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Earth and Ashes

By Michele Mobley

I knew they ate dirt, that it was crazy but common, not only on our modest plantation in Tobago but also on the larger ones too in Jamaica and Barbados and America. Plantation owners shared stories when they traveled, and when my husband told me that this strange inclination was widespread, I knew it would probably end badly for us one day, or more specifically, end badly for one of them. And it did. Craeton died last year, on April 19, 1820, after ingesting ashes mixed with clay. A few months later, on the ninth of December, another one of them – I don't remember his name – died after creating the same deadly meal out dirt and ashes. We had a relatively small operation and couldn't afford to lose bodies, especially in this frivolous manner. Frivolous in that it could have been avoided.

Sugar was our main output at New Grange Estate, yet our slaves were dying from eating dirt. It would have been funny if it wasn't pitiful and annoying. My husband was irritated and so, therefore, was I. Losing slaves was losing money, he said, and he was right. We couldn't afford to keep buying new bodies to replace dead ones. But how could we stop them from eating the dirt or clay and the ashes? We had an overseer to watch them, of course, but not every second or minute in a 24-hour day, and the smart ones always knew how to escape the eyes of our manager, Mr. McFadyen, or the overseer when they really wanted to. My husband told me doctors were calling the dirt eating, "cachexia Africana" and that owners were almost helpless to stop it unless they exerted more discipline on their slaves.¹

All my husband cared was that it affected the business of running his plantation. Slaves died, clearly, from a whole host of reasons during the year: because they were weak, sickly or

¹ Sex, Sickness and Slavery: Defining Illness in the Antebellum South; Marli F. Weiner with Mazie Hough; University of Illinois Press <http://bit.ly/1LkjppS>

just old. In the past year we lost Punch to leprosy, James to consumption, Polly just because she was old, and Rose to obeah of all things. Rose, with her silly self, wanted to conjure spirits to try and save herself from the inevitable. I supposed she got what was coming to her. We tried to introduce the Lord and Christianity into their souls but, I guess, you couldn't sway or save everyone, and the most stubborn of them played with fire by worshipping false idols and gods and evil spirits. I am a God-fearing woman. I often turned away if I even caught a glimpse of the handmade dolls and miniature statues the overseer found dotted throughout the cane fields and behind their sheds as he made his rounds. I knew they were made out of the belief and practice of voodoo and obeah, and it nauseated me. Weren't they terrified of what they were possibly conjuring? How could they not know better? But I gather desperation can make you believe in anything.

I knew we treated our livestock – these men and women – better than most. They must have known that too, right? But still they met in secret and chanted words I knew I wouldn't understand, didn't want to understand, in the hopes of what? Rising up? Having some devils on horses rescue them?

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January 2, 1821. My family wished each other a Happy New Year just yesterday, hoping the births would be higher than the deaths this year. And hopefully no more dirt eating. Unfortunately, there was almost nothing we could do about that because you couldn't hide dirt or clay, you couldn't put it away in a safety deposit box. It was a part of the earth and clearly we needed it to grow our crops and nurture our sugarcane.

As I puttered around the house, Clara, our housemaid was cleaning up. She was good and seemingly loyal, although you never knew for sure because how could you fully trust an animal that's been locked up in a cage almost their whole lives. Never knew what they were thinking. I

told her some things that needed to be done around the house and then asked after her sister, Sophia. I knew, hearing the maids' chatter, that Sophia and Craeton had sort of been sweet on each other. Even though it had been months since he died, I felt compelled to ask Clara how Sophia was, if she was still moping around, and then I added, "I hope we don't have any more dirt-eating deaths this year. I think it will just send the Mister right over the edge." I could see Clara hesitate for a fraction of a second, her hand poised over the mantel of the fireplace.

"What?" I asked.

She paused before answering me, "Well, Miss, it's just..." Her voice trailed off.

"What?" I pressed her.

Clara stood up straight and looked me briefly in the eyes. Bold. She knew that was grounds for a whipping but she did it anyway, almost as if she couldn't help herself. She looked away quickly and said, "Them boys, Craeton and the other one, Pling - it's a sin I know - but we's think they did it knowing what they were doing."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

Clara turned away from the mantel and started fidgeting with the pillows on our silk sofa, the one we had imported from England. She uttered something I didn't quite hear.

"Speak up Clara, what did you say?" She stopped but looked down this time, the cloth she used to clean our dusty surfaces gripped in her hand.

"We think they did it on purpose, Miss. That they wanted to die."

I was stunned and I'm sure my expression showed it. For some reason, I thought this was the most outlandish thing I'd ever heard. Why would they have taken the dirt from God's earth and deliberately eaten it to die? I had heard of the prevalence of these kinds of deaths all over,

but I always thought it was part of their bizarre African practices, not suicide.² Even thinking of the word made me shudder. No one who wanted to be in the Lord's grace or go to Heaven would kill themselves. No, no, no.

My voice was stern with Clara, "Don't you ever repeat that to anyone else, you hear me? Clara, look at me!" She didn't raise her head. "Look at me! Don't ever say that to anyone ever again, do you understand me?"

She lowered her eyes as she nodded her head. "Yes, Miss. I won't."

I scolded her. "That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. You all have it good here. Do you know what happens in other homes, how they treat their stock? Do you all know the things we've heard? Oh my goodness, gracious. If Craeton and that other boy did that then they were ungrateful, undeserving of our kindness. If what you say is true then how dare them! How dare them..."

I turned abruptly and walked out to the porch, grabbing my fan as I went. I sat down on a rocking chair in one of the coolest spots I could find, shady with an intermittent breeze coming from the palm trees. I was so upset. So upset. Taking your own life was the greatest sin of all. No matter how terrible you thought your life was, taking it was unforgivable. Tears stung the back of my eyes as I took two deep breaths trying to calm myself. No, I thought, Clara and the others were wrong. Eating clay and dirt and ashes was just a part of their confused practices. These negroes just didn't know better. Those boys just ate more than they should have, didn't have the brains to realize how much they were ingesting. I shook my head violently from side to side. Surely that must be it.

² The Modern Practice of Physic, exhibiting the character, causes, symptoms, prognostics, morbid appearances, and improved method of treating the diseases of all climates; Robert Thomas, M.D. <http://bit.ly/1GhK0fC>

I would have to talk to my husband about this. Or should I? He would be so upset. He might just punish them all for even putting that thought in my head. I rocked back and forth as I hummed the notes of a hymn we'd sung in church last Sunday. As I did so, thoughts started to invade my brain. Yes, being a slave wasn't ideal but...but it was the Lord's desire; otherwise there would be no plantations and people wouldn't own slaves. It was this way for a reason. And it wasn't so bad; we put clothes on their backs, fed them, let them celebrate certain occasions, and we only punished them when they deserved it. And we weren't like other plantations where we knew the treatment was harsh, even sub-human. I thought about how I had sometimes coaxed my husband out of dealing painful discipline – depending on the circumstances, of course - because I could never reconcile myself with God for letting it happen. But I also knew there were things my husband and the overseer and Mr. McFadyen didn't tell me and I didn't ask. Screams I'd heard, and bruises and wet eyes I'd seen, without asking what had transpired. But to deliberately kill yourself?

My thoughts quieted for a moment. A few minutes later, I put my wrists together in front of me and imagined them chained together for hours in the hot sun with no recourse to remove them. Or suppose I was told to sit in this rocking chair for days and told I couldn't move, or told to walk around our silk sofa for hours and hours in an endless circle and I would be beaten if I stopped? A deep sigh escaped my body. I didn't live their lives but I saw them every day. They were a part of my life, inside and outside my house. Wrists, rocking chair, silk sofa. Sugarcane, a rickety ship, a shack on a plantation. I imagined anything could be made into a prison. Anything. And if you had no way of escaping or you thought that would always be your life, I guess you could go mad. But taking your own life, it was inexcusable, right?

I got up and walked into the house. I could hear Clara and some other housemaids moving pots and pans around in the kitchen, likely beginning our supper. I decided I would not

tell my husband what Clara said, and also never speak about it again to her or anyone else. But the least I could do was pray for these souls. I would pray that they could accept their fate and be thankful for all we did for them. I would pray that they be hopeful that tomorrow would be better than today. I would pray that they find some satisfaction or happiness, no matter how little, in their circumstances. Because if we couldn't find something to hold onto in this life then..... then... I didn't finish the thought and walked quietly upstairs to our bedroom to change into my dinner dress. My husband would be home soon.