

**Holivay, Holivay! (3,004 words)**

The boy watched the dark wooden blades circling above. The ceiling fan, in summer mode year-round, was the slow bassline of his restlessness. He had been thinking, sprawled on his bed, about the man who suddenly became the best stickman in the village. For years, they served as altar boys together. Now, one of them was doing something with his life and left the Church. In a place where everybody knew everybody, the stickman was their hope. The boy and the stickman were only a few years apart in age. But the boy felt small. He wasn't doing big things like the man.

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Stick fighting had become the man's job. When he wasn't doing that, he was limin' on the corner, dishing out morsels of his victories after the official fighting season was over. He won competitions during Carnival and even had a sponsor to tide him over between seasons. Sometimes the man brought his sacred *bois* to the corner, reliving his battles, taking care not to give away his moves, his counters, his attacks. He let people hold it for a small fee. Other times, the man brought one of his old sticks with him and, whenever the boy's mother sent him to the corner store where the man idled, the man harassed him. The man prodded at the boy's calves with the stick. The boy jumped out of the way each time, begging to be left alone.

The boy's real name, Terrance, never left the lips of those who teased him. Instead, he heard all their nicknames for him.

Thin foot.

Lamp post.

And *Three Plumes*, named after the brand of matches that everyone bought.

The man, who often hassled Terrance, had earned a new name he would only lose if he lost a fight. Stickmen didn't come back from defeat, at least not as the men they once were.

Fighters. Enemies. But brothers in the art of stick fighting. They left traces of themselves on each other's *bois*.

Blood. Sweat. Skin. The occasional piece of a punctured eye.

Sometimes, one blow from the *bois* was enough to write a story on the spot. About how the stick buss open this-one-head and that-one-head and blood spray like volcano lava because he was so hot from the fight.

This man remained undefeated.

King Kalinda.

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Terrance wasn't a thief, but he had to fight back and stand up for himself. He had made up his mind to defeat King Kalinda.

Not in a battle.

In the man's backyard. Terrance was going to take King Kalinda's *bois*.

Steal the stick.

And bury it. Or burn it. Or throw it in the river. Terrance didn't want to get ahead of himself, but each fighter was superstitious about his *bois*. Stealing King Kalinda's *bois* was like taking a father's first-born son.

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Day and night were two different things for him. Like oil and water. Terrance knew he couldn't make a sound in the dark. He took off his slingshot slippers and placed them where the dirt started and the grass surrendered. Nobody was awake. Even the mongrel dogs, their saggy breasts swinging in the breeze, had to sleep. They worried Terrance. One unexpected sound and they would be up, quarreling with sounds swallowed by the night.

Terrance prayed for moonlight, but the sky rejected him, giving him all the dark instead, as if trying to change his mind. But Terrance had practiced for weeks tracing the path to King Kalinda's fence made of rusted galvanized iron. The fence was slightly taller than Terrance. He counted the steps and lost track each time. So, he kept trying, over and over, until he got the same number a few days in a row.

Two cinder block columns anchored the galvanized fence on each end. The metal bowed near the middle. Terrance passed his hands along the bricks, making note of any imperfections. Satisfied, he hugged one column and pressed his feet against it, beginning his climb. He steadied himself at the top and raised one leg at a time, crossing over from the street to inside the yard.

He lowered his legs and, holding onto the top of the column, dismounted, hoping the earth didn't raise an alarm.

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"Terrance."

His body clenched. He raised his arms and offered his open palms to the world. It was hard to see in the garage-like structure, but he knew the voice came from behind him.

"Kwame?" Terrance said, turning his head slightly to the side.

"Yuh know long time I don't go by that name. Is King Kalinda to you too?"

Terrance felt a blunt tip draw a line across his upper back. He clenched even more. His eyes closed.

"Turn 'round."

Terrance did as ordered.

“I was wondering when yuh was comin’ here.” King Kalinda was holding his stick. Already baptizing his intruder’s back, King Kalinda punctuated Terrance’s chest. “What yuh want?”

“I... I...I want yuh... leave me alone.”

“Leave yuh alone?” King Kalinda said.

“Yes.”

“Look ’round. Yuh notice where yuh is right now?”

Like a fool, Terrance inspected his surroundings. His eyes had adjusted to the dark. King Kalinda’s yard was a mix of a wide concrete strip and a worn gayelle where, Terrance assumed, the champion honed his craft. Terrance took in the details in case, just in case, the king showed him mercy.

“You is the one coming here by me and I must leave yuh alone? Yuh bounce yuh head or what, Terrance? Tell me why yuh really here.”

“I tell yuh... when yuh see me... leave me alone. Please.”

“Yuh is a brave boy, Terrance.”

“I’s not no boy.”

“Well, yuh come sneakin’ in my house like a boy. Through the back. Yuh eh come and talk to me like a man. In the front. To my face.”

“I talkin’ to yuh now.”

“What if I had a gun, Terrance? Some of these fellas who have gun does be jumpy-jumpy and don’t need no reason to shoot nobody.”

“King Kalinda don’t need no gun.”

The man smiled. “Lyrics, if I did ever hear one.”

“But is true.”

“Terrance,” King Kalinda said, “yuh mudder know yuh here?”

“She working overnight,” Terrance said. “Yuh did see me?”

“I see yuh passing here weeks now, boy. Through the fence. Back and forth like yuh working security.”

“I tell yuh I’s not no boy,” Terrance said. “Yuh see me?”

“I lucky I see yuh ‘cause I eh hear a thing. Yuh was passing quiet-quiet in the night. If I didn’t see yuh, next thing I know, King Kalinda lose he crown.”

The stalemate continued. King Kalinda had home field, but Terrance stood his ground. He looked on as King Kalinda balanced the stick in one hand and, in one swift motion, jabbed forward, pointing at his throat.

“Last chance. Why yuh here?” King Kalinda said.

Terrance glanced down at the *bois*. He could almost smell the tip. Rich earth mixed with blood. Ancestors and their victories.

“I was going to... am going to... steal yuh *bois*.”

“Yuh know my *bois* have a name, Terrance. Yuh want to tief Zion? Steal it and do what with it?”

Terrance looked away. “I don’t know.”

King Kalinda smiled. “Why tief it?” He withdrew the end from the boy’s throat. “Ketch.”

King Kalinda tossed the stick toward Terrance who stumbled, almost falling backward.

The *bois* clattered on the concrete.

“And yuh think yuh coulda tief this from me? Yuh can’t even ketch it,” King Kalinda said. “Pick it up.”

Terrance held the offering, turning it between his sweaty palms, testing the weight, waiting for the king's words.

King Kalinda put his arms behind his back. "If is revenge yuh come for, Terrance, then take it." He pushed his chin out, inviting the boy to strike him. "One chance. But I don't ever want to hear yuh involve with taking no stickman tools again."

Terrance stuck one end toward King Kalinda's throat. He felt a rush from the stickman turning the tables, but it soon passed as they stood silent.

King Kalinda stepped forward, pushing his neck closer to the stick, until wood touched skin.

King Kalinda looked down at Terrance's feet. "Yuh want to buss mih throat? Yuh leading with the wrong foot."

Terrance held the *bois* steady, and shifted his feet. "I not looking for revenge."

"Yuh is not a fighter," King Kalinda said, "so if yuh not looking for revenge, come back tomorrow please god."

"Come back?"

"Bring the *bois*."

"For what?"

"I will leave yuh alone, Terrance, but other people not going to listen to yuh so easy. Yuh get jumbie since yuh is an easy target."

Terrance understood King Kalinda's words. It wouldn't end until he, Terrance, was able to end it. He was in for a lifetime of revenge and loathing otherwise.

King Kalinda opened his mouth to speak again. "Right there," he said, pointing to the stick, "respect the *bois*. Respect the trees it came from. It can save yuh life. It can take lives."

Terrance nodded.

“Holivay,” King Kalinda said.

“Holivay,” Terrance said.

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Terrance returned home and lay down. His present... his borrowed *bois* was next to him. He had gone to King Kalinda’s house as an intruder... as an enemy... to steal. And he left with a *bois* anyway. Terrance stared at the stick in the dark. Protected, he slept.

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The next morning, Terrance stood at King Kalinda’s front door holding the stick, half-expecting him to be asleep. The king appeared, sweating. Terrance followed his host through his small house toward the back yard.

There were four other boys, each of them bareback, sweating as much as the king. They fiddled with their sticks.

“Yuh late,” King Kalinda said. “We almost done. Sit and watch.”

Terrance sat on the floor, spreading the gifted *bois* horizontally across his folded legs. He watched the boys absorb and copy King Kalinda’s actions. Terrance realized that the king was teaching them.

“Alright,” King Kalinda said. “Enough for today. See allyuh next time.”

Drenched, the boys left as a band, wiping their perspiration in their already soaked jerseys.

Terrance stood.

“Not you. Yuh now reach and yuh want to leave?” King Kalinda waited for the boys to walk down the path behind his house, out of earshot. “If yuh ever put God out yuh thoughts



again and come for me, yuh mustn't fool yuhself and think what I teaching yuh, yuh can use to get me," King Kalinda said. "Holivay. I am a man of honor. Yuh understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes... who?"

"Yes, King Kalinda," Terrance said.

"Good. Now listen. I am a believer in the natural ways of *bois*. Yuh born with it, like our ancestors were born with it as they defended each other. Yuh nurture it. We all have it. Nobody taught them to fight. They had to. They had no choice. How we use it is up to us."

"So, what yuh was just doing with the fellas here?"

"Teaching the art. And the history."

"The art of stick fighting."

"No. I'm training them. What they do with it...fighting... is up to them."

"But I see yuh in the papers winning all them fighting competitions."

"That is me. That is not what I am doing here. Yuh could learn piano and never play in a concert."

\*

Terrance joined the others, attending King Kalinda's weekly training. Some boys dropped out. New boys joined. Months passed. Their group rarely grew. Each boy's absence lengthened as Terrance sparred week after week. One day, he got up again after he cowered from another boy's *bois*. He found himself backing up less, pressing forward more.

Until there was no one left to train with him.

"Terrance."

"King Kalinda."

“You is the only one here,” King Kalinda said. “Yuh win by default. Unless we battle, I have nothing left to share. At least, not here.” King Kalinda opened his arms wide presenting the ring where the two stood. “Not without witnesses. There’s only one place to find them.”

“I can’t fight those big men.”

“Yuh don’t have to. Start small. We all do, Crown Prince.”

“Crown Prince?”

“Yuh next in line. But a name is just a name, eh. Yuh have to earn it eventually.”

\*

Like a child, Terrance had learned the alphabet and the numbers of *bois*. Words formed. Those words became chants. Those chants became actions and those actions became reflexes. Results came, not the kind he wanted, but the kind where he learned something small about himself. His back hardened. His arms grew. His mind became sharp. Sun and rain took turns scorching him and cooling him off. Still, Terrance stayed each day until King Kalinda forced him to go home and show his mother he was still alive, he was still in one piece.

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“Attack,” King Kalinda said. “I will defend.”

Terrance swung his *bois* to strike. King Kalinda defended with Zion, but released it late. His crossed arms replaced his defense.

Terrance stopped suddenly, glancing King Kalinda’s forearms, trying to avoid him. Terrance drew blood.

King Kalinda looked at the scratch. “Killer instinct,” he said. “Yuh fighting too frightened.”

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“Tonight, we have among us for our invitational, the latest and greatest in a long line of *bois* men,” one chantwell said. “We have with us the man who has inherited the throne of the great Joe Talmana, the warrior, the greatest stickman... the first stickman. Ladies and gentlemen... the champion...

“... of kalinda...” came the response.

“The warrior...”

“... of the wood ...” came the next.

“The steward...”

“... of stick fighting ...”

“The bastion...”

“...of *bois*...”

“The god”

“... of the gayelle...”

“King... King...”

“Ka-lin-da.”

The crowd murmured as if they wanted everyone to know who they came to see. A chant burst through and leveled out.

*Ka-lin-da.*

*Ka-lin-da.*

*Ka-lin-da.*

“Holivay,” the chantwell said. “Holivay.”

“Holivay,” the crowd answered.

Terrance's dry, cracked lips parted. He held his *bois* firmly. He whispered to the wind.  
"Holivay."

Percussion drums raised the heat. The chantwell continued.

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It had taken days, weeks, months... but his *bois* became part of him. He disturbed onlookers as he played catch with his *bois*. He twitched each leg, warming up each one to take turns being his plant leg and his back foot. What he lacked in experience, Terrance made up for in dexterity. He needed his legs, not only in defense, but in the dance of the stickmen.

*Carray.*

Before he could begin the dance, he needed a partner who would also become his opponent.

The music stretched on. Terrance threw his *bois* in the ring. He looked around, wanting to keep track of King Kalinda.

"The Crown Prince of Kalinda... Terrance," the chantwell said. Terrance had no chantwell of his own. He borrowed one.

Terrance smiled and bobbed his head. He began to sing in a whisper.

*Lawd, put a hand and foot.*

*Flambeau spittin' up soot.*

*Come hell or high water,*

*Crown Prince come to slaughter.*

His own chant.

Someone was watching Terrance sing to himself and stepped into the ring, waving another stick, answering the challenge. Terrance entered his first real fight.

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Terrance knew his first opponent: another boy he had met at King Kalinda's gayelle, who had stopped attending when the rainy season began. Terrance felt he had an advantage already, fighting a boy who only showed up half the time.

Terrance took a slightly sideways stance as King Kalinda had taught him. Both legs trembled, coiling to attack, slack to slide in retreat. His opponent's purple bandana slipped from his forehead. As it slid, Terrance attacked.

He sweated more from the action all around him than from the fight. Drums. Chants. Lights. Flambeaux whipping in the wind. People in the crowd moving around, searching for better views over the heads of taller patrons standing on the edge of the outer circle.

He had an even grace in the two fights that followed. He vibed from side to side, mocking each opponent with sudden movements. His body had warmed up for battle and he eased into the *carray*. So smooth he was, he turned his back to his new opponent, looking for the anchor of King Kalinda's silhouette beyond the light of the gayelle. Terrance held his *bois* level, until ready to strike.

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All in one night, Terrance made it to the lone semi-final.

The Crown Prince.

His opponent, a man named The Lost Talmana, pointed his *bois* at King Kalinda and smiled. He had done this before each fight as if he found a lucky charm in the champion. He was tallish, but didn't hover over Terrance. The rules for an unofficial invitational like this one, held

in a village, were not the same for national competitions. There was less money. But the fighters didn't mind. A fresh version of King Kalinda was the winner's prize. Terrance needed one more victory to claim it ahead of The Lost Talmana.

His opponent's *bois* camouflaged in the backdrop of night. Parts of it were wrapped in dark cloth, fading into the empty, black spaces between onlookers. Terrance dipped his head, searching for signs of the *bois* hiding in the dark faces in the crowd. He did not see the *bois* coming. It struck him viciously. His blood was drawn first and spouted, watering the dirt *gayelle*. A gash opened above his right eye. The chance he'd been thinking about, to face King Kalinda, was gone.

Terrance fell forward, bracing himself with his stick. Slippery, it betrayed him, but stayed in his grasp. His legs buckled. The Crown Prince dethroned.

3-1.

King Kalinda stepped into the *gayelle*. He stood over Terrance.

"King... Kalinda... I can't see," Terrance said, sprawled on his back. He raised his right hand to his head. King Kalinda grabbed it, keeping the boy's fingers away from the wound. "I can't see nothing from this side."

King Kalinda nodded. He unwrapped his student's fingers from the stick, separating the fighter and his tool. The *bois* rolled away.