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A Narrative of the Torments and Unlikely Freedom of a Child Slave

By Hanna Taylor

My mother was stripped away from her beloved land and dragged here by slave ship at the age of twenty-five. During the immense darkness of a night in 1769, a crowd of armed, pale men turned the sky white and destroyed her village, taking every man, woman, and child hostage. I know my mother suffered in the Middle Passage, but having lived in Halifax, Virginia all my life, and becoming motherless early on in my childhood, it is hard to portray the injustice of her passage properly.

I was born some day in 1779. My mother named me Betsy Simmons. The origin of my name is a mystery, but the whiteness of it mimicked the lightness of my skin compared to the other girls in the territory. On my fifth birthday my beloved mother was swept away by the Almighty God in a manner much more humane than her taking by the white man. Despite knowing the oppressed history of my family's past, I hadn't yet encountered first hand where the darkness of my skin placed me in this cruel world.

My mother's death was followed by a sudden shift in the colors of my world. I started to see in subtle ways how I differed from the family that watched over me. One day, as I was taking a break from cleaning, I saw Julie chasing the chickens in their pen. Julie was the daughter of my master, Henry Williams. It looked like too much fun for a fellow young woman of eight to pass

up, so I joined her. We ran around laughing and skipping, holding hands as the hysterical chickens ran away from our innocent grasp. We were young and our skin did not feel like a problem. Julie and I grabbed and grabbed with no success until finally she caught one by the throat. We giggled in exhilaration as to our achievement and she joked that I could cook it up that night for a celebratory feast of victory. When Julie allowed the chicken to regain its freedom by placing it back onto its homeland, it did not move. It just lay there limp.

This seemingly harmless play transformed my future in ways unimaginable, as Master Williams found no one to blame for the loss of the chicken but colored me. The true culprit did not matter; the dark creature was always to blame. Knowing Julie and my friendship, he did not want to lay a finger on me, but a lack of punishment would destabilize his power. As a solution, he decided to sell me to the Millers a few plantations down.

Every Sunday, Old Mills, the oldest and wisest black man in our territory, would gather all of us darkened folk into the small horse stable on the east side of the tobacco field. We would praise the Lord and sing until our throats were raw, all the while thanking the Lord for placing us in the hands of such a kind master who allowed us to pray, eat, and sleep. I could recall one of Old Mills' sermons about a year before my selling explaining our luck: "Praise de Lord, fer he has placed us under de watch of Marster Williams. Praise de Lord, fer de chains of de Millas have been brok'n." At the age of eight, I couldn't fathom what he meant. I simply assumed that

he liked Master Williams too much to imagine any other place of work. I quickly learned what Old Mills already knew.

Entering the iron gates that separated the Miller residence from the rest of the world, the yellow ball of warmth and sunlight I had known so dearly faded into an indescribable obscurity. The glow of youth seized to exist. As I neared the home of my new master, I caught a glance at an apple tree that was red from top to bottom where bark should lay brown.

The first person that I met upon arriving in the Miller residence was an older woman sharing the same color as me with scars in the shape of sticks on her arms. She feigned a smile, but I could sense a strange emotion beneath. Without speaking, she led me to a bright room at the end of the downstairs hall. White covered every inch, and there sat a woman in front of a magnificent shelf of leather bound books. As I gazed in amazement at the manuscripts and writings, items I had never seen in such an ethereal light, she dismissed the woman who brought me here and stared straight into my soul unaffected, as if she was a marble statue set aside simply to observe. Then she spoke.

“You have been sent here after murdering a young chicken, I have been told.”

“ No ma’am, I didn’ kill no chicken.”

“Do not lie to me child. I do not want harm to come your way, but without confessing, my husband will have to take you into his own hands.” I could feel the air stand still. My body tingled in a way indescribable.

“Ma’am it was an accident,” I answered reluctantly in the manner I knew she was searching for. She looked at me sympathetically for a split second, and then I saw her face harden again.

“Here you will make no mistake, tell no lies, and never look for freedom.”

The word freedom confused me. I did not know what she meant. I already had freedom, or so I thought. Isn’t everyone born with a sense of freedom? At the Williams’ residence I had enough freedom to play when my work was done, and everyone had to work to live.

After her warning, I quickly learned this statue of a woman was Beverly Miller, the wife of my new master. She had placed me as a caretaker of their home, working under the woman who welcomed me with a cautious smile, Agnes. Agnes was kind, she never scolded me when I left a white corner undusted or trimmed the flowers outside too short. She called me child, and I took her on as a motherly figure.

Three days from my arrival I was hanging laundry to dry when I heard an echoed shriek in the distance. There were many workers in the Millers’ residence, so I assumed it must have been an exhausted man or woman from the fields who could not find a break.

The day was immensely hot, yet the sun still failed to lighten the darkness of the plantation. Despite knowing the danger of leaving my work, I was drawn to the noise. I was shocked when I reached my final destination, the rare-colored apple tree I had encountered upon my arrival. I hid in the bushes as to not be discovered of leaving my task. I heard a large whip and then another scream. The crowd of slaves around the tree spread to uncover a light man with a bloody strip of leather directly in front of a young dark boy. I would learn later his name, James, and how he had tried to escape to Canada for freedom.

I watched as my master mercilessly whipped the poor boy of no older than 13. Each time James made a noise, Master Miller whipped harder. His wife stood beside him, neither enjoying the sight nor trying to change the fate of the young boy. Pools of blood covered the ground and the bark of the tree changed to a luminous color of red. The betrayal of James eliminated all of my Master's humanity in my eyes. His resentment towards the young boy did not subside until the boy's flesh was stripped of its brown. He was left chained and unfed for five days: a constant reminder to all the other slaves that escape meant death. On the fifth day, as I was hard at work, I thought I saw an angel come down and take his body to Heaven.

The tree changed its character in the days following James's death. Mourning the lost and harmed soul who had suffered at its roots, the red apples began to rot and the tree pulsed endlessly with the blood of my Master's victim. I knew all hope of regaining my childhood had

vanished. I thought the cruelty of Master Miller would stop simply at that tree, until I heard whispers overtime about the events that took place in the dark areas of the house.

I had been in the Miller's residence long enough to see summer come four more times after James's death without having a physical confrontation with Master Miller, only simple glances here and there as I cleaned or fetched him what he ordered. Most of the assignments placed on the fellow housemaids and I were told to us through Agnes. Despite doing tedious and tiring work each day, I cherished cleaning Mistress Miller's room of books. I had memorized every color of every binding, and over time taught myself how to sound out each of the titles. During the season of my twelfth birthday, I noticed a new edition to my mistress's collection, a red-leathered book with gold etching. Upon this discovery, I stopped my work to try to sound out this new challenge. I rapidly began to read aloud. I had only sounded out the first syllable when Mistress Miller startled me.

"Back to work" she said with a quick smirk, as if she were pleased by my success.

A few days later, as I went to bed on the ground of the basement, I came across something hard under my blanket. Searching for the culprit my hand grabbed a strange rectangular item. As I pulled it out from under my blanket, I saw clearly the red-leather book I had been admiring a few days before. I secreted it away where no one would find it, but in my few free minutes, I would pore over its pages and struggle with its syllables.

Shortly after this discovery, I gained my womanhood. I began to feel a constant surveillance over every move I made inside my Master's home. There was a dark room at the end of the second story hallway that Agnes had warned me upon my arrival never to go near. I had never before questioned her warning because the door was always locked shut. But one day, as I was dusting the pottery near Master Miller's second story study, I was surprised to see the door of the covert room open. Fearing that I would be blamed, with sweaty palms and a beating heart, I tiptoed to the end of the hallway with the goal of closing the ominous door.

My memory desperately struggles still to suppress all that happened that night and the weeks that followed. I was a good girl and prayed to the Lord every day. I did not choose to partake in the actions that Master Miller wanted. He forced himself on me. I tried to run away and scream but he held me down and would not stop. After the first time, I was unable to avoid his grasp. My body was taken and I lost ownership. Whatever he wanted he took against my will.

This went on for over a year, until Master Miller became ill during 1793. All the other slaves and I continued our work as usual, but whispers during the night hoped of a future free of his vicious grasp. Within weeks of the first signs of sickness, Master Williams was taken by the Man above and sent down below.

It took only a few days for the Mistress to sell most of the slaves to new properties. Soon only Agnes and I were left. By this time, I had become a proficient reader, and often would take

furtive breaks in the white room to hone my skills. A week after my master's death, I was summoned into the white room. A statue no longer sat underneath the library of knowledge, but instead a beautiful white woman took its place. This new woman handed me a piece of paper.

“I assume you know what this is.”

I had guessed that it was my time to be sold to a new master. I read it quickly and fearfully. To my disbelief, it was an emancipation letter, dated June 24, 1793. At the age of fourteen, I was going to be free. I had to silence the excitement in my soul for I was not supposed to have knowledge of the written word.

“Mistress...”

“I know Ms. Simmons”

We grasped the intentions of one another on a level beyond speech. The gratitude that filled my soul was mirrored in her smile, filling her face completely for the first time.

Departing the plantation, I took a final glance at the apple tree. For the first time the ground was home to a living organism of bright red, crispy fruit, vibrant green leaves, and bumpy brown bark. Sunlight entered the place that was once filled by the darkness of Hell. Stepping through the iron gates, my quest for true freedom, a passage to Canada, began.