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...

Efua gazed round and saw all children listen to her story with bated breath, their dark eyes sunk into a kind of dream.

‘His youngest son Ntikuma saw him go and followed at a distance to see what he was doing,’ she continued. ‘Ntikuma noticed that the gourd was far too big for Anansi to carry. He couldn’t carry it and climb the tree all at the same time. Have you ever tried climbing a tree, holding something in your hand?’ she asked of the children.

‘No, no one can,’ one of the girls replied.

‘No, you cannot, but Anansi the spider has eight legs, so he tried all the same,’ Efua said. ‘But the gourd was far too big and smooth to carry as he tried to climb into the tree. So he tied the gourd in front of his stomach and tried again. But each time it was too cumbersome to carry into the tree. He slid down every time he began climbing, and Anansi grew angrier each time he tried.’

The children screamed with laughter as Efua made an angry face, just like the spider must have looked as he was fruitlessly trying to climb the tree.

‘Ntikuma burst out laughing as he saw what Anansi was trying to do. “Why don’t you tie the gourd to your back, so you can grip the tree better?” he asked. But as Anansi realised his son was right, he became so angry that the gourd slipped from his grip and smashed into a thousand pieces on the ground. All wisdom the spider had hidden inside now flowed out, and to make things worse a thunderstorm came, causing a great deal of rain in the forest.

...

The young men and girls of the village walked single file through the forest, each with an iron collar fitted around their neck, linked together by

a thin iron chain. They all carried a load on their heads, part of the harvest they had brought in during the previous weeks. One of the captives was Kwame, the young man next door, who Efua had secretly coveted because he was so handsome. He was in the file slightly ahead of her. The strangers had taken away all their meagre possessions and they had to march barefoot over the rough forest trail of red soil trodden flat. Efua was still hurting due to what the three men had done to her, but she was young and strong and soon enough she could walk normally without wincing at every step.

The foreigners guarded them carefully, and once during a pause, one of the young men tried to escape as soon as he had been released from the chain. He fell bleeding with a spear in his back and was left to die in the forest as the others were forced to continue on their way. Efua knew him, and his sister, who had also been caught, screamed pitifully when he was left behind. The others had to share the load he had carried on his head.

No one could do a thing.

At night their guards gave them badly cooked yam from the burden they carried on their own heads, without anything else to relieve the flat taste. Hunger however made them devour all that was thrown them. They had to sleep in the forest, being bitten by the mosquitoes normally absent in the neatly swept huts of the village where the smoke of the cooking fire kept them away. Efua had shyly approached Kwame, and he had promised to stay with her for as long as the journey would take. They slept in each other's arms for comfort, something she once used to dream of, only the dream had become a nightmare.

...

What followed was something she could not have expected in her worst nightmare. The women and girls were taken to a small courtyard where a group of men were waiting by a fire containing glowing irons. One after

the other, the naked women were pushed forward to suffer a glowing iron pressed to their backs. The victims screamed with pain, occasionally one fainted and was dragged aside so the next could take her place. When it was Efua's turn, she resolved not to utter a sound.

Even so she felt sick with the pain of the iron sizzling against her back. Tears were in her eyes, and later she tasted blood in her mouth as she must have bitten her lip when the iron was applied. The crying and wailing women were now chained together in pairs, then a low door opened into a dark space. Efua and the others were sent inside, entering a stinking darkness, where more women could dimly be seen lying down or sitting. There were even young children inside. There was only one small window high up in the wall, it was crowded, hot and stuffy, and in a corner lay people who looked sick or might even be dead.

During the first days in her prison, Efua was dumb with horror. The pain of the brand on her back persisted for days and the burn festered, but after a time it healed, leaving an ugly white scar. In the centre of the dungeon was a dirty gutter full of filth which served as a latrine, where you had to squat with everyone looking silently on. There was no water to wash yourself with, and every few days when the stench had become intolerable, a few buckets of water were brought to flush out the excrement through a hole in the wall.

Things were made even worse because the women were chained together. Efua's companion was a girl from another tribe. They didn't understand one another, but soon learned to communicate in sign language. Occasionally the women were let out into a small enclosed yard, where white men leered at them from a gallery, nudging one another and pointing out the most attractive 'specimens', laughing at each other's dirty jokes.

...

At the end of the wooden pathway were canoes, which the unfortunates were sent into, guarded by armed men all the way so they could not escape. The canoes were paddled out through the surf, going alongside a great vessel with masts and sails waiting in the distance. It could only be seen for a few moments before the door slammed shut. Those who remained soon called it the *door of no return*, because they did not expect anyone who went through ever to come back. At least a hundred people had been taken from the dungeon.

Shortly after the departure of the others, the door to the courtyard opened, and all the young girls had to go out and line up in the sun, blinking against the brilliant light. On the gallery a number of white men appeared, and once again Efua had to turn round and round as she was leered at by the men. She was taken out of the line by a white man with a pointed beard, who spoke a few words of Akan, saying he would buy her to mind his children.

Thus it came about that Efua, a young girl of the Akyem people at the Bosumtwe lake, was enslaved in the household of the Spanish slave trader Don Aurelio Ortiz. To the Spaniard she represented two-thirds of a *pieza de India*, for which he paid fifty silver guilders.

...

Amsterdam is crowded and extremely busy. Housewives and servant maids dressed in skirt, bodice and apron make their way to market through the crowds, a basket on their arm. Business isn't done only in the Dam square, but the vendors also peddle their wares on the innumerable barges tied up in the canals. Half a dozen languages were spoken along the canals on my way to the harbour. There were Dutchmen, Frisians, Germans, Flemish, Swedes, Russians in bearskin caps, French Huguenots, and even Portuguese Jews in their pigtails and black hats. The shouting of the

waggoners on the quays along the canals could be heard over the bustle of the crowd – I hardly understood how they managed to safely drive their heavy wagons hauled by a pair of steaming cart horses, through the teeming mass of people.

Having arrived at the waterfront I looked out over the piling at the busy waters off the town filled with small vessels, boats and fishermen. Few large vessels come here nowadays, due to the shallows off the isle of Pampus close by the city, which are silting up rapidly year by year. Most of them now drop anchor in the Texel roads or continue to Enkhuyzen or Hoorn to discharge into barges carrying their cargo into Amsterdam. The only large vessels I saw here had been lifted over the shallows by huge barges. These are filled up with water before being brought alongside on either beam, linked with chains under the vessel's keel and pumped out, thus reducing draught by a few feet. An inventor called Meeuwis Meindertsz is said to be experimenting with specially shaped barges fitting the hull of a ship like a glove, which he calls 'ship camels'. It remains an annoying obstacle though – it is time someone dug a canal to the sea.

...

Two weeks hence, having made a good passage with a following wind from Ushant, the noon sight put us in the latitude of Gibraltar, the Portuguese coast dimly in sight to port. The skipper now made for Las Palmas, but we kept vigil against Barbary pirates, who also sail from Tangier and Casablanca. We exercised the guns to prepare against possible attack.

And not unexpectedly two triangular sails appeared on the eastern horizon, rapidly closing with us. The Latin rigged *chebecs* of the Barbary pirates sail swiftly and close to the wind, and in a calm they use oars to approach a drifting ship. They prefer to attack from astern, where artillery is usually

absent, and rake their victim from stern to prow with the heavy gun they carry forward, as long as it takes for it to strike its colours so they can enslave the crew. In our case there was some wind, enabling us to manoeuvre and fire on the attackers ourselves.

They tried approaching us from either side to confuse us, but the boatswain commanded one battery, and I the other, at the skipper's request. Our exercises carried fruit: a lucky shot from the boatswain's battery resulted in a direct hit on one of the attackers, which immediately began making water and, listing, had to break off the battle. My people were less successful: the other pirate managed to come alongside despite the shots we fired at him, so I assembled the men in the side to prevent a boarding.

Armed with pikes and cutlasses we engaged the attackers, several of which had managed to come aboard, from the gangway and in the waist. Of one of them, who had climbed through a gun port, we cut off a hand, and another was run through by the boatswain, who fought like a madman with his cutlass.

...

Early one morning, shortly before sunrise, we slowly approached the coast, which was hidden in fog. Or might it have been smoke? Closer by we noticed the unmistakable smell of a tropical coast: a fetid odour like ditchwater, mixed with the smoke of countless cooking fires. Slowly, from the murk the contours emerged of a beach, on which lay canoes hauled out of the water, with clumps of palms around a big square grey and white structure: fort St George of Elmina. To the right of the fort was the entrance to a harbour channel, which we could not enter because there was a bridge across. Behind the fort was a large settlement of houses roofed in red Dutch pantiles, and on a hill on the opposite side of the channel was a

second, smaller fort which I soon learned is called Coenraadsburg or St Jago, covering the town and the harbour with its guns.

The skipper luffed the ship into the wind, reducing our remaining speed to nothing, then ordered the anchor dropped. The hawser ran out with a great deal of noise, making the edge of the hawsehole smoke. A bucket of water extinguished the sparks, then the sails were clewed up and we were anchored in ten fathoms of water due east of the fort. Soon, from the harbour channel a few shabby canoes approached us, possibly out of curiosity, or else to trade. They proved to be poor beggars who came to ask for anything we could spare. But the cook cursed them and tipped glowing cinders from the galley fire into the canoes, which then quickly withdrew.

I had arrived at my destination, where I had to live in exile.

...

On a suffocating hot flow of air out of the doorway, a sickening stench enveloped us, and inside I heard a soft muttering, occasionally interrupted by subdued groaning. When my eyes had adjusted to the darkness within, I perceived a packed mass of naked black bodies, lying down or sitting on the floor, or leaning against the walls, chained together in pairs. From above, a narrow ray of light came in, and the only thing that stood out from the dark mass was the white of the eyes and the gleaming teeth, because everyone inside was watching the doorway, tensely waiting for something to happen.

Shocked, I stepped forward to have a better look, but the Ensign seized me from behind, warning me never to go in there alone, chances being that the crowd would grab me and tear me to pieces. The people in there had lost all hope, he said, which inevitably affected their morale and excited their bloodlust against those who had cast them into such a dismal fate.



‘Have you seen enough?’ Le Roy asked, dragging me out of the doorway by my arm, motioning the pikemen to shut and barricade the door. I was literally tottering on my feet due to what I had seen and shook my head in disbelief.

‘You must realise they were sold by their own countrymen. We’re only here to guard them until they can be transported,’ the Ensign said.

‘But surely there is no reason to keep them like animals?’

...

‘I heard you came to aid our people in the dungeons.’

I was astonished. How could she know? ‘*¿Quién ha dicho eso?* – Who told you that?’

‘The women who carried the water from the canal to clean the dungeons.’

And of course I remembered that the water from the canal had been carried that day by women, who had balanced the heavy buckets unfailingly on their heads, without spilling a drop. That must be the reason why African women had that straight poise, seemingly walking without effort, balancing a heavy load on their heads.

‘Regrettably it didn’t last, as señor Bicker forbids it.’

‘A small gesture often says enough.’

She confused me, and I hardly knew what to say, the first woman who ever managed to leave me at a loss of words. She now looked at me without reserve, with half a smile showing beautiful even teeth between her full lips. She had dimples in her cheeks and tiny scars on her cheekbones, present in many of her people, being carved in at a young age. I saw the long lashes of her dark eyes and the tiny perspiration beads on

her forehead and nose in the morning sun. She was very beautiful, no wonder Ortiz had his eye on her.

‘I don’t know what to say to that, señorita. It was only a matter of decency.’

‘It was seen by us and not forgotten. But please excuse me, señor, I have to complete my errands and return to the house of my master, Señor Ortiz.’

‘*Ciertamente, señorita, tal vez hasta la vista.* I hope we’ll meet again.’ I bowed my head, touched the rim of my hat and went on. At the end of the path between the market stalls I looked round, but she had gone.

...

One night she brought me a surprise: two dozen tiny kauri shells, which are used here as small change, threaded on a string. She had carefully saved them and drilled holes in them with an old nail.

‘These are to guard you from evil,’ she said. ‘I asked the *okomfo* to put a protecting spirit into them.’

She put the chain of shells around my neck as an amulet, the most beautiful gift she could think of. I never took them off, and even as I write this, many years later, I still wear them as a necklace.

Despite our precautions it was impossible for us to avoid discovery. One night as Efua was with me, Abeeku knocked on my door to warn me that Ortiz was on his way with a few men to catch us out. He had heard from one of his friends who always kept a watch. Efua dressed quickly, and silently stroked my cheek in farewell before disappearing into the dark. A moment later Abeeku returned, saying he had sent Efua away with two friends, to the wooded hills in the interior. They would accompany her for a day until she was faraway and safe.

...

‘To Suriname?’ It took a moment to sink in – I had automatically assumed the ship was going to Curaçao. I had never been there, but I knew Suriname was way east of Trinidad and Berbice, and dead into the wind. ‘If you’re prepared to take me to Curaçao, how do I reach Suriname from there?’

‘All along that coast and between the islands there is coastal trade with small craft, even to Trinidad and further, but it is a long journey, at least eight hundred miles as the crow flies,’ De Haan said. ‘And if your girl ends up in the Paramaribo slave market, you can forget about her. Those planters are crazy for beautiful women, they are stuck in the jungle which must be little fun.’

‘I’m willing to take that chance. And I cannot stay here because I’m in grave danger, more so if that Spaniard croaks.’

‘You have your mate’s ticket?’

‘Yes, issued by the Amsterdam Chamber, but the certificate is lost, it was in my sea chest which they ransacked as they searched my house here in town.’

‘How much sea time do you have?’

‘Three round trips to the East Indies as a second mate, and the outward journey to the West as a chief, before we were snapped up by a Spanish frigate because we sailed there without a permit, after a cargo of salt that had been promised us. I spent three years interned in Cumaná, before I was allowed home. During the trip in the *Jonge Ophelia* to Elmina I was a supernumerary.’

‘The *Jonge Ophelia*? Isn’t she owned by Geelvinck?’

‘Yes, that piece of work had me arrested in Amsterdam and sent here because I was having it off with his daughter.’

De Haan roared with laughter. '*Geelvinck?* You and Geelvinck's daughter? No wonder he wanted to be rid of you. I wouldn't trust you with my daughter either. And now you're in trouble again over a girl. Where is your brain, between your legs? You filthy womaniser, you'll never have friends this way!'

He calmed down and became serious again. 'All right, listen. Regrettably for you I already have two experienced mates, but if you don't mind working your passage to the West Indies as our third, against no more than your berth and grub, I'll put you on the muster list. That way it won't cost me a thing and I'm rid of having to stand watch. But keep out of sight until we raise anchor, or they might come and fetch you ashore. I'll notify the chief and the second, but don't show yourself on deck in the daytime, I'll give you a temporary berth in the supercargo's cabin, because he is lodged ashore for the moment. During the passage you'll have to arrange for a hammock forward with the boatswain.'

...

In the crowded stern, most people around her lay on their backs, day after day. Once at sea the women and children weren't chained, but the space was so cramped that they could hardly sit, and standing up was out of the question due to the low headroom. Almost without exception they were naked, and as the deck was only hosed down once a day, many lay in their own filth despite the sanitary barrel next to the companionway to the deck – they were only allowed out at certain times. Seasickness and bad food played their respective parts, so the place stank like a sewer, even though in the daytime the crew left the hatches towards the deck open to let in as much fresh air as possible. At night the hatches were closed however, to prevent people straying on deck. They were as helpless as dumb cattle having to wait for their stable to be mucked out.

Efua's cramped berth lay between that of two other women. One of them, Esi, was stockily build and still cheerful despite their terrible plight. She had a small child with her, a boy called Ebo, and had been forced to leave two other children in the village she came from. On Efua's other side was a young girl perhaps thirteen years of age. Her name was Abena and she had been abducted from her village like Efua had been at that age, and taken to Elmina. The first night on the ship, Efua had noticed subdued crying next to her, the slight young body she was pressed against shaken by soft sobs.

'What ails you?'

'I am homesick.'

'So am I.'

'I miss my mother and my village.'

'I miss my loved one.'

'Men have done bad things to me. I am still hurting.'

'It happened to me as well. You will be all right. Women are strong. So are you. We will overcome our troubles, you will see.'

...

A week or so after having gone ashore from the *Tuinlust*, along the Commercial Quay in Curaçao I found a galliot looking slightly worse for wear, with the rather inappropriate name of *La Hermosita*, the Beauty, a two-masted vessel that had been shoddily repaired in places and could do with a touch of paint. The rig looked serviceable however, masts and shrouds were in good order, which made me look twice. Two dark-skinned sailors lay sleeping under a sunshade, and her skipper was on deck, a villainous-looking French Creole with one arm and one eye, a giant of a

man who saw my interest and spoke to me in almost unintelligible Créole: ‘*Bonjou, blanc, koman ou ye?*’

He asked me how I was, that much I knew, but the conversation would improve if we understood one another. ‘*Estoy bien, gracias, capitán, ¿comprende español?*’

‘*Wi, p’tit peu.*’

I tried making him understand with Spanish and some French. ‘I know how to sail a ship and am looking for a berth to *les Antilles*. Where are you bound?’

Apparently he understood, because he replied in bad French, which is easier to understand than Créole. ‘I am bound for Barbados by way of Saint Croix and *La Martinik*. I have a cargo of salt from Bonaire to Barbados, and tomorrow I will receive *une douzaine d’Africains*, who were sold in the market here to the agent of a sugar plantation near Fort-de-France.’

Barbados? That suited me well, Barbados being the intermediate port between North America and Suriname, which probably would find me a ship bound for Paramaribo. To reach there, one had to sail close-hauled and far into the north due to the eternal east wind, and Martinique was on the way to Barbados.

‘*¿Cómo se llama, capitán? What’s your name, skipper?*’

‘*Mwen rele Benoît le Petit. Montez à bord, blanc, pour discuter.*’

Benoît le Petit? That name was the worst possible choice for such a man, because he was over six foot tall. I stepped aboard, and between his garbled French and my Spanish we could just about understand one another.

...

‘In Elmina I had a relationship with an African girl who was another man’s property. Four months ago, as a punishment they put her aboard a ship to Suriname to be sold. I had to flee and managed to get aboard a friendly skipper’s vessel bound for Curaçao. I want to go after her and try to free her.’

Dias sat up in his chair. ‘Four months ago? What is the name of that ship?’

‘The *Middelburg*.’

Dismay came into his face. ‘The *Middelburg*? So you don’t know yet? She was wrecked with great loss of life on the coast of Suriname. Only part of the crew saved themselves. All those imprisoned on board drowned, a terrible disaster, I heard of it only last week.’

I felt blood drain from my face. ‘Drowned?’ I managed to utter.

Dias looked at me concernedly, rose and opened the door, calling: ‘*Susana, tráenos el Kill-Devil y dos vasos, por favor.*’

He turned round. ‘Your loved one? I am sorry I had to bring you such bad news. Will you tell me of her? Or would you rather collect yourself first?’

I shook my head, unable to utter a word. Susana, the Creole woman who had let me in, entered bringing a tray with a flask and two elegant glasses. Dias poured a half measure in them both. It went past me till he put the glass before me.

‘Better drink this first, my friend. It may help you come to your senses.’

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