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## Betsey Simons: Freedom at What Cost?

By Anthony Maristany

I was fourteen when I was freed. Many would consider me lucky; some would even go as far as to say that in the eight years of my being a slave, I had it easy. While I am cognizant of the fact that I experienced minimal violence, none of which was sexual since I was so young, my experience as a slave was nothing short of miserable, and it was through another's misery that I suddenly gained my freedom. Here, I provide a condensed version of my story.

I was captured at the age of six and, as such, have lost most of my ability to speak my native African tongue. While the lands of my tribe are but a distant memory, I keep the visceral memories of the lush savannah and the wildlife that roamed close to my heart. I remember my mother's warmth against my tiny frail body as the last time I got to touch her before my brothers and I were snatched up in the middle of the night. The men spoke a strange language, which I now know to be English. My brother's cries were answered with a swift blow to the face. As would soon be a staple in my life, I learned to be quiet by observing the violence inflicted on those who decided to speak out against the white man.

Mr. and Mrs. Milnez were unusually kind in comparison to the slave masters my brothers were sold to. I was tasked with helping out Mrs. Milnez, who told me to simply call her Beverly, around the house and tending to whatever they needed. The couple was middle-aged and did not have any children. I soon learned that Beverly had had three miscarriages and so, in my juvenile understanding of the world, I liked to think that although I was their property, Beverly saw me as the daughter she never had.

Mr. Milnez was a stark and handsome older man with a face that demanded respect. During my eight long years of enslavement, I had few and scarce conversations with him. They

were always about business and what he required of me. If memory serves, our first conversation was when I was still learning to speak English and went a little like this:

“Betsey, now I’m aware that you are young and that this may all be new to you, but I expect you to do your daily duties in an orderly fashion and to respect me. I’m not one for violence but you will be punished if you disobey me in any way. I have no use for a disobedient slave. Do you understand?”

“Yes’m mastah. Betsey is good girl. I’s can cooks and clean for yuh. I’s be real quiet, don’t yuh worry mastah Milnez.”

“I’m glad to hear that Betsey. Please get to washing my clothes and folding them. I have business to attend to in the morning.”

Mr. Milnez went back about his day, and there was rarely ever another exchange of words unless he was hungry or needed something brought to him. He was a busy man who was always out on business trips and so I rarely saw him. Behind that stern face and cold gaze, I could somehow tell that there was an inexplicable amount of pain and subtle compassion for me. The Milnezs had owned multiple slaves in the past, but those men had been bought for the sole purpose of labor. I was a companion to the distraught Beverly when her husband was away.

Mrs. Milnez was kind and soft-spoken, often taking time to braid my hair and sing me songs. She would tell me stories of her youth and help me tend to the house just so she could have someone to talk to. Having her comfort and warmth usually elicited memories of my mother and our village and helped appease the workload of the day. Nonetheless, no amount of kindness could account for the fact that I still missed my family and that I would likely never get to see any of them ever again. I had heard through the grapevine that my three brothers had all been sold to separate slave owners across Halifax County, Virginia. I had never been far from the

house, let alone past the road, since Mrs. Milnez always kept an eye on me and kept me plenty busy from dusk till dawn. I wouldn't have known what direction to run if I could one day manage to escape. And so at the age of ten, after four years of being a slave I decided to merely succumb to the monotonous days ahead of me. At the age of ten, I had to grow up and rid my mind of such infantile pleasures like running and playing with the children of my tribe or hunting for any small game we could find.

Mr. Milnez only lived up to his promise of physical punishment once. One tumultuous occasion where I broke out in pure angst at Beverly became the first and last time I was ever whipped. I was twelve at the time and my despite my thick accent and slave slang, my English was far more versatile.

“Misses Milnez, I long to see my brothers. I been told that they are only ten minutes offa dis hea plantation. Ken I please go visit em? It been nearly six an' a half years and all I's do is work from morning to nighttime.”

“Nonesense.” She told me. “You are my girl and my girl you shall remain until I so desire. Your brothers have likely forgotten about you by now. It is easy for brutes such as you to forget where you came from as soon as you all are put to work. All in all, you animals just have to be disciplined. We are simply too nice to you.”

At this moment, all of the pent up anguish and hatred I felt at my situation was released in one fuming ball of screaming and crying at Beverly. In retrospect, I am surprised at the fact that I could scream so loudly or that I was able to talk back to the woman who I was to respect and look after.

“I hate yuh Misses Milnez. I ain't ebber ask yuh for nuthin. I works and works for yuh an yuh kent take me tuh see my brothers.” I cried. “I bet Mastah Milnez is out dea lookin fuh a

bettuh wife. Yuh kent gib him chillen an yuh kent gib me deh satisfaction of seein my brothers.”

It was this last comment that seemed to strike a chord with Beverly. The sudden shock at my outburst quickly transformed into passionate rage and she slapped me hard across the face. That night I received a savage whipping from Mr. Milnez, which engraved me with the silence I would need to maintain if I ever intended on being free. My relationship with Beverly was never the same again and we rarely spoke. Mr. Milnez never seemed to treat me any different, like my beating was nothing but another business transaction to him; he was always the cold, stern, and quiet man that gave the occasional blunt orders around the house.

And so, a small idea blossomed in my head – a burgeoning idea that grew like a snowball rolling down a hill. I would escape before my thirteenth birthday. If temporary freedom would not be granted to me after all my hard work, then I would seize freedom by my own means. I would find my brothers and free them, and we would go back to my mother and my village. I waited and waited and timed my escape accordingly.

Finally it was time. Mr. Milnez was out on a business trip as usual and Beverly, who usually succumbed to exhaustion early on in the evening, was asleep. Aside from a loaf of bread and a canteen of water that I stole from the cupboards, I did not take any physical belongings with me. I did not want any recollections of my time as a slave. I longed for the future and I longed for my freedom. And so I began my descent down the window that Beverly left ajar to cool the house. Without second thought of hurting myself, I dropped into the bramble bush below. Thorns dug deep into my skin but I did not feel a thing. No amount of thorns and no amount of whips could stop me now.

I ran and ran and then ran some more. Marianne, an older slave who would routinely visit the Milnez home to deliver milk, had told me in passing that a man had asked about me not more

than ten or twelve houses to the right of the Milnez home. And so I sprinted away from fear and from suffering. The night was dark but my heart lit the way forward.

I reached the first home where I thought my youngest brother, Akwonko, could be. I peered my head through a small hole in the slave cabin and was only able to decipher the shape of four or five men in the sheer darkness.

“Akwonko, dat yuhs? Is yuh sister Betsey. I comes ta free yuh,” I pleaded, hoping for a familiar voice to emerge from the darkness. Instead I was welcomed by a deep but timid voice.

“Mam? Yo brother been freed frum hea. Akwonko was deh masttuhs favorite slave round hea. Before he pass away, he dun left yo brother some money an tol’ him he was free to go.” The voice in the dark said, “He dun went aways to finds yuhs and yo other brothers. I’s so sorry Betsey. I hopes yuh can find him.”

Tears streamed down my face. I felt a mixture of sadness and happiness. My brother was free and on his way to find and hopefully free my other siblings, but he had unfortunately missed me even though I was but a half hour walk from him. I had been too late and perhaps Marianne had not been able to communicate my location to let Akwonko know of my whereabouts.

Nonetheless, I continued on. With no general direction of where I was heading, I continued down the path completely exhausted. Around sunrise, I eventually collapsed on the road. When I awoke, I was back in my bed at the Milnez home. An over-bearing dread came over me. I had failed and now I would be punished. I would never be free and my condition would now be far harsher!

Mr. Milnez had found me on his way back home. He had picked up my lithe body and carried me back. I expected anger and the most savage beating I had ever received. All I received, however, was a short speech on how I should not go out late in the night since it was

very dangerous outdoors. Mr. Milnez retained his usual stern look but somehow looked much more frail and weak. Disease and time had withered away his body.

And so I remained a slave for seven more months. I rarely spoke to my masters and simply did my tasks routinely every day. The only thing that kept me alive was the hope of Akwonko one day coming to rescue me. In those days, Mr. Milnez's health continued to deteriorate to the point that he stopped going on his business trips as usual. Beverly spent the majority of her day tending to him, and small tasks such as fetching a pail of water or helping wash Mr. Milnez's body were added to my list of daily duties. This continued for many more days until it was evident that Mr. Milnez was close to death.

It was around my fourteenth birthday where I was summoned for the last time to Mr. Milnez's room. Beverly was quiet and did not even glance my way as I entered the room. Mr. Milnez looked pale and disheveled, a remnant of the strong man he once was. He made an effort to sit up in bed but it was to no avail. He slumped back into the mattress. I sat at his bedside and held his hand. Despite all the suffering he and his wife had inflicted upon me, I could not help but pity him in his current state.

And so began the last but most meaningful conversation I would ever have with Mr. and Mrs. Milnez.

“Beverly, you're a smart girl. You must know that I'm dying by now, right?” he said.

“Yes suh mistuh Milnez.”

“You've been good to us Betsey. I know we worked you hard, but we loved you like the daughter we never had. And so, your duty working for us is over.”

Confused and astounded at the brevity of the situation and expecting some cruel twist, I asked him to repeat himself. “Watcha mean mastah Milnez? If I ain't working fuh yuh anymores

den who will own me now?" I asked.

Mr. Milnez then mustered a smile – the first time I had ever seen him do so. Perhaps the first sincere and most beautiful smile I had seen since I was captured. He looked at me and with all the energy he could muster simply said, "Betsey you are a free slave now. Beverly will sign this letter of emancipation, and you are free to take one of our horses from the stable and go find your brothers."

Tears flowing down my dark face and the manuscript held tightly in my hand, I rode North in search of my brothers and eventually my mother. I would later find out that Mr. Milnez died a few short days after my emancipation and that Beverly spent the last years of her life alone and heartbroken.

I looked up to the sky and saw the powerful beaming sun in the distance. The warmth of the familiar African plains of my village surrounded me. I was free.