlor, a teacup or a plate perhaps. Footsteps pounded closer. The image on the floor shimmered and Delphine tentatively touched it. A flashing green light seemed to suck her in.

The ground below her was hard and solid, like so many gray pebbles fused together.

Delphine found herself in a paved courtyard surrounded by mountain-sized buildings. Who could have made such houses? How did they even remain standing? She saw no horses, no fine carriages on the wide, empty road that fronted the courtyard. What she did see were words carved onto buildings and printed on signs. She sounded them out like Uncle Jean had taught her. *Pioneer Court. Chicago Tribune. Equitable Life Insurance.* Behind a wall of glass, an image of an apple with a bite taken out was lit up like the moon.

Delphine saw something in the shadows of the courtyard that frightened her, a tall man perched on one thick leg. He didn't seem able to move so she cautiously edged closer. Delphine saw that it wasn't a man at all, but a bust set atop a stone column. She read the sign beneath it.

*Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, 1745-1818, founder of Chicago
African-Caribbean, born in St. Marc, Haiti*

She stared at the face frozen in bronze. Yes, the man did look somewhat like her parent's friend, although his brow was too high and his nose too short. The man she knew as Uncle Jean had sharper cheekbones and smaller eyes.

But how could he have died in 1818 when this was only the year of our Lord, 1779? Was *Chicago* the same place as Shikaakwa? And why did these words say he was born in Haiti? As far as Delphine knew, Uncle Jean came from the Province of Québec, the same as her parents. Well, the same as her mother. Her father had told her that before being enslaved in Québec City, he was born into the blacksmith's clan in the Kingdom of Cayor.

“I bested the White man by working ten times as hard,” he was proud to say. François hired out his labor as a blacksmith, paying the slaveowner the lion’s share of his wages and keeping a pittance for himself. It had taken François 12 years to earn enough to buy his wife’s freedom, for he wanted any children from their union to be born free. Another eight years later he finally bought his own.

A rumbling noise tore her attention from DuSable’s bust. It was like a roll of thunder echoing in the distance, growing louder as it advanced. Yet this was a thunder with voices in it.

A large group of people came marching across a bridge and down the middle of a road whose sign read “Michigan Avenue.” They were oddly dressed, some of the women wearing trousers like men. The crowd shouted words she could barely make out. Yet she could read the signs they carried. *No justice, no peace! I can’t breathe. George Floyd’s Life Mattered.*

She sounded out the words and struggled to make meaning of them. Were these the Yankees Uncle Jean warned were coming? The crowd she saw was mostly *des jeunes noirs*, though there were older people and different kinds of Whites among them too.

Around that group of Blacks and Whites, another set of men wove and darted, shaking their fists and hooting at them. It was easy to see they were taunting the young marchers.

Delphine heard a rumble from the other direction, the stomp of marching feet. She turned to see a group from the opposite end of the road approaching in military formation. They were men and women in identical blue clothing carrying sharp weapons and see-through shields.

One voice was magnified by the large cone he carried. “This is an illegal gathering. You are not allowed to advance beyond this point. You must disperse. I repeat, you must disperse.”

Delphine could differentiate the groups by their signs, their weapons, their manner. Could these be the warring Yankees and British? Delphine watched, frightened and fascinated as the groups drew closer. It seemed to her a war horrible dance about to explode in bloodshed.

A woman came hurrying from one of the buildings. She passed Delphine crouched beside DuSable's bust. "What you doing out here, child? Go on home. It's not safe in these streets."

"I know," Delphine told her, "but home is also bad."

"Out here is worse." The woman touched the girl's forehead like she was testing for a fever or giving a benediction. Then she shook her head, clicked her teeth, and walked away.

"Ain't no time for all this. Got my own kids at home to worry about."

Delphine took a charcoal stick from the pouch and began drawing on the hard ground beneath her.

"Hey, look at that one." One ruffian in a Tartan plaid shirt pointed her out. "Defacing public property."

His companion grabbed his arm. "Forget it, man. That's a kid."

"Put 'em in their place when they're young, you won't have to worry when they're grown. That little nigger needs a lesson." The man in the plaid shirt broke away from his friend. "And I'm just the one to teach it."

Delphine finished her sketch as the man raced toward her. In a flash of green light the mountainous buildings, the hard gray, ground and the man loping toward her all vanished.

Back inside the secret place, the nightmare hadn't ended. Delphine still heard the shouting and the weeping, the sound of things being broken. She covered her eyes and wept anew. Then she saw through her fingers that her charcoal drawing on the floor still pulsed with green light.

Delphine crept into the kitchen where her mother sat cowering in a chair. Thomason was using a long, wooden lacrosse stick to ransack their home, yanking rugs and prying up the floorboards, rummaging through bureau drawers. Maman stood suddenly and mouthed the word, “*retourne!*” but Delphine shook her head.

“Pardon me, please.” She approached the man from behind, tugging at his sleeve. Thomason whirled to face her, the lacrosse stick upraised in an undelivered blow.

“We have many furs,” Delphine pointed across the room, “in the secret place.”

Thomason grabbed her arm and dragged her to the wall. “Show me at once. God help you if you’re lying.”

When Delphine pulled the panel aside, he frowned at it suspiciously.

“They are all inside,” she lied. “I’ve seen them there myself.”

“What, behind the wall?”

“It’s our special hiding place.”

The man elbowed her aside, dropped to his knees and thrust his upper body into the crawl space. Delphine heard the wood splinter as he tried to force his way inside.

“I don’t see any...What in God’s name!” A mist of green light leaked from the space, partially obscured by Thomason’s thick body. Then he was sucked into the secret place, splinters from the lacrosse stick flying back into the room. The cracked beadboard panel swung crookedly into place.

Delphine rushed over to her mother, reassuring her that the man was gone.

“*Es-tu sûre?*” Maman whispered, wiping tears against the sleeve of her nightdress.

“What if he returns?”

Delphine went back to the crawlspace, crept inside and rubbed away the image she had drawn there. Then she called across the room. “He will not return, Maman. I am sure of it.”

Thomason Cutler stood stunned within a valley of tall, gray buildings. He gazed around him at the bright streetlights, the broad boulevard, the crowds of milling people.

A man in a plaid shirt dashed past him, slapping a long wooden club against his palm. A short distance away, people gathered around a body lying prone on the ground.

“What happened?” a woman asked. “Who did this to you?”

“Baseball bat.” The young man pointed weakly. “He ran off.”

The crowd’s eyes turned toward Thomason. He dropped the cracked lacrosse stick and began to back away. “Please, I am innocent. I swear it!”

“Somebody get him on video!” one of them shouted. They converged upon him, whipping out objects that shone bright lights into his face.

Thomason turned and took off running into the bleak landscape he convinced himself was Hell.