

THE UNIQUE QUALITIES *of a Black Man*



A NOVEL

PETER SHEPPARD

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of a Black Man

— ◆ —
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MBP² Press

The Unique Qualities of a Black Man

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This is a work of fiction. The Toussaint family, the town of Belmont Landing, Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church, and every character, business, and school in this book are products of the author's imagination. Real historical events (Reconstruction in Louisiana, the cypress logging era, the 1918 influenza, the 761st Tank Battalion in the Second World War, school desegregation in 1970, Hurricane Katrina, the events in Baton Rouge in July 2016, the 2016 Louisiana flood, and the COVID-19 pandemic) appear only as the backdrop for invented lives. Where real people or events appear, scenes, dialogue, and private thoughts are imagined. Any other resemblance to actual persons is coincidental.

This book discusses suicidal thoughts and trauma. If you or someone you love is in crisis, call or text 988.

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

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A companion to *The Unique Qualities of a Black Woman*.

*For the grandfathers, fathers, uncles, brothers,
coaches, and mentors
who carried what they were given
and handed it down.*

*And for the men who taught me
that a man keeps his own tools.*

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The Men of the Toolbox

— ◆ —

Elias Toussaint (1840–1912)

The Freedman · carpenter · Faith · the plumb bob

Josiah Toussaint (1878–1950)

The Sawyer · Elias's son · Work · the crosscut saw

Samuel Toussaint (1905–1979)

The Watchman · Josiah's son · Protection · the claw hammer

Isaiah Toussaint (1924–2001)

The Soldier · 761st Tank Battalion · Integrity · the level

Walter “Big Walter” Toussaint (1932–2010)

The Father · plant operator · Fatherhood · the folding rule

Leon “Coach” Toussaint (b. 1952)

The Coach · shop teacher · Discipline · the chisel

Nathaniel “Nate” Toussaint (b. 1955)

The Prodigal · lawyer · Humility · the sanding block

Marcus Toussaint (b. 1976)

The Brother · builder · Brotherhood · the bar clamp

Andre Toussaint (b. 1980)

The Firefighter · fire captain · Courage to be known · the pencil

Jordan Toussaint (b. 2000)

The Heir · Southern University graduate · Legacy · the last place

And the women who stood beside them (Hannah, Ruth, Lottie, Clara, Bernice, Denise, Tasha, Keisha, and Asbley), the brother who was not blood, Ray Guidry, and Eli Walter Toussaint (b. 2024), who will one day build the next box.

PROLOGUE

The Cypress Chest

Belmont Landing, Pointe Coupee Parish — May 2026

And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean these stones?

— JOSHUA 4:21 (KJV)

THE CHEST HAD been sitting in the corner of the old shed behind his great-great-grandfather Samuel's house for so long that Jordan had stopped seeing it, the way you stop seeing the door frame you walk through every day. That morning, before anybody else was awake, his grandfather had carried it across the yard by himself and slid it under the big workbench in the new shop, and had told nobody why.

It was not much to look at. Three feet long, maybe a foot and a half deep, made of cypress gone the color of strong coffee. The corners were dovetailed by hand, and the dovetails were not perfect; one of them, on the back left, had a gap you could slide a dime into. The handles at either end were wrought iron, black and pitted. The lid had a brass hasp so worn that the shine had gone soft, like the toe of an old church shoe.

Jordan had grown up with it. He had sat on it as a boy while his grandfather planed boards and told him to stay out of the way. He had set his drink on it once, at fifteen, and his grandfather had looked at the sweating can and then at him, and Jordan had picked the can up so fast he spilled half of it down his shirt. Nobody had ever told him not to set things on the chest. Nobody had needed to.

Now his grandfather was pulling it out into the light.

"Get the other end," Leon said.

"Pop, let me get it. Your back."

"My back," Leon said, "is seventy-four years old and has carried heavier things than this. Get the other end."

Jordan got the other end. It was heavier than it looked. Things rattled inside, solid things, iron and wood. They set it down on the clean concrete floor in the middle of the shop, in a square of afternoon sun that came through the big rolling door, and Leon stood with one hand on the small of his back and breathed for a minute.

Outside, the yard was full. Memorial Day weekend, and the whole Toussaint family had come home: from Houston and Atlanta, from Dallas and Chicago, from Baton Rouge twenty-eight miles down the road, from New Roads, which wasn't even far enough to count. Somebody had brought a sound system and was playing Frankie Beverly and Maze, because somebody always did. Three pits were smoking. The men were standing around the pits the way men stand around pits, with their arms folded, offering advice that nobody had asked for. The women were under the big tent, and the laughter coming from the tent was louder than the music.

And along the fence line, on the new gravel, eight teenage boys in matching gray T-shirts were sitting on overturned five-gallon buckets eating hot dogs, because tomorrow was the first day of the Toussaint Trades summer program, and Jordan had made them come to the family reunion first.

"You don't learn this work from strangers," he had told them. "You learn it from people. So come meet the people."

Two of them had looked at him like he was out of his mind. One of them, a tall, quiet boy named DeShawn from out past Batchelor, had shown up at seven that morning to help set up the tables, and had not said three words since, and had not stopped working either.

Jordan's son was in the shop with them now. Eli was twenty-two months old and had figured out that if he toddled fast enough, he could get anywhere in the world before his mother caught him. He had gotten away from Ashley at the tent, crossed the yard on his fat legs, and arrived in the shop doorway with a fistful of potato chips and a look on his face that said he knew exactly where he was and intended to stay.

"Look who it is," Leon said. "The boss."

Eli marched straight to the chest and slapped both hands flat on the lid. Chip crumbs scattered across the cypress.

Jordan opened his mouth. Leon held up a hand.

"Leave him be," his grandfather said. "That box has had worse on it than potato chips."

He knelt, slowly, one knee and then the other, and worked the old hasp open with his thumb. Then he lifted the lid.

Jordan had seen the inside of the chest maybe twice in his life. Both times at funerals. Both times from the back of a crowd, over the shoulders of grown men who were crying and pretending they were not. He had never been this close.

The first thing he saw was the lid itself. Someone, a long time ago, had carved into the underside of it. At the top, in big square letters cut deep with a knife and a steady hand:

FAITH

Below that, in a different hand, smaller and neater, as though the man who carved it had used a chisel and taken his time:

PROVIDE. PROTECT. RESPECT ALL WOMEN.

And below that, scattered across the wood in a dozen different hands, names and dates. Some burned in. Some carved. One written in what looked like carpenter's pencil and then varnished over so it would never wash away.

Then he looked down into the box.

There was a lift-out tray across the top, the kind old carpenters called a till, divided into compartments with thin cypress walls. In the compartments, each resting in its own place as though it had been there forever:

A plumb bob, dark gray, lumpy, hanging from a coil of old braided line.

A claw hammer with a hickory handle worn so smooth and so dark it looked like it had been dipped in oil.

A spirit level, wooden, with brass edges and a little glass vial in the middle where the bubble floated.

A folding rule, the old kind, yellow wood with brass joints, closed up tight.

A chisel with a wooden handle wrapped in black electrical tape.

A sanding block, just a chunk of pine with a sheet of paper wrapped around it and tacked down, so worn in the middle you could see the shape of a man's palm.

A bar clamp, steel, a little rusted at the screw.

A carpenter's pencil, flat and red, sharpened down to half its length with a knife.

And under the till, laid along the bottom of the chest, wrapped in a piece of old flannel: a crosscut saw, its teeth dull, its handle split and mended with two brass screws.

There was one more compartment in the till. It was empty.

Eli reached in and grabbed the plumb bob before anybody could stop him. He held it up by its line and watched it spin, and the shop was quiet except for the music from the yard, and the plumb bob turned and turned and slowly, slowly came to rest, pointing straight down at the concrete floor.

“Huh,” Eli said, which was most of his vocabulary.

“That’s right,” Leon said softly. “That’s exactly right.”

He held out his hand, and Eli, to everyone’s surprise, gave him the plumb bob. Leon laid it back in its place.

“Nine tools,” Jordan said. “Nine men.”

“Nine men,” Leon agreed.

“What’s the empty one for?”

His grandfather did not answer right away. He reached into the till and touched the claw hammer, then the level, then the folding rule. When he touched the folding rule his hand stayed there a long time, and Jordan knew why. That had been Leon’s father’s. Big Walter. Jordan had been ten when Big Walter died, old enough to remember the size of him and the sound of his laugh, which came up from somewhere around his belt buckle and filled whatever room it was in.

“The empty one,” Leon said at last, “is yours.”

Jordan looked at him.

“Every man who put a tool in this box put it in when he’d earned it,” Leon said. “Not when he wanted to. Not when he turned twenty-one or got married or got his name on a sign. When he’d given something that cost him. That was the rule Elias Toussaint made in 1866, when he built this box out of the boards of the cabin he was born in. A slave cabin, son. He tore it down with his own hands and he built this.”

Jordan put his hand on the side of the chest without meaning to. The cypress was warm from the sun.

“I didn’t know that.”

“Most of the family doesn’t. They know there’s a box and there’s tools in it and you don’t put your drink on it.” Leon smiled a little. “I’ve been meaning to tell you the whole thing for a long time. I kept waiting for you to be ready. Then I figured out I was the one who wasn’t ready. Because once I tell you, it’s yours. And then I’m just an old man with a shop.”

“Pop.”

"I'm not being sad. I'm being accurate." Leon looked out through the door at the yard, at the smoking pits, at the eight boys on their buckets along the fence. DeShawn was standing now, and an older cousin, Aunt Gloria's granddaughter, was coming along the fence with a pan of something, and DeShawn had stepped forward and taken the pan out of her hands before she could ask him to. He carried it for her toward the tent, on the outside, between her and the drive where the cars were coming in.

Leon watched that for a long moment.

"Who taught him that?" he asked.

"I did," Jordan said. "Last week. He's been practicing."

"Uh huh." Leon nodded slowly. "Provide, protect, respect. You teach them that first?"

"Before I taught them which end of a hammer to hold."

"Good." His grandfather's eyes were wet, and he did not bother to hide it, which Jordan had learned only recently was its own kind of strength. "Then maybe you're ready."

Eli had lost interest in the box and gone to sit in a pile of sawdust under the bench, where he was very happily putting it in his hair. Jordan sat down on the floor beside the chest, cross-legged, the way he used to sit as a boy when he was supposed to be staying out of the way. His grandfather lowered himself onto an upturned bucket.

"Every one of those tools has a man behind it," Leon said. "And every man had a reason. If you're going to put something in that last place, you need to know what you're putting it next to."

"Then tell me," Jordan said. "Start at the beginning."

So Leon Toussaint reached into the till, and took out the plumb bob, and let it hang from his fingers until it was still.

And began.

CHAPTER ONE

The Freedman

Belmont Landing, Pointe Coupee Parish — 1866 to 1875

Thus he shewed me: and, behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand.

— AMOS 7:7 (KJV)

ELIAS TOUSSAINT WAS born in a cypress cabin on the Dumaine place in 1840, and in the winter of 1866 he took that cabin apart with his own hands, one board at a time.

The people at the quarters came out to watch. Some of them thought he had lost his mind. The war had been over for most of a year, and the Dumaine family had gone to New Orleans and not come back, and the overseer had gone wherever overseers go when there is nobody left to oversee. The fields along the river were full of dead cane and Johnson grass. The big house was shut up with its windows boarded. And the cabins in the quarters were the only roofs most of these people had ever had, so taking one apart in January seemed, to some of them, like the act of a man who had decided he did not need a roof.

“Where you gonna sleep, Elias?” old Uncle Paul called from his doorway, wrapped in a blanket.

“Same place I been sleeping,” Elias said. “Hannah’s.”

That got a laugh, because everybody knew it. Hannah Ricard had a cabin at the end of the row that she shared with her sister, and Elias had been courting her for four years, and for the last two of those years he had been doing it in a way that the old women said was not courting anymore. They were going to marry in the spring. A real marriage, with a preacher and a paper, at the courthouse in New Roads, because the Freedmen’s Bureau man said they could, and because Hannah said she had been married by a broom once already in her heart and she wanted it written down this time where nobody could take it.

“What you want with them old boards?” Uncle Paul asked.

Elias did not answer him. He worked the pry bar under the next board and leaned on it until the square nails squealed and let go.

He did not know how to explain it, even to himself. He only knew that his mother had died in this cabin in 1851, when he was eleven, and that he had been

born in it, and that every bad thing and every good thing he had ever known had happened inside these walls. He knew the wood. He had known it all his life. Old-growth cypress, cut from the swamp behind the Dumaine place by men whose names nobody remembered, men who had been his grandfather's people, maybe. Cypress did not rot. Cypress outlasted everything. You could sink it in water for a hundred years and pull it out and it would be as sound as the day it was cut.

He had decided, somewhere in the long months since freedom came down the river, that he was not going to leave it here.



He had been a carpenter since he was nine.

Old Toussaint Dumaine, the master's father, had noticed him early. A boy who could look at a broken gate and see what was wrong with it. A boy who watched the men building the new sugar house and could tell you, that night, how the beams went together. So they had put him with Jacques, the old carpenter, a man born in Saint-Domingue who had come to Louisiana in chains as a boy and who spoke French and English and something else that he only spoke when he was angry or praying.

Jacques taught him everything. How to sharpen a chisel. How to read the grain. How to cut a mortise and a tenon so tight you needed a mallet to put them together and could never pull them apart. How to frame a wall and square it with nothing but a cord and three stakes, three feet and four feet and five, the way the old Egyptians did it, Jacques said, and the old Egyptians knew more about building than any white man in Pointe Coupee.

And Jacques taught him the plumb line.

"Look," he said once, when Elias was twelve. They were framing a corncrib, and Jacques hung his old iron bob from the top plate and let it swing. "Look at it."

Elias looked. The bob swung and swung and slowed and stopped.

"Where it point?"

"Down."

"Not down." Jacques shook his head. "Down is where you are. It point to the center of the earth. Every plumb line in the world point to the same place. Here, New Orleans, Africa, everywhere. You understand? The world, it lean. Men lean.

The master lean, the overseer lean, the preacher lean. The house you build, it want to lean. But the line, it don't lean. The line belong to God."

Elias had not understood it then. He understood it later.

By the time he was twenty, they were hiring him out. That was how it worked, in those days, for a slave with a trade. A planter in New Roads needed a staircase built, or a gallery repaired, or a whole house framed, and he would pay the Dumaines for the use of Elias, and Elias would go and do the work and come back, and the Dumaines would keep the money. Sometimes, if the job was good, the man who hired him would slip him a coin or two, and Elias saved every one of them in a tobacco tin buried under the floor of his cabin. By the time the war came he had nineteen dollars and forty cents. By the time the war ended he had spent most of it on food.

He had built more houses in Pointe Coupee Parish than most white carpenters. He had built staircases in New Roads that rich men still walked up and down every morning, never once wondering whose hands had cut the treads. And not one board of any of it was his.

That was what he was thinking, that January, as he pulled down the cabin. Not one board of any of it was his.

These boards were going to be.



The war had come to Pointe Coupee like weather. Union gunboats on the river. Confederate cavalry in the woods. In 1863 and 1864 there had been fighting all up and down the bank near Morganza, and the people in the quarters had lain on the floors of their cabins at night and listened to the guns. Some of the young men had slipped away to the Union lines and come back in blue coats. Elias had wanted to go. Hannah had begged him not to, and his own fear had begged him louder, and he had stayed, and he had never stopped being ashamed of it.

After the fighting moved on, the fields near the levee were full of lead.

You could not plow a row without turning up a bullet. Minié balls, mostly, the long ones with the hollow base, gray and heavy. Children collected them in their pockets. Old men picked them up and threw them in the river.

Elias kept them.

He kept them in a feed sack through the whole year of 1865, and in February of 1866, after the cabin was down and the boards were stacked and drying under a shed roof he had borrowed, he built a small fire in a hole in the ground, and set an iron pot in it, and poured in the bullets.

Hannah came and stood beside him and watched them melt. They went soft at the edges first, then slumped, then ran together into a bright silver puddle that shone like a mirror.

“What are you making?” she asked.

“Plumb bob.”

“Out of bullets?”

“Out of bullets.” He took the pot off the fire with a pair of tongs and poured it into the mold he had carved from a block of wet clay, a teardrop shape about the length of his thumb, with a hole through the top for the line. “Isaiah says they shall beat their swords into plowshares. I don’t have any swords. I got these.”

Hannah was quiet for a while. She was a small woman, fierce, with a gap between her front teeth and a way of looking at you with her head tilted as though she were deciding whether you were worth the trouble. She had been a house servant at the Dumaines’ for ten years and had learned to read in secret from the cook’s daughter, and she read the Bible to the people in the quarters on Sunday nights, by firelight, with a watch posted at the door in case anybody came. Elias had fallen in love with her the first night he heard her read.

“Jacques had a plumb bob,” she said finally. “Why don’t you use his?”

Jacques had died in 1862. They had buried him in the old graveyard by the swamp. Elias had put the old carpenter’s tools in the ground with him, the way Jacques had asked.

“Because his was his,” Elias said. “This one’s going to be mine.”

The lead cooled. He broke the clay away. The bob was rough and lumpy, with a seam down one side where the mold had not quite closed. He would file it smooth later. He would braid a line for it from cotton cord, three strands, the way Jacques had taught him. But for now he just held it in his palm, the weight of it, the dead weight of all those bullets that had been fired by men trying to kill each other, maybe trying to kill him, all of it melted down into one thing with one purpose.

To tell the truth about which way was down.



They married on the twelfth of April, 1866, at the parish courthouse in New Roads. The clerk spelled Hannah's name wrong, and she made him write it over, and he did it with his ears turning red. Elias wore a borrowed coat. Hannah wore a dress her sister had made out of a curtain from the big house, which everybody agreed was the best use that curtain had ever been put to.

Afterward they walked home along the river road in the evening, and Hannah held his arm, and Elias walked on the outside, between her and the road, without either of them thinking about it. It was what you did. His mother had taught him that before she taught him his letters. A man walks on the outside. If something comes down that road, a wagon or a horse or a drunk white man looking for trouble, it gets to him first.

"I'm building us a house," he told her as they walked.

"With what?"

"With my hands."

"On whose land?"

That was the question. That was always the question. The Freedmen's Bureau man had said there would be land. Forty acres, people said. Everybody said it. And then the summer came and the government gave the land back to the men who had owned it before the war, and the forty acres turned out to be a rumor, like most of the good things people said.

But there was a piece of ground along the river, a mile north of the Dumaine place, where an old steamboat landing had been before the river moved. Nobody wanted it. It flooded some springs. It was full of willows and mosquitoes. A Creole man named Belmont had owned it once, and his heirs lived in France and had not set foot in Louisiana in thirty years, and their agent in New Roads was willing to sell it off in small pieces to anybody who could pay.

Elias could not pay. Not yet. But he could rent. And by the fall of 1866, eleven families from the Dumaine quarters had rented pieces of the old Belmont landing, and they were building houses there, and somebody started calling it Belmont Landing, and the name stuck.

Elias built nine of the eleven houses. He did not charge for any of them. People paid him in what they had: a ham, a day's work in his garden, a promise. He built his and Hannah's house last.

And in a corner of the shed where he kept his lumber, working at night by lamplight after the day's building was done, he built a chest.



He took his time with it.

He planed the old cabin boards down until the gray weathered surface came away and the wood underneath showed through, honey-colored and fragrant, with that cypress smell like a church that has been closed up for the summer. He cut the dovetails by hand, the way Jacques had taught him, with a backsaw and a chisel and a mallet. He was not as good at dovetails as Jacques had been. One of them, on the back left corner, came out with a gap you could slide a coin into, and he looked at it for a long time and almost cut the whole board over.

Then he left it.

"Why'd you leave it?" Hannah asked, when she saw it. She knew him. She knew he did not leave mistakes.

"Because it's true," he said. "It's how it came out. I'm not going to pretend I'm better than I am."

He built a till to sit across the top, a lift-out tray with little compartments, ten of them, divided with thin cypress walls. He did not know why ten. It just seemed like the right number. He forged the handles himself at the blacksmith's in New Roads, on a Saturday when the smith let him use the fire in exchange for fixing the shop door. He bought the brass hasp with the last of the money from the tobacco tin.

When it was done, he put his plumb bob in one of the compartments, coiled on its braided line. It looked very small in there. One little gray bob of melted bullets, in a box built to hold a lifetime of tools.

"It's empty," Hannah said.

"It's started," Elias said.



The church came next.

The people of Belmont Landing had been worshipping under a brush arbor since the first summer, a roof of willow branches over cut log benches, with a pulpit made from a packing crate. Brother Amos Fontenot preached. He had been a field hand on the Ternant place across the river and had a voice like a church bell and could not read a word, so Hannah read the scripture for him every Sunday, and he preached on whatever she read, and some Sundays it was the best preaching anybody in the parish had ever heard.

But a brush arbor was not a church. When it rained, it rained on the preacher. When it was cold, the old people stayed home. And in 1868, when the congregation had saved up enough, a dollar at a time and a dime at a time, to buy a single acre of high ground at the north end of the landing, Brother Amos came to Elias.

"We want a church," he said. "A real one. With a steeple."

"I can build you a church," Elias said. "I don't know about a steeple."

"Can you build a steeple?"

"I can build anything I can see in my head."

"Then see a steeple."

It took him a year. He did it in the evenings and on Saturdays, after his paying work was done, because by then he had paying work: white folks in New Roads had started hiring him directly now that they could not hire him from anybody else, and some of them paid him fair and some of them did not, and he took the work either way because Hannah was carrying their first child. The men of the congregation helped when they could. The women brought food. The children carried nails.

He used the plumb bob on every post. Every stud. Every corner of the frame. He hung it from the top plate and watched it swing and settle, and he did not drive a single nail until the line hung straight down against the wood, top to bottom, with not a sliver of light between them.

"You're slow," young Lucien Ricard told him once, Hannah's cousin, nineteen and impatient. "It's straight enough. Nobody's gonna know."

"God's gonna know," Elias said. "And I'm gonna know. And when your children are sitting in this church fifty years from now, and the wind comes off that river at sixty miles an hour, the walls are gonna know."

They named it Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church. It had twelve pews made of cypress, a pulpit with a carved cross on the front, four tall windows with real glass, and a steeple that rose twenty feet above the roof and could be seen from the river. Steamboat pilots started using it as a landmark. Brother Amos said that was the most Christian use a steeple could be put to, guiding people who were lost.

Elias's first son was born that fall, in 1869, and they named him Amos after the preacher.

He died the next summer of a fever that went through the landing and took four children.



There are griefs a man does not speak of. Elias did not speak of this one. He built a coffin, small, out of the last of the cabin boards, and he and Hannah and Brother Amos buried their son in the churchyard of the building he had just finished, and on the next Sunday he sat in the front pew with his wife and did not hear one word of the sermon.

Afterward, he went to the shed and opened the chest and took out the plumb bob and held it in his hand for a long time.

He did not pray. He did not know how to pray right then. He just held it, and felt the weight of it, and thought about Jacques and the line that did not lean.

Hannah found him there at dark.

"You coming in?"

"In a while."

She came and sat beside him on the lumber pile. She did not say anything for a long time. Then she said, "I keep asking the Lord why."

"What He say?"

"He don't say anything." She was quiet again. Then: "But I keep asking. I figure as long as I'm asking, I'm still talking to Him. And as long as I'm talking to Him, I haven't let go."

Elias thought about that for a long time. Then he hung the plumb bob from his finger and watched it swing and slow and stop.

"Still points down," he said.

"What does?"

“The line. Everything that happened. And it still points the same way it always did.”

Hannah put her head on his shoulder.

“That’s faith, Elias,” she said. “That’s all it is. The world’s leaning every which way and you keep looking at the line.”



Two more babies came and went. A girl, Patience, named for his mother, who lived eleven days. A boy, stillborn, who never got a name except the one they gave him in their hearts. After that, Hannah stopped telling anybody when she was carrying, and Elias stopped building cradles ahead of time.

And the world kept leaning.

By 1874, the hope that had come up the river with freedom was running back down it. You could feel it. Black men had voted in Pointe Coupee. Black men had held office, a few of them. There were schools now, real schools, and Hannah taught in one of them three days a week, the little schoolhouse that Elias had built behind the church. But all over Louisiana, men who had worn gray during the war were putting on other uniforms now, and riding at night, and the newspapers called them the White League as if they were a baseball club. In the spring, word came down from up the Red River about killings. Men taken out of their homes. Officeholders shot on the road. In September, there was a battle in the streets of New Orleans itself, and for a few days, the White League ran the city.

Belmont Landing kept its head down. That was the only way. You went to work, you came home, you did not talk politics where anybody could hear, and you kept your shotgun loaded and behind the door.

And on a night in October of 1874, somebody burned Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church to the ground.

Elias saw the glow from his front porch. He ran. Half the landing ran. They formed a bucket line from the river, men and women and children passing pails hand to hand up the bank, but cypress that had stood dry in a sealed church for five years burns hot and fast, and by the time the first bucket reached the fire, the steeple was already falling. It came down through the roof in a shower of sparks that lit the whole river orange, and the people of Belmont Landing stood in the churchyard among the graves of their children and watched their church burn.

Nobody saw who did it. Everybody knew.



In the morning, the ashes were still smoking. Elias walked through them alone at first light. The pews were gone. The pulpit was gone. The four tall windows had shattered in the heat, and the glass lay melted in the ash in strange, bright shapes. The only things standing were the brick piers he had set the church on, eighteen of them, black with soot.

He stood in the middle of it for a long time.

Then he went home and got the plumb bob.

He came back and hung it from his hand over the first brick pier, the one at the northeast corner, the one he had laid first. He watched the line swing and settle.

The pier was plumb. Burned black, but plumb. The fire had not moved it a hair.

He went to the next one. Plumb. And the next. All eighteen. Every one of them still stood exactly where he had set it, still true to the line, still pointing at the center of the earth.

When he finished checking the last pier, Brother Amos was standing at the edge of the churchyard watching him, and behind Brother Amos, most of the congregation.

“What are you doing, Elias?” the preacher called.

“Checking the foundation,” Elias said.

“For what?”

Elias looked at the plumb bob hanging still in the morning air. He looked at the black piers standing in the gray ash. He looked at the people.

“For the next one,” he said.



They held service that Sunday in the ashes. Brother Amos stood on the bare brick of the old pulpit pier, and Hannah stood beside him with the Bible she had carried out of her house, and the people of Belmont Landing stood in the burned churchyard in their Sunday clothes with soot on their shoes.

Hannah read from Amos, because it was the preacher's namesake, and because Elias had asked her to.

Thus he shewed me: and, behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand.

And Brother Amos, who could not read a word, preached for an hour and twenty minutes on that one verse, and said that God had built the world plumb, and men kept trying to knock it crooked, and God kept standing on the wall with His line in His hand, waiting for somebody to pick up a hammer and set it straight again.

"They burned our church," he said, "but they could not burn our God. And they could not burn the line."

They rebuilt it in seven months.

Every man in Belmont Landing worked on it. Men came from New Roads, from Morganza, from across the river at Bayou Sara. A white lumberman named Ransom, who ran a sawmill upriver and had once watched Elias frame a house in New Roads and never forgotten it, sent down two wagonloads of cypress boards and would not take a dime. "You built my brother's staircase," was all he would say. "It's still the best thing in that house."

Elias used the plumb bob on every post again. Every stud. Every corner. He was slower than he had been the first time, because his hands were older and his heart was heavier. But nobody complained this time. Nobody told him it was straight enough.

They dedicated the new Mount Pilgrim on Easter Sunday, 1875. The steeple was five feet taller than the first one.

"Why taller?" Hannah asked him.

"So they can see it better," he said. "Next time they come looking for it."



That night, after the dedication and the dinner on the grounds, after the last of the people had gone home and the children were asleep, Elias went out to the shed and lit the lamp and opened the chest.

He took out the plumb bob and held it one more time. Then he took out his pocketknife, the one he had carried since he was twelve, and he turned the lid of

the chest over on his knees, and on the underside of it, in big square letters, he carved one word.

FAITH

He cut it deep. He wanted it to last as long as the cypress did.

Then he laid the plumb bob back in its compartment, one gray bob in a box of ten, and he closed the lid, and he sat with his hand on it.

Hannah came out to the shed in her nightgown with a shawl around her shoulders.

“What did you do?” she asked.

He opened the lid and showed her. She read it out loud, softly, the way she read the scripture.

“Faith.”

“That’s what goes first,” he said. “Everything else gets built on it.”

“And the rest of the box?”

“The rest is for whoever comes after.” He was quiet for a while. “I’m going to tell them a rule. Whoever has this box. You don’t put a tool in it because you want to. You put it in when you’ve earned it. When you’ve given something that cost you.”

“What did yours cost you?”

Elias looked at the plumb bob for a long time. He thought about Jacques. He thought about the cabin. He thought about three small graves in the churchyard, and a burned church, and a man standing in the ashes with a little gray bob hanging from his hand, refusing to believe that the line had moved.

“Everything,” he said. “And it was worth it.”



Josiah Toussaint was born on the third of March, 1878, in the house his father built at Belmont Landing, with the steeple of Mount Pilgrim visible through the window. Hannah did not tell anybody she was carrying until the week before he came, and Elias did not build the cradle until the day after.

The boy lived. He was loud and hungry and strong, and he grabbed his father’s finger the first time Elias held him, and would not let go.

Elias Toussaint lived thirty-four more years. He built two more churches in Pointe Coupee Parish, a schoolhouse in New Roads, and more houses than

anybody could count. He never learned to read well, but he learned to read the Bible, slowly, with his finger under the words, Hannah beside him at the kitchen table. He was a deacon at Mount Pilgrim for forty years. When he died in 1912, they sang him home in the church he built, and the steeple was still standing, and still plumb.

The night before he died, he asked for the chest. Josiah carried it in from the shed and set it beside the bed. Elias could not lift the lid anymore, so his son lifted it for him, and the old man looked for a long time at one gray plumb bob in a box with nine empty places.

“It’s still started,” he whispered.

Then he closed his eyes.

End of the free sample

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