

OLD MOSE

by Larry Edwards

Old Mose shuffled to the stoop and peered into the darkness, then shivered as a slight breeze curled around his neck and slid down his back. Craning his neck to the left, he listened, but all he could hear was the chirping of the crickets, and his own breathing.

"They's gunna' be trub'ls t'night. Yus-sug, they's gunna' be trub'ls, an ole Mose ain' a goin' offin dis porch."

He walked back to his rocking chair and sat down, his joints creaking with the strain. Picking up an old corn-cob pipe with trembling hands, he placed it between his gums.

"Wishes I hads some 'baccy, but I don' mind, cuz I ain' agoin' any wheres. Uh uh. Gonna' be trub'ls t'night. I kin smells it."

He sat and rocked, and sucked on his pipe, and listened to the crickets in the night air. Then he stopped rocking. The crickets had stopped chirping.

"Who is out der? Who is it?"

No one answered.

Mose remained sitting, his eyes scanning the darkness, but he could see nothing except for the trees that surrounded his shack, and the path which led to the dirt road. He called again, "Who is it? I's a good ole nigger, and I ain' dun nobody no trub'ls, so leaves me be."

Then he saw a shadow, or what he had mistaken for a shadow, detach itself from a tree next to the porch. He waited, not breathing. Squinting his eyes, he peered at the shadow, then gasped when he recognized who it was.

"Isn't you the Jackson Boy? You is, isn't you. What you be doin' way out here in de midd'l o de night, scarin' an ole mans haff ta death?"

The shadow stepped onto the porch and squatted next to Mose. He was a young man—more of a boy than a man really—and he was frightened. Stretching forth a trembling hand, he touched the old man's shoulder, "Mose, momma dun sent me out here. She says that you'd helps me. She says that you would."

"What you talkin' 'bout, boy? What you doin' way out here?"

The boy peered over his shoulder into the darkness, then took a shuddering breath, "Mose, I's in trub'l. Bad trub'l. I killed a man. A white man."

Mose started, "You did what?"



"I killed a white man t'night. That's why I's here. Ta gets help from you. Momma a'ways told us 'bout you, an how you's a'ways helped the slaves when dey wuz a'runnin'. I needs help."

Mose scratched his head, his eyes never leaving the boy's face. He had helped runaway slaves, but that had been when he was younger and full of vinegar. Now he was an old man. What could he do?

The boy must have read Mose's doubts in his eyes, because he clutched the old man's shoulder tighter and cried, "You's got to helps me! Momma said you would. An all those stories. You gots to!"

Mose grabbed his hand, "Lis'n to me, boy. That wuz when I wuz younger, when I wuz strong. Now I's an ole man. What kin I do?"

"But those stories? They said you wuz a man who wuzn't 'fraid o' no white man. That you wuz a man who stuck by others 'cuz they wuz you friends, an not cuz o' the color o' the skin."

Mose sat there, his forehead wrinkled in thought. He looked at the boy's face, then into the darkness, then back at the boy.

"Who you kill?"

"I don't knows. They wuz all wearin' hoods and bed sheets."

"Why'd you kill him?"

The boy sobbed, "Cuz they castrated my papa! I shots one o' them wi' papa's squ'r'l gun. Then I run'd."

Mose shivered. Damn them! Why couldn't they leave his people alone! But he was so old! What could he do?

A noise came from the path. Men's voices. And Mose could make out torches wavering in the night air.

"Mose! What is I gonna' do?"

Mose stood, then gripped the boy's arm, "Lissen to me. You gits behind dat door dere, an no mat'r what you hears, dun' you comes out."

"But Mose, how's you gonna' keep them from jest comin' in an' gettin' me?"

Mose smiled and reached behind his rocking chair, then straightened. In his hands he held an old single barreled shotgun, rusted with age, "Dun' you be worryin' 'bout ole Mose, boy. You jest gits like I dun tolds you to."

With a worried smile the boy ran past Mose and hid behind the door. As he shut it he said, "Momma wuz right. You is the best."

Mose puffed out his chest and waited for the men. As they drew nearer he coked the shotgun. The men, hearing the sound, stopped.

"Hey nigger, you seen a young buck come runnin' past here?"

Mose stood there, his eyes on the hooded men before him; but his mind was thirty years in the past. He had been a man then. He still was. But he was old. So old now.

"We asked ye a question, nigger. An' what you doin' wit' that shotgun?" Mose remained silent.

"Ye gonna' answer us, nigger? What ye doin' wit' that shotgun?"

Mose heard a voice behind him. It was the boy's, "Don' let 'em gits me, Mose. You is the best. The best."

"Nigger, we ain' gonna' ask ye again. Now put down that shotgun and step out'ta the way."

Mose felt the sweat rolling down his face, burning his eyes. The men stepped forward. One step. Two. They were almost on the porch. From behind him he heard the boy again, "You is the best, Mose. The best."

"Out'ta our way, nigger."

Mose whirled and leveled the shotgun, his finger tightening on the trigger. A deafening roar and Mose was hurled backwards into the arms of the men.

"What the hell!"

"The nigger's gone crazy!"

"Grab 'em! Git that gun away from 'em!"

Mose let the shotgun be wrenched from his hands as the men bore him to the ground. He felt two of his fingers break, but he didn't cry out. He just lay there on the ground, thinking how cool the dirt felt against his cheek.

One of the men, stepping onto the porch and flinging open the door, whistled, then chuckled, "Well, lookie here. Looks like ole Mose dun kilt himself a killer nigger."

The others let go of Mose and crowded onto the porch. There, just inside of the old shack lay the dead boy, a gaping hole in his stomach from where he took the blast. A look of surprise was on his face.

One of the men said, "I told you Ole Mose wuz a good ole nigger. He wuz just akeepin' the boy fer us."

The hooded men gathered around Mose, "That right, nigger? Wuz you a keepin' em for us?"

Mose remained silent.

Carefully, almost gently, the men picked Mose up, dusted him off, and placed him in his rocking chair. Then, placing his shotgun across his lap, they faded into the night, leaving Mose to his thoughts.

Mose didn't notice that the men had left. His mind was in the past.

He shifted his seat a bit and the shotgun fell across his hand, bringing a cry of pain from him. Holding his hand to his mouth, he turned his head toward the door. All he could see was a shadow.

"I is an ole man. I duzn't wants no trub'ls. I is an ole man."

A tear, tracing the lines in his face, fell upon the shotgun, and glistened in the moonlight, then fell to the porch where it was lost in the darkness.

"I is an ole man."