

**A CHILD
WENT FORTH**

ALSO BY BOSTON TERAN

God Is a Bullet

Never Count Out the Dead

The Prince of Deadly Weapons

Trois Femmes

Giv—The Story of a Dog and America

The Creed of Violence

Gardens of Grief

The World Eve Left Us

The Country I Lived In

The Cloud and the Fire

By Your Deeds

A CHILD WENT FORTH

BOSTON TERAN



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to actual events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright 2017 by Brutus Productions, Inc.

All rights reserved under International and Pan American Copyright Conventions.

Library of Congress Control Number: 1-5700842511

ISBN: 978-1-56703-067-9

Published in the United States by High Top Publications LLC, Los Angeles, CA
and simultaneously in Canada by High Top Publications LLC

Special Thanks to LET US BREAK BREAD TOGETHER... THERE WAS A CHILD
WENT FORTH by Walt Whitman... JUMP JIM CROW... WHEN THE PIGS
BEGIN TO FLY... MY OLD KENTUCKY HOME and HARD TIMES, COME
AGAIN NO MORE by Stephen Foster.

Map image courtesy of Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps—www.RareMaps.com

Image of Girl—Print#N269, Hugh Mangum Photographs, David M. Rubenstein
Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

Photo of Boy—Courtesy of Charlene Crandall

Cover and interior design by Alan Barnett Design

Printed in the United States of America

*To the writers and artists, whose inspiration has made
this and all other Boston Teran works possible*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Deirdre Stephanie and the late, great Brutarian...to G.G. and L.S....Mz. El and Roxomania...the kids...Natasha Kern...Janice Hussein, for her fine work.... Charlene Crandall, for her brains and loyalty...And finally, to my steadfast friend and ally, and a master at navigating the madness, Donald V. Allen.

BROOKLYN

CHAPTER 1

“Every artist dips his brush in his own soul and paints his own nature in his pictures. I learned this from you, Mister Beecher. And what is the great canvas of our age? It is America, sir. And the country we paint together will determine the future of this great nation. This is what I teach my son, and what encompasses all that I have learned from your honored self.”

Zacharia Griffin then looked at his son with such love, and smiled in that telling way as only he could. They sat in the private office of Henry Ward Beecher, the most famous evangelist of the day. The boy and his father had traveled all the way from Topeka to the Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn with a letter signed by the most important abolitionists of Kansas. Theirs was an urgent plea to solicit financial aid from the famous Christian foot soldier for their fight against slavery.

Zacharia Griffin brushed his boy’s hair back. “We never know the love of a parent till we become parents ourselves,” he said.

Mister Beecher, that kindly soul, sat at his desk with folded hands and nodded intently, hearing his own prized words being

recited back to him. “Handsome boy,” said the evangelist.

“Looks like his mother. The tragic soul. Has her good heart and nature. And like her, reading is already a passion.”

The boy sat there in his polished shoes and neat suit. He had never been in a room of any kind with such beautiful woods and cut stone. He was overwhelmed and a little bit frightened.

“What is that book you have there?” the good evangelist said to the child.

The boy held it out for the older gentleman who took it.

“He already has a fascination about growing up to be a writer,” said the boy’s father.

“A noble profession,” said Mister Beecher, “when committed to a noble heart.”

The boy, of course, had no such idea about being a writer. Or at least, he didn’t know it at the time.

The book looked to have journeyed many hard miles, the pages being severely dogeared, the binding in places torn loose. But when the evangelist saw the embossed title, how moved his features became. “Ahhh,” he said, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” It was his own dear sister’s work, and he nodded profoundly.

He stood and came around the desk and he handed the book back to the boy and he took the boy’s hands in his own. “What is your full Christian name?”

“Full Christian name?”

The boy looked to his father.

“It is Charlemagne Ezekiel Griffin,” said the father. “But we call him Charlie.”

“Well...Charlemagne Ezekiel Griffin...Like a vineyard, or a vine, they are tenderly sheltered, nourished, and trained, are wisely instructed and restrained, and bear rich and abundant fruit.”

The boy's father nodded in agreement, and there was a look the boy recognized. A look perceptible to no one but himself most probably, that seemed to be totally in tune and in time with all that was going on around him. A look that spoke of such human authenticity, with just a touch of private glee, that the boy had come to know meant...the fleece was on.

• • •

Mister Beecher called for an attendant. An old black gentleman named Louis was asked to escort young Charles to the kitchen. "Fill the boy a nice plate," said the evangelist. "And make sure there's plenty of gratitude to go around." This would give Mister Beecher and Zacharia a chance to talk privately.

The boy had one stiff leg and walked with decided difficulty. Louis led him down a steel circular stairwell. The boy had to clasp the railing and refused Louis' help when offered.

"Thank you," said Charlie, "but I can do it." There was quiet shame in his voice.

"How did it happen?" said Louis.

"How did what happen?"

"Your leg."

"Nothing happened. My father...well...he's like to say God borned me like this."

A place was set at a table in the kitchen. Not at the table where the blacks who worked for the church ate, but at the one for the handful of whites who were part of the ministry.

Charlie sat alone and quietly watched the kitchen help as they went about their business, crossing and crisscrossing the scullery, talking in hushed tones, respectful with their glances. A boy about

Charlie's age, twelve or so, came over and excused himself and then said, "We're praying for you." Charlie knew then word had gotten around, as it always does, one whisper at a time.

Zacharia and Ward Beecher were upstairs in that cool, dark, secluded office to discuss Bleeding Kansas and the popular sovereignty law, which stated slavery in that state was to be decided by the vote of those who lived there. And so, in the most practical sense, violent confrontation was born. Free staters went to war with pro-slavery border ruffians.

"The cost of freedom, is freedom itself," said Zacharia. "God's will is to be determined by he who has the best armed encampment."

It was money—that was what those who signed the letter were asking for. Money to buy arms Zacharia could negotiate for and deliver through a network of underground sympathizers.

CHAPTER 2

“The pious are god’s sacred marks. Put here on earth to be served up like supper,” said Zacharia. “You should have seen that fanatic clergyman come to terms with his own goodness once he got you out of that room.” Zacharia now did a railing imitation of that evangelist for his son. “If we mean to free this world of its crime of slavery, guns are more important than bibles.”

Zacharia drank from his Washington and Eagle flask. “Thank God for hypocrisy. He’s going to talk to some of his abolitionist friends. He should have four thousand dollars within days for me to buy arms.” He looked at the letter he’d created with its forged signatures, then he tossed it across the room. “Charlie, my boy... goodness is the building block of humanity’s downfall. If there’s one thing you remember for when you’re a writer, it’s that—”

“I never said I wanted to be a writer!”

Charlie was sitting on the bed trying to free himself of that damn brace of leather and iron that his father had built for him to wear so he’d pass for a cripple. The boy’s leg was black and blue and cut and, it ached so, and he was angry.

“That’s just another lie you made up there at the church,” said Charlie.

“Yeah,” said Zacharia. “I forget sometimes what I make up and what’s the truth. No matter. As long as you can successfully lie your way out of a lie...you’ll fare well.”

The boy tossed the brace so it would land near his father’s feet to hint of his anger.

Zacharia had rented a room in a small waterfront hotel off of Hudson Avenue and within blocks of the ferry that would take them back to Manhattan and the trains when it came time to escape west.

The blocks were lined with refineries and shipyards and mill houses, and the Brooklyn Gas Light Works lit the night sky outside their window. The bars were rough and loud and peopled with hard cases and seamen and prostitutes. There was no shortage of the poor in the streets and gangs of homeless youth and louts sleeping off a drunk in some muddied alley. And there was always a game of chance to be found and the unintended consequences they engender.

Zacharia went to the window, sat on the sill, and sipped from his flask. He was looking out into a waterfront darkness while Charlie watched him silently. The boy could read that stark and declarative expression from what was already years of experience following his father’s footsteps across a nation of back alley gambling dens. His father’s eyes got all fiery and glistened as if touched by lighted oil, and the stare seemed ceaseless and rather desperate.

Charlie knew his father had the hunger then and that he was already imagining secret pleasures there on the night streets waiting for him. The drinking halls with their money wheels and drunken laughter and brothels with their rinky pianos and dice games and sallow faced girls lurking in shadow. My inheritance, thought the boy, will be the memory of coal smoke, stale beer and bawdy house

perfume. I know the clatting of the roulette wheel like some men know the rhythms of their own body. His father would often say.

And it was so true, it made the son sad, because it was their life.

“I think I’ll tumble out for a while,” said Zacharia. “You rest up here.”

His father stood and tucked away the flask and started for the door, but Charlie was quick to say, “You’re not taking all the money we have left with you?”

The look his father gave the boy flashed with anger, and then hurt. “Not exactly a master of faith, are you?”

“I only know what I learned from you.”

Zacharia didn’t appreciate being so pointedly observed by a boy, but his better angels got hold of him, and he threw out his chin and reeled off a laugh, and then he brushed his long straight black hair back off his forehead.

He reached for a slim packet of bills he had pocketed, licked a thumb, and counted off a few worn dollars which he tossed on the bed. It was then he noticed a medallion attached to a horsehair rope one can wear around their neck. It was lying next to the copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

“What is that?”

“A medallion. It was given to me by a boy who worked in the kitchen. They believe you’re going to do what you told Mister Beecher.”

Zacharia heard the conflict in his son’s voice and brushed past it. He took up the medallion and made a show of looking it over. It was some kind of white jasperware. He had to look closely because the image on it was chinked. He held it to the oil lamp. It was a black man there, in chains and down on one knee. There was etched writing along the rim that he could not read or did not care to read. He tossed it down without a word.

