

Magic Lamp of Nubia

“Stop, you’ll break it,” shrieked Jerome, pushing Otis away from him.

“It’s made of metal. I can’t break it, you ditz.” Otis pouted and folded his arms as he watched his older brother fuss over the object he found discarded behind a dusty bookshelf in his grandmother’s basement.

Jerome rushed past Otis, up the stairs and outside into the bright radiance of the summer sun. He caressed the oil lamp in his arms as he made his way to the middle of the backyard with Otis pulling on his shoulder.

“Let me see it, let me see it,” Otis begged.

“Not yet, I need to clean it. Fetch me a small towel from the clothes line.” Jerome knelt on the ground, setting the lamp in front of him. He dusted it off, scratching at the crud with his fingernails.

“Here’s your towel, now can I see it?” Otis settled down on his knees next to his brother watching him clean the lamp.

“Let me make a wish first. Wouldn’t you like to have a large container of strawberry ice cream?” Otis smiled and nodded briskly. Jerome rubbed and rubbed, but nothing happened. “You try,” Jerome said, handing the lamp to his brother.

Otis shrieked with joy as he grabbed the lamp and placed it in his lap. He traced the symbols using a finger nail as if he were attempting to decipher them. “What do these little pictures mean?” Otis asked.

“I don’t know. We should ask grandmother.” Jerome grabbed the lamp from his brother and darted for the house, leaving the towel in the grass.

Jerome and Otis rushed into the house letting the screen door slam behind them. They stopped at the sight of their grandmother pushing a rolling pin over dough. She kneaded the dough, spread it back down on the wax paper, sprinkled flower over it and continued flattening it with the roller. She stood for a minute as if to admire her work, then grabbed a small class and started to cut circles in the dough.

“What are you making grammy?” asked Otis.

“Benne cookies. Something you can’t buy in the store. Made with molasses, benne seeds and some ground peanuts.”

“Yum, I can’t wait to taste them.” Otis danced around in a circle in anticipation of eating one.

“If you learned how to cook you wouldn’t have to wait.”

“Cooking is for girls,” said Jerome. “I just like to eat.”

“Some of the best chefs in the world are men. You shouldn’t put limitations on what you want to be in life. Your mother is a lawyer, which was unheard of when I was a child. What if she listened to people who said only men should be lawyers? Those two boys would still be in jail for a crime they didn’t commit, because no one else cared enough to research their case. Now what do you think about that?” She paused and gave her two grandsons a look over her glasses. They just squirmed in silence.

“You two clearly did not rush in here to discuss your career goals, so tell me what you are excited about?” asked their grandmother returning to her cooking.

“We found this magic lamp in your basement. We tried rubbing it to make a wish, but we can’t get it to work,” Jerome said, holding the lamp up for her to examine.

“You are wasting your time rubbing it. It’s not Aladdin’s Lamp, which was never real in the first place. Let me take a look at it.”

Jerome’s grandmother took the lamp from her grandson and rotated it in her hand. She ran her fingers across the etchings and even took a whiff of the oil residue that coated the bowl of the lamp. “My, my I haven’t seen this thing in forever. Where did you find it?”

“It was behind the bookshelf in the basement. I tried to clean it up as best I could.”

“Oh yea, I remember it falling back there when I was a kid, but I never thought to recover it.” She continued to look over the lamp as if recalling memories of her childhood.

“So, where did it come from?” Jerome asked, fidgeting nervously.

“This lamp belonged to my grandmother’s sister on my mother’s side, who got it from her mother,” she explained speaking slowly, as she continued to look over the brass lamp in her hands. “She was a Saltwater Geechee from Port Royal. I believe her name was Genseoua, but everyone just called her Aunt Genny. She was named after her mother who somehow made it to shore when their slave ship sank. She was to be wed to an Angolan prince, who had been kidnapped by slavers before she arrived. Her husband to be drowned when the boat sank. My grandmother gave the lamp to me after her sister passed.”

“If the prince was kidnapped before she arrived, how did she get on the ship and why would they let her keep the lamp and stuff?” asked Jerome.

“I don’t know. I guess I remember it wrong or something.” She paused for a moment in an attempt to collect her thoughts.

“So, what about the magic lamp?”

“Well, it looks like Aladdin’s lamp, but it’s something different. I would sit in my grand aunt’s lap as she told me stories and fed me strawberries and cream. For a while she would teach me Nobiin, her native language. At least until my grandmother forbade me to visit her anymore. My grandmother didn’t like the old ways. She was afraid I would be shunned by Americans and be unable to assimilate into this new world of ours.”

As she reflected on her memories, she remembered how she was lectured on the importance of an education and to not use bad English like her friends. Her friends called her *proper*, which embarrassed her. She got the last laugh though. Her good grammar and grades got her into college while her friends settled on menial jobs.

“The lamp grandmother, the lamp?” Otis let out a heavy sigh and slapped the sides of his leg expressing his impatience.

“I’m getting to it, just hold your horses. The etchings on the side of the lamp are written in Nobiin. I didn’t learn how to read it, so I can’t tell you what it says, but my aunt told me it explains the importance of the lamp and how it is to be used, not necessarily how it works.”

“Do you know how it works?” asked Jerome.

“I never saw my great aunt use it, but I will tell you what she told me. You first have to fill it with a special olive oil that has been infused with the essence of your ancestors. Then you light the lamp and its vapors open up the power of our ancestors to you.”

“What’s infused with essence mean, grammy?” asked Otis.

“It means that it contains fluids from your ancestors, like blood or tears. Something like that.”

“Can we use spit?”

“No, your spit isn’t pure and lacks emotions. If you are serious about connecting with your ancestors, then they need to be able to feel your emotions.”

“Where are we supposed to find that special olive oil?”

“She kept it in a gourd in the shack she lived in on the other side of the property. It had writing similar to what’s on the lamp. The shack is probably dilapidated and too dangerous to be walking around in now. I suspect the gourd probably rotted away as well. Look you two, I need to finish cooking. Go play and try to stay out of trouble. Just leave the lamp on the table before you go.”

“Okay grandmother,” said Jerome, placing the lamp on the table and heading out the door.

Jerome spent a lot of the time in his grandmother’s house lying in the cool basement to hide from the summer heat. He took that opportunity to read the stacks of books she kept on the shelf there. Most of them were about mythology and fairy tales. They filled his head with fantasies where he was a magical hero or a mythical god with super powers. Those fantasies drove him to seek out his aunt’s shack and her gourd.

“I can barely see the shack for all these bushes,” Jerome said, climbing through the thick growth around his great, great, grand aunt’s place. He finally reached one of the windows and peered in. The edges of the room were overgrown with weeds and bushes, but further inside appeared to be intact. Getting there would be the problem.

“These weeds are making my leg itch,” said Otis, scratching at his calves.

“Then go back, I want to solve this mystery,” Jerome said, already halfway through the window. He dropped into the room, making creaking sounds on the old wooden floor with his Sketchers tennis shoes. Rays of sunlight shown through the ragged roof, casting angled columns of bright light on the spiderwebs and dust floating through the cabin. Otis grabbed onto Jerome’s back as he jumped from the windowsill behind him.

“Careful! I don’t want you pushing me into these spider webs,” warned Jerome.

“Okay, okay. I’m just trying to get my balance.” Otis looked around surprised by how the shack had fallen into disrepair, but somehow it was still standing.

Jerome examined the area in attempt to picture his aunt living there. He could see old furniture, a rotted piece of rug and water-damaged books strewn across the floor. An old rocking chair sat in the middle of the small living room near a rusted-out potbelly stove. He wondered if that was where his grandmother sat listening to her grand aunt’s stories. Through a doorway he saw what looked to be a kitchen and felt that might be where he would find the gourd. He gingerly crept toward the doorway with Otis gripping the back of his shirt. As Jerome moved forward one of the boards made a loud crack and the two fell through the wooden floor.

Jerome fell onto his back, while Otis fell on Jerome’s chest causing him to gasp for air.

“Get off me you idiot. What did you do to my leg?” Jerome complained as he pushed Otis from his chest. He looked down at the wound in his leg. A nail from a board stuck through the back of his calf. Blood oozed from the wound leaving Jerome more afraid of what his grandmother would do than the scar the wound would leave.

Otis sat on the dirty floor of the crude cellar with his arms crossed and lips poked out in defiance of Jerome’s anger. Jerome slowly pulled on the board to remove the nail from his leg as Otis surveyed the cramped dark space. The rays of the sun broke through the murkiness shining a light on an object half buried amongst the scattered debris. It drew Otis away from the moaning of his brother. He crawled to the faded orange looking object and pulled it free of from the loosely clinging refuse.

“Is this the gourd grammy was talking about?” Otis held the object into the sunlight for Jerome to see.

“Arghh!” Jerome screamed, as he yanked the nail out of his leg. “Oh my goodness, my leg hurts. Hand it to me and let me take a look at it.” Jerome brushed years of caked mud from the sides of the gourd. Underneath the crud he found lettering similar to that of the lamp. “Yes, this looks like it.”

“Well you better put some of your blood in it if you want to talk to our ancestors.”

“Good idea. Then we need to get back so I can put a band aid on this hole in my leg.”

Jerome, twisted the cover from the gourd, grappling to get a good grip. Pieces of the rotted rim fell away and disappeared into the earthen floor. Jerome threw his head back as the smell of the putrid oil climbed his nostrils. He pushed the lip of the gourd against his wound and let his blood

flow into it. After replacing the cover, he slapped his brother on the arm indicating it was time to go.

The two brothers climbed out the shack and headed back to the house with Jerome leaning on Otis. Jerome shook the gourd listening to the fluid slosh around on the inside. He wondered if his ancestors were chatting with his blood.

Upon arriving at the house, Otis retrieved the lamp from the kitchen while Jerome used the sink in the basement to clean his leg. He found a bottle of alcohol on the shelf above the sink and poured some on each side of his wound. He scrunched his face and suppressed a muffled scream as the alcohol went to work.

“I got the lamp,” said Otis, sprinting down the stairs.

“Bring it here. I’ll put some of the oil in it and see if it works.”

Jerome opened the top of the gourd then poured some of the oil, mixed with his blood, into the lamp. He gingerly placed the cover back on the lamp, then lit the wick. The flickering flame from the lamp cast an eerie glow across the damp basement. Jerome took the lamp into the small fruit cellar at the back of the basement for more privacy. Otis followed him in, closing the rickety wooden door after him. Only a sliver of light came in through the covered window. They sat on the floor and stared at the flame, waiting for something magical to happen.

“Maybe we should make a wish,” Otis suggested.

“Okay, I wish we had a hundred-dollar bill,” said Jerome. Several seconds passed without a response. “Check your pockets.” They went through the pockets in their shorts with no success.

“Aunt Genny are you there?” asked Otis. No response came from the lamp.

“She’s not in the lamp.”

“Her essence is supposed to be there.”

“It doesn’t mean she can talk.” Jerome crossed his arms and grunted in frustration.

“You boys come up for supper,” their grandmother yelled from the top of the stairs.

“Coming grammy,” Otis replied, cracking the door to the cellar. “What are we supposed to do now?”

“Just blow out the lamp. We can come back later and try.” Jerome extinguished the flame with a quick puff, causing a billow of smoke to gush from the lamp’s spout. Jerome leaned in to smell it. “Smells like benne cookies. Ohhh!” Jerome stiffened and made a face that startled Otis.

“Aunty, is that you?” Jerome asked, peering into the darkness.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Her. Don’t you see her? She looks like a gypsy in colorful robes.”

“I don’t see nothin’ Jerome. You just trying to scare me.”

Jerome placed his hands on each side of Otis’ head and turned it until he could see the figure of his aunt. There sat a woman crossed legged on the floor wearing a colorful skirt and white blouse with a lace collar and cuffs. A red scarf covered her curly black hair, which was braided at the back. The dark skin of her face was covered in wrinkles. Her glowing image shifted as if she wasn’t totally there.

“Hello Otis, I’m Genseoua, your great, great, grand aunt. Of course you can call me Aunt Genny like everyone used to.”

“Can you grant us a wish Aunt Genny?” asked Otis with a big smile.

“I’m not a genie Otis, but I do have a few powers that are now flowing through Jerome from his use of the lamp.”

“I have powers? Like what?” asked Jerome, his mouth wide open.

“You are not a superhero Jerome. But you do possess the collective knowledge of your ancestors who have shared their essence with the lamp’s oil. One of your ancestors was a spiritual healer, or witch doctor as some would call him. Place your thumb and index finger on each side of your wound and breath in while thinking of pulling healing power through your leg.

Jerome did as she suggested and felt his leg tingle as he took deep breaths in and out. He removed his fingers and noticed the wounds on each side of his leg were gone.

“It worked. What else can I do?”

“You can learn our history, our culture and the people that make up your family tree. My mother brought that lamp with the oil and several other things to this land when she came here. She was pregnant with me and my sister at the time. Some slavers took her husband, along with many other people in the village, away on a large sailing ship while she was visiting a nearby village. When she returned she gathered all her belongs on a small sail boat and used the power of the lamp to catch the ship before it reached shore. She snuck on board the ship, freed the captives and led a small revolt. The ship caught fire and sank, killing many of the passengers including her husband.”

“How did she escape?” asked Otis.

“She swam back to her boat with a few of the survivors and made it to one of the Geechee Islands. She later built the shack where you found the lamp and I lived there after she died.”

“Wow, what a story,” said Jerome, rocking back and forth.

“I need you to do me a favor Jerome.”

“Anything Aunt Genny.”

“I need you to show your grandmother where the shipwreck is, so they can give my husband a proper burial and tell the story of our journey.”

“Can’t you tell her Aunt Genny.”

“No, her time for connecting with us has passed, as yours will soon enough. Go back to the shack and get the bracelet I got her as a child. Her mother made her give it back and I saved it in a box for her. You will know where it is when you get there. That will prove we talked. Then tell her the story. Tell her all the stories. You came from greatness and upon you greatness will be bestowed.”

Aunt Genny’s image faded, which was the boys queue to go. The two ran upstairs, gobbled their dinner and ran off to the shack to discover what they could find using Jerome’s newfound knowledge. Jerome gave the bracelet to his grandmother and convinced her to take a boat out on the water to find the sunken ship. Jerome found the ship, became famous and went on to be an authority of Eastern African culture.