

DESTINY 5
by John Walker Lee

I don't know why we follow him, but we do. Abujar, the man we call brother, runs ahead of us on the dirt road next to the ravine. If we swam the river winding along the base of the ravine we would end up in the town of Jos, the town after which I was named, but we have chosen to run in the other direction. The bitter, sweet smoke of burning dry veldt and blackened grass envelopes us. Far behind us some flames still lap at the sky.

Abujar's broad assegai and short spear bounce against his zebra-skin shield with every jogging step. He stops and raises his hand with four fingers spread apart – there are people ahead.

Legba stops teasing Zaria and they both stop their chattering, for the first time in the three day journey they are quiet. Ibadan takes several more steps before pounding his rhino-sized frame to a standstill, losing his footing momentarily and almost sliding down the ravine.

Abujar signals us again, fingers speaking their code – four... no, ten men ahead, stay quiet.

We disappear from the road in silence and wait, hidden in the blackened bushes, ignoring the smoke and dust pulling strings from our lungs. Dusk is approaching and in the silent twilight of the savannah there are more dangers lurking behind trees and bushes than just men. While we wait Legba entertains Zaria with a magic trick,

pulling out a beetle from his nose and pretending to eat it. She whispers for him to be serious and hands him the goat bladder of water so that he can quench his thirst.

Abujar sits cross-legged in the dirt with his eyes closed, raising his hand once again for silence so that his incredible hearing can pick up the conversation from the camp ahead. He wants to be certain they are the ones we are after. We wait while the long-legged birds gossip to one another and the crickets sing to the sunset. We try to hear what Abujar can hear, but we hear only the sounds of the savannah. My dry mouth tastes like the carcass of a dead Eland.

Abujar opens his eyes and whispers, "It is them." For a moment I wonder what we will do, if we will turn back after travelling all this way, because the men are powerful and many and we are just a few young people from the village. The ones who are left.

Zaria takes out a small parcel of dried mielie leaves from her antelope skin bag and holds the package out to each of us, the leaves cunningly folded to seal in the contents. I push apart the leaves carefully so that I do not spill the bright blue powder inside and take some powder in my hand. The others take a pinch and close their eyes as they snuff it up into their brains. Zaria returns the parcel her bag.

"You as well, Jos," She whispers to me.

I have never used kanafuru before and I sniff at it cautiously. I don't like the muddy, bitter scent of the powder, but her comforting voice reassures me.

"Close your eyes first, or you will get dizzy, ne."

"Ayah." I close my eyes before taking a deep sniff. In one moment the world changes, the hard lines falling away and returning in glassy blue shadows. In front of me every impulse to move creates shapes of smoke glimmering ahead in streaks of blue. They are moving but I am staying still, each smoky version of me walking forward. Four possible paths to follow. Four destinies.

I open my eyes and see the impulses of the others glimmer in front of them. The smell of burning veldt moves with them, the touch of hot wind against my skin flittering away in four different directions.

I think about standing up and in front of me I see a blue shadow of myself stand up and walk forwards into the road. A bullet cracks from the tree-line ahead and I see the vapor of it in blue as I fall down, feel the recoil of the hakim rifle against the gunner's shoulder and his satisfied smile even from here. Through his destiny I see hints of the others in the camp, dressed in dirty camouflage uniforms, drinking peach beer made in a bucket. I feel the steel of their weapons, see them hunt us. As each destiny travels into the future it becomes a thin vapour and wafts away. I decide not to stand up and this destiny fades away in a pale cloud.

In our blue destinies we are connected. I can feel the others, see into their future, and I can feel them probe and pull my destiny out from me.

Abujar thinks about flanking the men, running left and right. His destinies run forward and we watch the

ghost of the men in the camp jump into their battered jeep and drive down into us, we see a ghostly image of us throwing our spears at the jeep and getting mowed down by a machine gunner sitting on the roof. I hear his laughter without hearing. Abujar retracts the thought and the image disappears and collapses in a waft of pale dust.

So far the kanafuru has not shown us a way to victory.

Ibadan closes his eyes and his massive chest heaves deeply, his destiny throws his assegai high into the air, the wooden shaft glimmers, then lands short of the men sitting around the fire. Ibadan thinks about throwing his spear lower through the trees, four, five, six times the spear either lands in the wrong place or the men are alerted. The spears, like silver snakes, dissolve into the ground as Ibadan rejects their potential path. When I see the world through the blue-grey light of the kanafuru root it is hard to tell what is real and what is illusion. Ibadan tries one more time.

A ghostly assegai hits the guard and before we can react Ibadan stands up behind the bush and blindly throws his spear just like his destiny had thrown it moments before. In the distance we hear a thud, a stifled scream, and commotion erupting behind the trees.

"Ljamba! Ljamba!" We hear the second guard scream. The camp erupts into motion, coffee pots fall and clatter, overturned by the men as they scramble for their weapons. The guard lies dying on the ground with

Ibadan's spear sticking from his final breathing lungs, the shaft pushing into the dry leaves as he rolls over.

As one creature we spring into action. Abujar runs forward, his muscles flexing, sending his four destinies out to try different avenues of attack. Legba, the fastest in our group, runs stealthily behind the camp, his destinies looking for ways to attack the men from behind. Reaching, retreating, trying again. The guards now stand near each other, back to back, their guns drawn, searching for their attackers through the trees in the dusk.

I run behind Abujar into the camp of men who destroyed our village, killed our women and children while we were out hunting.

Abujar sees the ghost of a man pull the trigger on his hakim rifle and steps aside a moment before the weapon fires. The man stares at Abujar in surprise and I use the opportunity to step forward with my byongi knife and cut into his flesh. I pull red strands of his destiny from him. Under the spell of the kanafuru I vaguely make out a red mist evaporate from his chest, mixed with the blue smoke. Time is strange, things happen now and not now. Somewhere nearby I hear the echoes of a man shouting commands and the crackling reply of the radio, perhaps in the future, perhaps in the past, time is moving backwards and forwards in front of me.

I feel, rather than hear, the ground vibrate as a jeep spins its wheels and roars towards us. It grinds to a halt in front of me. Now the remaining men are gathered in a

circle in front of the jeep but we are not afraid - if one fires his weapon we will simply sidestep the bullet. I sense that the machine gun on top of the jeep can fire many bullets quickly; if it can shoot faster than the kanafuru vision I do not know.

"What do you want from us?" A man standing next to the jeep, wearing a black beret and dusky mamba-green pants, shouts at us. "Get out of here before we swat you down like flies."

Abujar breathes calmly as he walks out from behind a tree, appearing from the brush like a stealthy leopard. He stands in front of the men. "We have come to take your destiny for what you have done to our family. Your destiny, and the destiny of all these men."

"What are you talking about, you crazy boy?" The man in the black beret shouts back. "We have done nothing. Go back to your mud house, ignorant boy."

Abujar stands up straight, towering a head taller than anyone else in the camp. "You killed my wife," he says into the sudden quiet of the camp. He points at Ibadan, "His sister," and at Zaria, "her mother." He points at me and my heart sinks again just like it did when I first discovered Nakila lying on his bed, his heart covered in blood. "His child."

Now another man gets out from the jeep, smiling a gold-toothed smile, wearing a neat black shirt that is out of place in this group of rough men.

"Was that your little village, the one that refused to move so that our company can build the dam? We did

not kill the women immediately," he says, taking a puff from his cigarette before tossing it to the ground among the dry leaves, "there was much entertainment before they died." Around him the men in uniforms laugh.

Abadan steps forward, his face hot with rage, but Zaria lays her hand on his shoulder and calms his spirit. "Wait, Aba," she whispers, "something is wrong,". The blue smoke of our destinies whirls and twirls around us but shows us only chaos.

The man in the black shirt holds up his hand, in it is a radio. A voice crackles, "We are on our way."

He smiles at us. "Now run from here before we send you to meet your families in hell." On the side of the jeep are words I cannot read, but next to the words is a picture of a tree and a saw. "These little boys only have sticks. Why are you cowering, surround them!" His order barks through the trees and the men load their weapons.

I can not see the destiny of this man with the dark heart, even Abujar is confused by the void around him. The man slowly pulls out a gun from his belt and we duck away behind the trees. The rest of the armed men continue advancing, some waving pangas, some aiming AK47s into the trees. Now the destinies are unclear, tangled and muddled by the arrival of the man in the black shirt and all the weapons pointing in every direction. The only clear paths are our own. We step back into the trees, back over the dead guard who lies forgotten on the forest floor. Perhaps he will stay here

until his body is eaten by animals, the uniformed men have no use for a fallen comrade.

Legba holds his hand to his mouth to muffle the sound and whispers, "I have an idea. Follow me." He leans down and grabs the jacket and hat from the fallen guard and runs off. We follow him through the undergrowth to the edge of the trees, along the tree-line and back towards the edge of the ravine. Behind us we hear the low growl of the jeep racing towards us on the dirt track. A shout from the man on the roof. The bullets of the machine gun smack into the red dust on the road, pampampampam, pampampampam, faster than what the kanafuru can show us. We scatter and crouch low behind the bushes, creep back to the ravine while we keep our eyes on the approaching jeep. We stand at the edge of the ravine holding our spears ready to attack as the jeep bears down on us,. Legba steps out, dressed in the uniform he shouts at the jeep, "It's them, run them down!" The driver shouts loudly and accelerates without thinking, sending the jeep racing forward. Legba jumps back. At the last moment before the jeep hits us we step back and fall over the incline of the cliff, the driver realizing too late that there is nothing beyond us and that the brakes will have no effect on the gravel and sand. And now the air. The vehicle flies over us, over the edge into nothingness, tumbling end over end until it disappears along with the screams of the men inside. We slip down the side of the ravine until Ibadan catches hold of a rock and we catch on to each other.

We hang like a chain over the cliff, Zaria holding on to Ibadan, Ibadan sitting on the edge of the rock holding Legba's ankles, Legba holding mine. I hold tightly onto Abujar's hands despite the sweat of battle, but my grip is slipping. Abujar, the man who looked after me since I was a boy, who beat off the unJani tribe and suffered ten scars, who taught me how to fight and be a man, is hanging from my fingertips.

My feet slide in Legba's grip, edging us further down the crumbling dry clay of the cliff. "If you go, we all go," I say, grinning through the sweat and the pain. Away from the chaos of the camp our blue destinies are clear again, though more feint now. The power of the kanafuru root is wearing off. I push hard and project all four destinies to see if swinging will get Abujar to the adjacent rock, but watch our ghostly blue destinies fall into the ravine no matter what I try. Legba and Ibadan's destinies try to pull, to twist, exploring every possible outcome and in each one losing their grip, the cliff face crumbling no matter what we do. Above us Zaria frantically tries to create a rope from the dry branches that she can reach, but the fire and the drought has taken all the strength from the vines. Her four destinies have faded completely. She pulls out the kanafuru powder to look for another way and screams as she slips, the pouch tumbles out of her grasp over our heads into the ravine, splashing blue flame as it hits a rock far below us.

There is no sign of the jeep in the ravine, no sound except for the chirp and twitter of the savannah, where

nature is reclaiming the burnt grass. The kanafuru has almost worn off, our destinies indistinct, pale ghosts hanging like rope, twisting and turning with every thought of escape. Now my destinies are gone. All that is left is the real Abujar hanging from my fingertips, the man who raised me from a boy and taught me how to carve a spear, to hunt Eland, and survive the winter.

"I cannot find a way, Abujar," I shout into the chasm, "our destinies have left us." My voice echoes through the hills. Above us Ibadan loses his foothold and gives out a cry, stones clattering over us. We slide down the steep incline of stones and sand towards the waiting chasm. Ibadan grabs tightly around Zaria's legs and groans as his arms begin to shake. Zaria holds on, stopping all of us from sliding, but her grip is white. She begins to scream in pain.

Abujar looks up at me. "Brother," he says with a smile, "there is always another way." His one last destiny pulses blue and bright, glowing in the dim light.

Abujar lets go of my hands and pushes back with his feet. He tumbles down into the darkness of the ravine with a final burst of blue, snaking its way like lightning against the cliff face, looking for purchase, and then fading away into the void.

I lie against the side of the crumbling rock waiting for the impact below us, but not even sound will tell us of his final moment. Ibadan pulls us back up, but I don't want to go. I don't want to go back because in that destiny the man who fought the leopard that attacked our

village, the man who cut firewood through winter for the old people to sleep warmly, is not there.

#

We don't know why we follow him, but we do. We run through the veldt looking for the last of the men who destroyed our village, our home, and our future. In front of us the shimmering ghost of him guides our path, the man who fought for us and now, because of some quirk in the kanafuru root, continues to be a ghostly part of our destiny. When we think of him he appears, which is all the time. Ibadan lumbers forward, after seven days of travel no longer panting and uncomfortable, but resolute in the action of pursuing the men who took our families from us. Legba kicks up dust as he jogs ahead, turns and waits for us to catch up whenever he gets too far. I run next to Zaria, our gaze transfixed on the glowing blue figure running ahead of us towards the distant plume of smoke. He lives. He is a part of all of us now, leading us forward to our destiny.

###