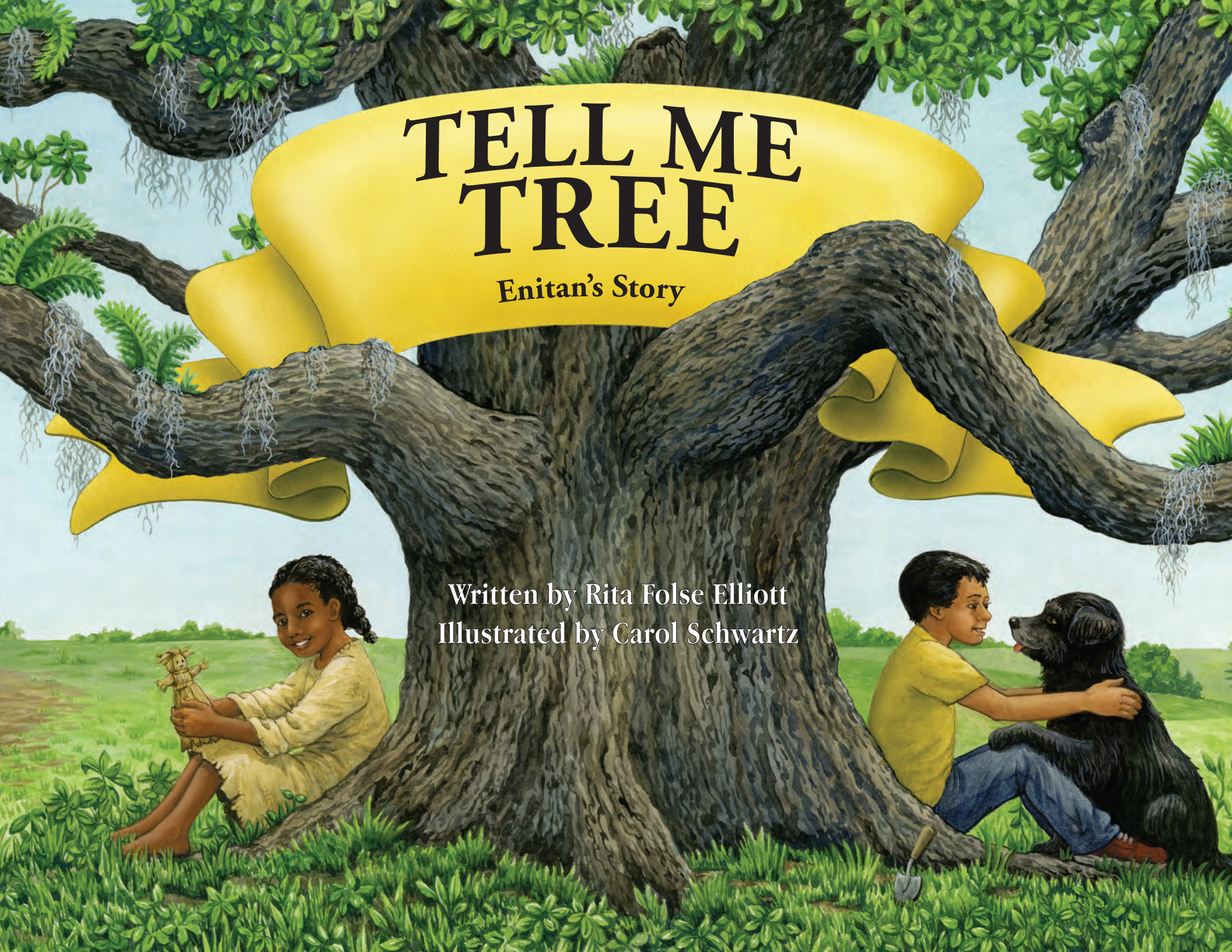


TELL ME TREE

Enitan's Story

Written by Rita Folse Elliott
Illustrated by Carol Schwartz



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New South Associates, Inc.
Georgia Department of Transportation
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2014

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*This book is dedicated to Ian Yoonmyeong Lim (임윤명|林潤明)
and the promise of all children.*

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Nita took the heavy hoe from Auntie Ife's calloused hand. "Thank you, Enitan." Old Auntie Ife was the only one that used Nita's entire name. Once Auntie Ife told her, "Enitan, never forget your name. It means 'person of story' in the language of the Yoruba, the African people from where your mother's mother came." They walked in twilight from the fields back to the village with

the others. The dust from the road coated their worn clothes and sweaty skin. Only Cato had shoes. Nita was always exhausted after hoeing for twelve hours in the 100 degree, humid Georgia summer.

"Auntie Ife, can I help you tomorrow?"

"Yes Enitan." Nita smiled. She liked nothing better.

Sunday was the one day master did not make the slaves work, but still they had their own chores. Last week the slave driver William told everyone in the village, “Georgia and the south are at war with the northern states. There is less food now and no new clothes for you.” Nita sensed the worry among the adults, who knew there was already too little food.

“Come, Enitan,” Auntie Ife said, taking her hand. “We will gather extra wild plants for food and medicine to share. Look here, these vines are smilax. Help me break off the tender ends.”

Nita gathered a large basketful. At the clearing on the edge of the woods, they gathered two baskets of poke for salad.

Auntie Ife said, “You must take care to prepare these as I tell you or they will make you sick.”

“Auntie Ife, here are some blackberries!” They returned to the village to find that Ayo, Jupiter, and Sylvie had gathered two bushels of oysters and caught dozens of catfish. The villagers ate the fish, oysters, greens, rice, and blackberries under the big oak tree nearby. It was Nita’s favorite spot in the whole world.



Winter arrived as villagers were digging up the last acres of the plantation's sweet potato crop. The slaves were allowed to take some of the crop to their village. Nita and Auntie Ife had already dragged two burlap bags of sweet potatoes from the fields and laid them in a large hole beneath the shed. Nita knew the cool ground of the storage pit cellar would keep the root crops from rotting. Back in the fields, gunshots pierced the frosty morning air. William shouted, "Quick. Run back to the village!" Mundy and Jim carried Auntie Ife. Everyone ran as the gunfire got closer. Halfway down the road, Nita turned and ran back to the field to get her gourd water bottles. Just when she picked them up, she saw him - a soldier dressed in a blue uniform, carrying a rifle. Nita froze, dropping the bottles.

"Don't be scared, I won't hurt you," the soldier said. She could sense he was being honest.

"We are here to set you free."

"I am not afraid of you," Nita said quietly, looking him squarely in the eye.



For several weeks, Nita heard gunfire. Auntie Ife said, “We will stay in our village. It is not safe to gather plants when soldiers are camped everywhere.” Nita was glad. The wooden houses in the village weren’t fancy. Many were built with posts dug into the ground that rotted quickly. Others had solid wooden foundations that needed to be repaired often. Old Cinque had built his house with walls of clay mixed with sticks placed in a trench dug into the ground. Once, he told Nita about how his father’s father had taught him how to build that way. That was how houses were built in Africa. Old Cinque’s house was cooler than the other houses and didn’t rot. But the others had forgotten how to build African houses and made their houses of wood.

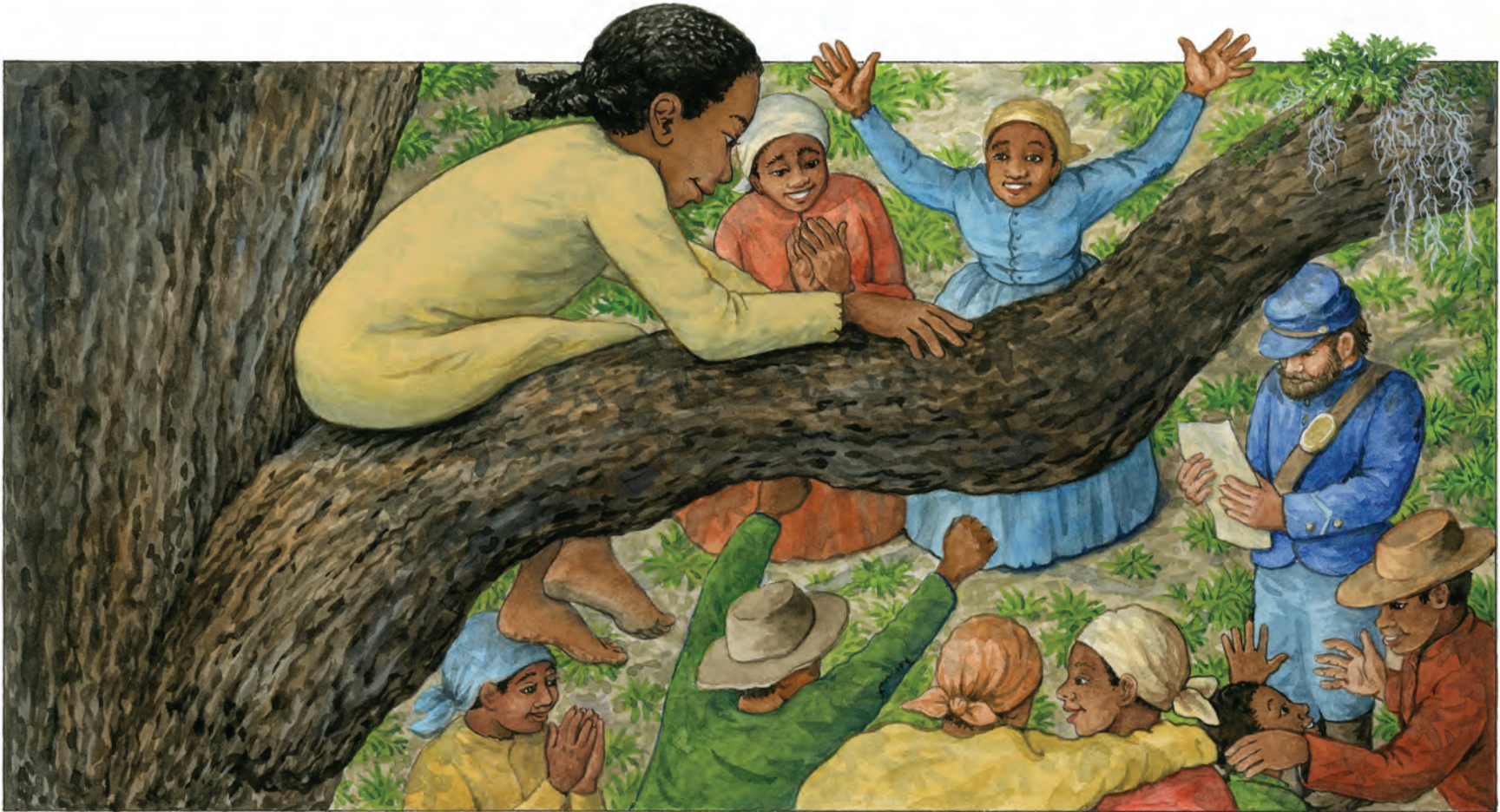
All the houses were crowded. Sometimes families, including aunts,

uncles, and cousins, all had to live together with as many as 10 people packed along the floor where they slept. Only two houses in the village had real brick chimneys. The others had chimneys made of clay and sticks. But the village was home to Nita.

She walked to the big tree and leaned against its trunk. Nita loved the tree. It was probably 200 years old, she thought.

“Hello tree! Tell me, tree, have you kept my treasures safe?” she asked, crouching down to reach into the space beneath one of its huge roots. She pulled out a doll that Cesar had made for her out of corn husks. She liked it even more than the doll with real porcelain hands that Auntie Ife found in the master’s trash pile. It had been thrown away when one hand shattered.





The plantation bell chimed loudly in the distance sending soldiers and villagers hurrying toward the tree. Nita sensed excitement and nervousness. The tree's limbs began swaying furiously. She recognized the Union soldier now standing under the tree. "By General William Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15, I hereby proclaim that you freed people will get 40 acres of land each." Nita looked around in confusion. The tree limbs swayed wildly in a gust of wind. Loud cheering erupted among the villagers.

Auntie Ife said, "Child, not only are we free, but we will have our own land!" Tears welled up in her eyes. That night everyone in the village celebrated. Akan and Jim beat gourd drums. Later, women joined the ring shout, moving in a rhythmic circle to the beat of a stick and the shouter's call. Nita had never in her life known such happiness as she felt that night.

“Tell me tree, how long do we have to wait for our promise?” Nita asked as she sat in her favorite spot. She was 13 now, and it had been three years since the soldier’s announcement. Nita cut the top off another gourd, pulling out all the seeds she could catch to save and plant. “Several in the village say they are willing to fight for property.

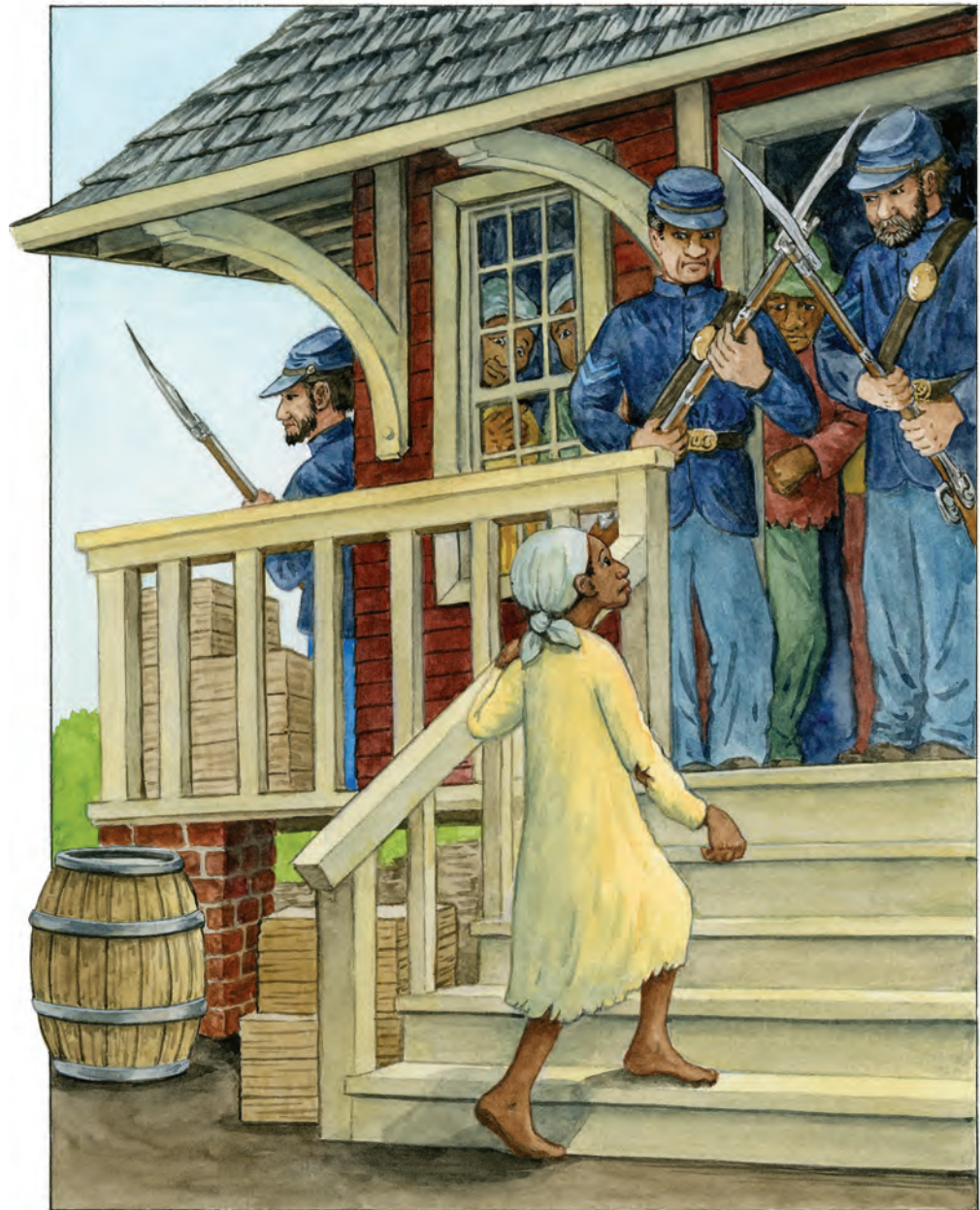
They want to farm their own land and work hard to earn an income.” Nita heard a slight rustle in the tree’s leaves. “Auntie Ife says for me to stay away from them and stay out of trouble.” The wind blew stronger through the leaves. Nita felt the sturdiness of the oak tree in the wind. “Be strong....be strong...” she thought she heard as the leaves rustled.



Nita heard and felt the rapid drum beats coming from Miller's Station train depot nearby. She ran quickly across the fields and found a large group of villagers at the station. "We demand you free Solomon, who is trying to get us our land!" shouted one. "Let's take over the station!" shouted another. And with that, the group pressed into the building. Nita was surprised to see they had guns. Soon soldiers surrounded the depot. Nita was scared of the soldiers and worried that her friends would be shot. "Be strong," she chanted to herself and before she could change her mind she walked firmly up the steps to the door of the station.

"What are you doing here, girl?" a soldier shouted. Nita's stomach churned.

"Please," she said loudly, "Please don't hurt my friends. They just want a chance to work their own land...to raise families. We just want to be free." With that she walked into the depot and joined the cheering group. Nita was the only child among them.





Unlike the train depot, the jail was cold and dark and crowded. It smelled of mold. Someone in the group began to sing and soon others joined in the soft, comforting hymn. “Girl, come forward!” the sheriff demanded. The singing stopped and the crowd cleared a path for Nita to get to the cell door.

As she walked through the crowd, someone patted her back, another touched her shoulder, and someone called out, “Enitan!” The sheriff slammed the door and took Nita outside, where Auntie Ife waited.

He said sharply, “You better see that she stays out of trouble!”

Auntie Ife lowered her head and took Nita by the hand, “Come, child.” When they had walked five miles down the road, Auntie Ife

turned to Nita. “You have disobeyed me.”

“I am so sorry, Aunt Ife,” she said. Tears ran silently down her cheeks.

“Enitan, while it was wrong for you to disobey me, it was right for you to stand up for your family, friends, and yourself. I have always known that you have a strong Yoruba spirit. You sense others’ feelings. You have learned the medicine and food of the plants. And now you have shown that you are a leader.” Auntie Ife put something into Nita’s hand. It was the special pin Auntie Ife never wore but kept hidden in a wooden box in a small hole in the dirt floor of the house. “This was your mother’s before she died. You keep it now,” Auntie Ife said as she hugged Nita tightly.

Several weeks later Nita was washing clothes outside. Her back ached from leaning over the big iron cauldron of hot water and lye soap. She stood up as she heard singing down the path. The jailed villagers were returning home. She dropped the wet dress and ran to them, "I'm so glad you are back!"

Scipio raised his hat to her and nodded in respect. "We may not

get our land right now, but we are free."

"But that isn't fair," Nita said. "Shouldn't we keep fighting? Let's go back to the depot!"

"Nita you are wise for your age, but there are still things to learn. There are many ways to fight for justice." He tipped his hat again and continued walking with the others down the village road.





“Tell me tree, how can I be the leader Auntie Ife thinks me to be?” Nita asked after climbing the big tree and curling up at the top of its trunk, right where its gnarly branches began. “How can I help my friends and the village when I don’t even know Scipio’s different ways to fight? Oh, tree, tell me,” Nita sighed.

The leaves fluttered in the gentle breeze, “read... lead...read...fight... read...write...” she thought she drowsily heard as she drifted to sleep. A wagon rumbled by noisily, awakening her. She looked down and saw Samuel running behind it.

“Who is that?” she called to him.

“That’s the school teacher lady. She says they have a school to teach freed people to read and write!” he hollered.

“Reading and writing!” Nita thought. Even at 13, Nita didn’t know how to read. Slaves weren’t allowed to read and write, but she was free now. “If I can read I can help my village. Maybe that is one way to fight for justice, tree!” As she scampered down the tree, the branches swayed. “Enitan...Enitan...Enitan...person of story...” she heard as she sprinted to follow the wagon.

“And so that is what we know of the story of your great, great, great grandmother Enitan,” LaTasha’s mother said, as she tucked LaTasha into bed. “This is her photograph taken the first day she began at the new school. It was started by the Freedman’s Bureau for freed slaves in Georgia.” LaTasha studied the photograph. The girl had tattered clothes but a beautiful woven head scarf wrapped her hair. On it was a fancy pin with a gemstone in the center.

“Momma, I think her eyes look like yours.”

“I agree. And you know people say your eyes look like mine.” LaTasha smiled, glad that she also had her grandmother Enitan’s eyes.

“Momma, I am so excited to fly from Chicago all the way to Georgia with you tomorrow. I can hardly wait to see where you think Enitan may have lived when she was my age! “Me too honey. Now get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow!” she said, turning off the light. She hoped the archaeological site she read about on the Internet really was the village where Enitan once lived. She didn’t want to disappoint LaTasha or herself.





