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Her Taste of Freedom

By Orlandra Dickens

Beverly Milnez wondered what little ol' Betsey Simons was up to this time. She stared out her window at the slim, brown girl whose golden complexion reminded her of the seasonal pecans at the local market. Betsey's thick, curly hair caressed her shoulders as she sat on her master's back porch and sang, in a raspy soprano voice, one of the songs that her grandmother had taught her so long ago.

"Betsey, I hear ya been practicing. You sing better than any Negro I eva' heard," Mrs. Beverly called out to the girl.

"Well thank ya Miss. 'Dat sho' means a lot comin' from a woman like you." Betsey actually felt that Mrs. Beverly's compliment was half-assed. She for sure knew that Betsey could sing better than any of the white women that made a living singing in all of Halifax County. But that was for her to keep to herself.

"Maybe ya could go down to the market on Sundays and start sanging for a couple dimes here and there. Those white folks down there would love to hear a young Negro like you sing so pretty."

Betsey thought Mrs. Beverly was just rubbing it in her face now, but when Betsey turned to see Mrs. Beverly coming out to the porch, Betsey could tell by her expression that she was serious. She caught Betsey off guard because she had never said such a thing or even hinted at it. Betsey barely knew how to respond.

"Well ma'am... I...I dunno if those folk would take likin' that much to pay me. I don't wanna waste nobody's time Miss." Betsey replied in a timid voice as if she was already in front

of a crowd. She thought to herself, *if 'dey treated me like I was somebody maybe I would feel like a somebody.*

“Girl if I think ya any good, I know those folk down at the market gonna love them some a you. Go give it a shot. I’ll give you the day off and all. You can even have Saturday to practice some of ya favorite songs.”

Betsey could feel the nervousness welling up inside of her. She realized that Mrs. Beverly was very serious and held back the urge of excitement at the thought of singing in front of a small crowd and potentially making a little money from it. But she really had no choice after Mrs. Beverly insisted; she must do what her owner told her.

“Okay Miss. I guess I try my best. I really do ‘preciate it.”

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It was Saturday before she knew it, and it was Betsey’s first time ever having a day off. Of course there had been days when there was not much to do around the house, but that did not compare to today. Mrs. Beverly had come right out and told her she didn’t have to do anything that day, and it felt different. Real different. Real good. It was the first time in her life that something felt strange but still so good. Betsey thought that maybe one day she would be lucky enough to feel it again. Maybe when she became a woman and was mature enough to find something in comparison. But for now it was all foreign; all of the emotions she felt were new to her. Betsey was fourteen years old, Her time on earth had shown her how hard life could be and her experiences made her skeptical about many things. Although Mrs. Beverly was a good master compared to those on the neighboring plantations, Betsey experienced things that Mrs. Beverly would never understand: being born a slave, being separated from her mother at birth, and always being looked down on by the whites.

The only family she ever knew was her grandmother. Everyone else was separated from her, sold off one by one. She heard rumors of her mother and sisters being freed after being sold to a nice white man from the North. But neither she nor her grandmother knew how to get in touch with them and only wished them the best as freed Negroes. She knew very little about her father, but that didn't bother her much because she could make up stories in her head and think of the best possible scenarios. Maybe he found his way to her mother and sisters and they lived happily ever after. At least she had her grandmother. Until she died earlier this year, "Mema," as Betsey called her, made sure Betsey was showered with all the love and family traditions she could ever ask for. Betsey reflected on all of this daily as a reminder of who she was and who she could be.

Betsey had woken up just in time to watch the sun rise on her day off, not forced to rise before first light to begin her work for the day. She sat on the back porch watching and feeling the warm wind blow the dried up wheat stalks to and fro. There was a comforting silence surrounding her. A silence that wasn't dead quiet, but a natural peacefulness far from the intruding human loudness that usually surrounded her. Not many people were awake this early on a Saturday and it was just her and nature. She could hear birds chirping in the distance and random frogs croaking from the ditches. Somewhere in the distance something quietly moved in the dry grass, just enough for Betsey to hear it. Humming, she found her key in the harmony of the morning.

I wonder what the white folks wanna see me sing in. I only have two dresses. One of 'em is all torn and raggedy and the other one so dingy, I swea'. But I gots ta look nice and all. Mema sure would be proud of me. I know it too. I spend too much time worrying 'bout the wrong things.

Her thoughts were all over the place but she knew she had to rehearse. She refused to go out to the market and embarrass herself in front of the very folks who thought she was incapable of doing anything worth doing. As nervous as she was, she was also determined. Determined to show everybody that she was more than just a slave. More than just a Negro. Yes, a Negro nonetheless and with no shame, but so much more than that.

Betsey's grandmother had taught her so many songs. They ranged from the ones white women sang to the Negro spirituals everyone sang in the fields. There were so many she could choose from. She figured that she should perfect three to five songs and if they really liked them she would just sing them over and over again. How long could they expect her to stand out there and sing anyways?

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Finally Sunday came. The day had come for Betsey to prove herself worthy, not only to Mrs. Beverly and the whites but to herself. She decided to go with the yellow, dingy dress with no holes. It was a simple dress and the fanciest thing about it was the bow on the back that hinted at how young she truly was. It seemed appropriate for where she was going and what she was doing. She tied a ribbon in her hair and let it all fall around her face.

Mrs. Beverly called Betsey to the front of the house. "Are you ready gal? We should head towards town now."

"Yes'm. I'm ready now."

On the way to the market, Mrs. Beverly made awkward conversation. "You look real nice today Betsey. I got a good feeling about today." Mrs. Beverly's friendly reassurance made Betsey almost uneasy. It wasn't that Mrs. Beverly wasn't nice but she was a white nonetheless and her master. She was never this straightforward and friendly about anything.

“Well I thank ya ma’am. ‘specially for the chance ta do this.”

“I feel like it was time I treated ya like the special Negro ya was.”

All of a sudden, Betsey felt like one of the cattle going to be traded now. As much as she wanted it all to be genuine, and as genuine as it sounded, she was still suspicious.

Once they got to the market, Mrs. Beverly searched around for the perfect place for Betsey to perform. The market was shaped like a horseshoe that made it easy to browse and see everything all at once. Finally, Mrs. Beverly decided on a small open space off towards the back of the horseshoe. The opening was slightly behind and between a mixed stand of peaches and plums and some knitted blankets.

“Just wait for me right here gal. I shouldn’t be too long. But I plan on lookin’ and talkin’ so ya’ just get comfortable. Show ‘em how good you are.”

Betsey started with her favorite song and the one she knew the best.

“...ahmazing grace, how sweet ‘da sound..’ dat saved a wretch like me. I once was los’...but now I’m found...”

No matter how broken Betsey’s words were or how country her accent, no one could deny that she had one of the best voices in all of Halifax County. She was barely fourteen years old and had the voice of a thirty year old woman. The girl sounded like she had been through some things indeed. She sang from a place deep within her just like her grandmother taught her.

To her surprise, she quickly attracted a crowd. The whites slowly approached her as if she was the first Negro they ever laid eyes on. They were in awe and it showed on their faces. The first white to drop change at her feet was a young white girl, not too much older than Betsey. She smiled as she dropped the change and looked at Betsey in amazement. It was almost like everyone else just needed to see that the young Negro girl wouldn’t bite, because after the brave,

young white girl dropped her coins, it started a trend among the whites. They all slowly started dropping money at her feet, some moving along to finish their shopping and some waiting to see what the Negro girl would sing next.

Every time Betsey started singing a new song she attracted a new crowd of even more white folk. Before she knew it, there was a pile of silver coins at her feet. But she didn't let it distract her. She stared off into the dusty distance and sang her heart out.

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On the way back to Mrs. Beverly's farm, Betsey held the coins in a dirty canvas pouch that Mrs. Beverly had given her as they were leaving the market. Betsey wondered how much she had made but couldn't count money to save her life so she just waited on her master.

"Ya know that's all yor money, dontcha? I don't wanna penny Betsey. You earned it."

"I thank ya, ma'am. I really do 'preciate it."

"How did you like ya taste of freedom gal?"

Freedom? What the hell was Mrs. Beverly talking about now? Of course it was an amazing feeling to stand there without her master breathing down her neck or staring her down as she sang for the white folk. But never did Betsey think of it as freedom. There were still the white folks who were all in her face and watching her every move.

"I...I dunno whatcha mean ma'am. I sho' liked singin' at the market tho'."

"Well ya got a break from life as you know it for once... I jus' wanna know how it was. Ya did such a good job. Ya stood there an' held ya own."

Betsey stared off into the sky trying to put together everything Mrs. Beverly was saying. She was fighting off emotions she didn't know she had, as she had been doing the past few days since her master started acting all weird and nice.

“I think ya should pack up ya things when we getcha back to ‘da house gal. Just get ya things togetha. Shouldn’t take too long...”

Betsey could feel tears welling up in her eyes and she could hardly understand why. She was confused and felt somewhat betrayed. She thought Mrs. Beverly was proud of her.

“But...b-b-ut what I do wrong ma’am? You gon’ sell me?” Voice shivering and tears in her eyes, Betsey was losing the fight with her emotions.

“Silly child. I’m more than proud of ya. Ya ain’t being punished. If anything ya being rewarded gal.” Seeing that Betsey truly did not understand and now physically seeing the tears falling down her brown, round cheeks, Mrs. Beverly saw she had to spell it out. “You a free Negro now Betsey. I found ya mother and sisters up there North in New York. I’m gonna send you up there with ya family child. I just wanted to make ya last day here one to remember.”

Betsey had never sobbed so hard in her life. She thought she was dreaming and a part of her wanted Mrs. Beverly to stop playing this sick twisted mind game. But the look on her mistress’s face showed a hint of sincerity that she had never seen. To make it all the more real, she handed Betsey her documentation of emancipation. It was sealed and signed with Mrs. Beverly’s mark.

“Ya keep this on ya at all times okay? No matter what. Ya hold on to it for dear life, even once ya get up North. You’ll be fine child, I can promise ya that. I sure hope ya enjoyed ya last day here in Halifax wit me.”