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The Example

By Nate Bradley

How do you inspire people that have been worked to the bone and beaten day in and day out regardless of whether or not orders were followed? My name is Arthur Richardson and I know their game, and believe me, if there is a way out of this horrible situation I'll be the first to find it.

Each new day in these fields is a repeat of the hell of the previous day. The tension in the air lingered as if it was one with the humidity itself, ever-present and undesirable. We toiled for a man that had no respect for us as human beings. We suffered for a man who took sick pleasure in inflicting pain on a whim for any reason he could think of, no matter how trivial. Zachary Johnson is a despicable human being with no regard for my life or the lives of my people. He always makes it a point to remind us that we are his property and when we "stop being useful," he has no problem "cutting dead weight." It always bothered me how one human could act so cold and unforgiving towards another. I'm not surprised though, for I'm just another in a line of slaves in my family, separated and all sold to different people for no good reason whatsoever.

I had a vision that I could be the one to lead the charge. I want to lead my people away from here, far away. This wasn't just some random idea either; it was provoked by something Master Johnson did a few days ago.

We were out in the fields doing our usual steady stream of work. I wasn't feeling too good and decided that I needed to take a moment to sit and gain my bearings. Usually I'm pretty cautious with my breaks, but at this moment I felt I was in a pretty good

position to keep an eye out. I lay on the moist soil and let the cool earth ease my aching body. I didn't want to be out of sight for too long, but the shade was a haven compared to the blazing heat of the sun. After what felt like five minutes or so, I stood up and began walking back to my work area.

From out of nowhere, I felt sharp slash of pain across my back. It throbbed and burned and I collapsed to the ground. I turned my head slightly to see the burning hatred in the eyes of my attacker cutting through me. Master Johnson flung his arm back and proceeded to whip my back again with all the force he could muster. I wanted to scream out so bad, but I would not give him the satisfaction of hearing my pain. He whipped again and again, hitting my arms, my legs, and what felt like every part of my back.

“Boy, I don't remember anyone giving you permission to lay down. Get up!” he yelled as he yanked me up off of the ground. He cocked back and whipped me across the chest, sending me right down to the ground again. “I am sick and tired of you being defiant with me. I have no problem beating you in front of all your little friends if it keeps everybody in line,” he said as he pulled me off the ground again. “You see you're nothing more than property in my eyes. If I have to take a small loss in order to keep the rest from turning, I have no problem doing so. In fact I've done it before, long before you were even around boy.”

He pushed me to the ground yet again and smirked. He handed me a tattered slip of paper from a small book he often had on him. “I know you can't read this, but to make it clear, take it as a sign that everyone here has a price, and I have no problem taking that loss if someone gets out of line,” he chuckled to himself. He leaned so close to my face

that I could seemingly feel the hatred emanating off him and whispered, “That boy got out of line too many times for his own good, don’t end up like him.”

As he walked away, I worked my way up off the ground and onto my knees. Pain engulfed my body, overwhelming me to the point of nausea. I didn’t want to continue thinking about the pain so I diverted my attention to the paper that was given to me. Little did Master Johnson know, I could read the paper, and what I read made my stomach turn. It was straightforward and hauntingly empty. It was a promissory note “for the hire of a Negrow boy Henry” that showed his price as being 120 dollars. There were notes about him receiving “the usual clothing hat and blanket,” about him not being allowed to “carry rafts, nor sail vessels nor steamboats nor work in a saw mill.” The whole document felt as lifeless, uncaring, and impersonal as Zachary Johnson. I tucked the note away and got back to work.

That night I once again read the note, this time closing my eyes and picturing just what exactly happened in the life of Henry. I first began by imagining what his life was like before being stuck with Master Johnson. I began by picturing a small boy working in the house alongside his mother, mimicking her actions with the carefree demeanor that could only come from a sense of security, of purpose. A wave of nostalgia hit me as I began to think back to my childhood and the warmth of my mother’s love that I was able to experience ever so briefly. It made me think back to those dark evenings where she taught me in secrecy to read, one of the last moments of significance that I experienced with her. My emotions were beginning to feel overwhelming so I continued to think back over what Henry’s life was like. The sights of gleeful children and the warm bonds of family eased my mind until I fell asleep. I felt slightly anxious, almost overwhelmed by

the disdain shown by Master Johnson. I began to place myself into Henry's body, his perspective, seeing things the way that he once saw them. Never before had I experienced a dream that felt this real and true to life.

I woke up to the sound of a loud thud. As my eyes opened, I could tell that things were not quite right. The room I awoke to was much akin to the room in which I had envisioned earlier as Henry's living space. I was able to find a window in which I saw my reflection and somehow I knew that I was Henry. Everything around me was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

The thudding continued, so I ran to where I believe that the noise was coming from. I found a locked door where I could hear the muffled yells of an unfamiliar voice and the low deep sobs of what sounded like a distressed woman. I heard the sound of thrashing whips and screams of agony that made my blood curdle at the thought of such horrors. The thrashing sounded continuous, each strike sounding swifter and more forceful than the last.

I repeatedly slammed myself into the door with all my force and it gave way after a few hits. I was shocked to find Henry's mother nearly naked and badly wounded by the lashings I had heard from the door. I saw a white man who seemed eerily similar to Master Johnson in looks and demeanor. We locked eyes for what felt like eternity before he began to motion as if he would beat me as well. I ran out of the house fearing for my life. I had no idea where I was going; I just knew that I had to escape if I wanted to survive the wrath of his punishment. I ran through fields that seemed endless, making twists and turns in hopes that my pursuer would give up. Running through fields and along a river, I happened upon a dock and instinctively set my sights on one of the boats.

I thought that I could escape, but it was too late. I was caught and I knew then I was going to die. Instead of the whip that I was expecting, a fist struck me across the face and I crumpled to the floor of the boat.

I regained consciousness to find myself restrained in a small shack outside the owner's home. In front of me was the owner and another man, Zachary Johnson. I could hear them discussing the very deal that was on the note that Master Johnson had given me earlier that day. I could hear Johnson saying, "This boy right here will be a good investment for me. I've seen the work he's capable of doing. You should know, if he tries anything like the stunt he pulled with you, I'll make an example out of him." At that statement, the two men shook hands and came to terms on the value of Henry's life right there with him in the room.

Suddenly, I awoke, this time in my own body with the images of my dream fresh in my mind. It was not yet time to wake up but I could not sleep with the thought of Henry's fate lingering in the back of my head. Just what exactly happened that cost Henry his life? I imagined that he was tired of the way that Master Johnson always claimed to have ownership over the lives of others. I understood his anger, as I felt the same way now. I liked to think that he died defending not just his own humanity, but also the humanity of everyone around him who didn't quite feel that they could defend themselves. I believe that I was meant to read that note, to put myself in the shoes of Henry. I was tired of the constant abuse and felt that maybe if I could rally some sort of change, life could be made better.

That week I began assembling as many people as I could, telling them of my vision, my experience in the life of Henry. Their reaction certainly varied between silent

shock and profound enthusiasm. I was stunned to learn that none of my peers had actually been around during that tragic incident. Some had heard what they thought were rumors of what happened, but until now did not truly know the situation. I told them all that with or without them, I would confront Master Johnson and show that I am worth more than any piece of paper could proclaim. Whispers had begun to circulate as to whether I would actually be crazy enough to face certain death just to pull this off.

The day of reckoning quickly approached. One day, I could take no more. I saw Johnson in his usual post overlooking everyone with his typical smug look of intense superiority. As I began to walk to him, a crowd converged behind me. Faint voices could be heard incredulously questioning whether this would be the moment.

Johnson finally noticed the crowd behind me and became immediately incensed. He screamed at the top of his lungs, “What do all of you niggers think that you’re doing leaving your work?” His face began to turn a vibrant shade of red and sweat began pouring down as his scowl became more and more defined.

I walked up to him, leaving enough space to react in case he decided to reach for his whip. “Master Johnson, or should I call you Zachary,” I began, with a heightened sense of bravado as I knew this could possibly be a life or death situation. I continued, “Now I know that you don’t give a damn about anything that I have to say about how you make me and my peers feel, so let me put what I’m about to say in business terms so maybe you’ll understand. We’ve decided that we’re now broken goods so you might as well let us go because we’re done working.”

Upon hearing those last few words, he lunged at me with all his might, jumping off his horse and throwing punches right and left, many of which, to my relief, missed.

Soon the crowd behind me converged on the scuffle and they dragged him off of me and incapacitated him. As I picked myself up off the ground, I noticed hundreds of eyes all staring at me, each face beaming in admiration and craving direction as to what to do next. I had become the example that Master Johnson suggested; I had become Henry. My vision had finally come to fruition and I was their example, their role model, and the man that would lead them to freedom. I directed them the only place that I could guarantee some semblance of freedom.

We were to go North.

Much time has passed since then, and I am proud to finally be able to release this story for all to see. I still ask myself how I was able to risk it all like that. I still wonder what prompted me to act in the way I believed Henry intended to. What prompted me to put so much faith in a story that very well could be fiction? The answer: I believed in the idea that all it takes is one person to stand up for themselves to inspire others. The idea of Henry did that for me and I did that for my peers.