



*Papa's Banjo* by Monique Duncan

Sam wrapped his fingers around the skinny wooden neck of Papa's banjo. He stretched his hand across its round face and plucked the strings. Pop, pop, it snapped.

"Lower," Papa said.

Papa guided Sam's fingers. Twang, twang, it thrummed.

Every night, Papa played his banjo. It whispered in the moonlight that shone through the window. Mama hummed, while Sam danced in circles. But tonight was different. As Sam sat on Papa's lap, he had his first banjo lesson.

"Gotta get you ready for Pinkster," Papa said.

Sam's eyes widened.

"I'm going to play for Pinkster, Papa?"

"Yes sir." Papa winked.

Thoughts of Pinkster flooded Sam's mind. Bands playing, hands clapping and voices lifting in song. Men and women dancing the jig. Children playing marbles and eating corn cakes with honey. Finally, a break from chores and time for families to come together. Pinkster was just weeks away.

When the morning sun seeped into the manor, Papa had already left to grind wheat. Sam picked up Papa's banjo.

"Mama, I'm going to play for Pinkster," he said.

Mama smiled. "Eat your meal and go help Susan milk the cows. Then come right back here."

Sam swallowed his cornmeal and headed out the door.

A cool breeze brushed his face. He waved to Uncle Charles in the garden.



“I’m going to play Papa’s banjo for Pinkster,” Sam said.

Uncle Charles held up a large gourd.

“I can show you how to make your own banjo,” he said.

Sam ran through the grassy fields until he saw Susan.

“I’m going to play Papa’s banjo for Pinkster,” he shouted.

Susan beamed. Her deep-set eyes wrinkled at the corners.

“Back home, we danced to the sounds of the calabash.”

Sam grabbed a bucket as Susan continued.

“Papa plucked the strings—

Twang! Twang!

Nana told the stories—

Twing! Twing!

The songs beat through our hearts.”

Susan paused and shook her head.

“We carried those songs from the old world to the new. They kept us going through the darkness. And now, young Sam, just think: You’ll be playing so we can dance again.”

Susan’s story strummed in Sam’s head all the way back to the house. Mama was churning butter. Sam helped while he waited for Papa. He beat the heavy cream with a wooden stick, pounding until his arms grew tired. *Where’s Papa?*

“It’s getting late,” Mama said, her voice low and shaky.

Sam heard hurried footsteps outside the house. Dimond rushed in. He swallowed bits of air, trying to catch his breath.



“I’m ... I’m ... sorry, Dina,” he panted. “I have some news.”

Dimond was back from shipping flour down the river. He always had news. But today, his face drooped with sadness.

“Sampson is gone,” he finally whispered.

“No!” cried Mama, dropping to her knees.

Caesar and Kaiser ran in to help.

“Where’s Papa?” Sam cried.

Dimond bowed his head. “Your papa ... was sold down the river.”

His words hit Sam like a blow to the belly. *Papa was gone*. Sam’s eyes filled with tears.

The next morning felt still and stiff. The sunlight cast a muted glow over the mill. As pork crackled in the pan, Mama fried eggs and made biscuits. Lord Philipse was back to oversee his manor and he was hungry.

*How could Mama keep working?* Sam thought. But he already knew the answer. She had no choice. They *all* had no choice.

When night fell, Sam watched a group of elders bow their heads and hold hands. They whispered prayers and called Papa’s name. Uncle Charles played Papa’s banjo. Mama hummed and rocked back and forth. Sam sat in the corner and buried his head between his knees.

“I know your heart is heavy, but your papa loved to play,” said Uncle Charles.

He set Papa’s banjo next to Sam.

Sam cradled it in his arms. It felt light and hollow, like his heart.

“Play, son,” Uncle Charles said.

Sam plucked one string. Then another. Pop. Twang.



Sam didn't feel like playing. He couldn't play without Papa.

Every night, after supper, Sam curled up in the corner of the room. Mama always wiped his tears and hummed until he fell asleep.

One night, Uncle Charles sat next to Sam.

"I made this banjo for your papa," he said.

Sam lifted his head. His eyes, red and raw.

"He was 'bout your size when I taught him to pluck the strings and feel the sounds of each note."

Sam's chest tightened.

"Your papa never went to sleep without playing," said Uncle Charles.

Sam's eyes welled with tears.

Uncle Charles rested his hand over his heart. "Your papa will always be with you. But when you play, he lives on in you."

"I can't play without Papa," Sam cried.

Uncle Charles looked him squarely in the eye. His rough, whiskered face softened.

"Play *for* him," he said.

Uncle Charles was old and wrinkled, but his words were strong and steady.

"Play for your papa," he whispered.

Sam picked up Papa's banjo and glided his fingers down its wooden neck. Pop, pop.

Papa's smile flashed in Sam's mind.

"Lower."

Twang, twang.



Papa's words rang in Sam's ears.

"You sound just like Sampson," Uncle Charles said. "Your papa would be proud."

Night after night, Sam played for his papa.

Soon the manor swelled with people from miles around. Strewn with rainbow ribbons and pink azaleas, the sights of Pinkster brightened Sam's eyes. Drummers and banjo players danced with singers and storytellers. Spit-roasted hen and mashed yams wafted through the air. Children played games and chased each other through the open fields.

Papa used to chase Sam in those fields. Sam looked around. *Could Papa be somewhere in the crowd? Maybe his new owners granted him time off for Pinkster.* A dull pain throbbed in Sam's stomach. *Papa was gone.*

"It's time for the parade," Uncle Charles called out from behind. "Go get your banjo."

Sam ran back to the house. Papa's banjo was tucked under a straw-filled sack on the floor. Sam plucked the strings as Uncle Charles' words settled in his mind. "When you play, he lives on in you."

For several days, Sam played his best for his papa. Everyone danced to the sounds of the calabash.

And every night thereafter, Sam curled up in the corner of the room and played Papa's banjo. It whispered in the moonlight that shone through the window. It beat through his heart and kept him going through the darkness. Sam played *for* his Papa. And every night, he gathered the strength to dance again.