

Message That Kills: A Slave's Story

“My heartbeat’s still going. Your heartbeat’s still going. We can keep going.”

That’s what *he* said. Nobody could keep us down. Our message was too strong. So strong that it killed me.

The pale watercolour ahead of me turned an orange hue... that was the beauty of sunrise. The sun smiled at us, ready to begin a new day. Sunrise was one of the very few luxuries a slave had, but with it also came a sour note. Every day the sun rose, with it another day of toil and misery. The smell of tobacco from the master's house was so pungent, making me dizzy. I was not one to contemplate: we were rarely given time to. Today was different though. The neighing of the horses was an almost alien sound on the plantation. French people were not seen in such places except for trade. That meant a new batch of males were arriving at the plantation; more victims of persecution. *He* looked African, an Igbo, like the majority of the others, and with similar features to several of them. I would have seen nothing different about *him*.

I really did not like to ponder on the events of my childhood... that is, the few that I could remember. The sight of these new slaves being brought here; the smell of the alcohol; the dust scratching against my feet; the sound of the bartering men; and the taste of my own saliva drying up in my mouth, conjured up memories which I had decided long ago I would forget- those of the beginning of *my* enslavement.

It was a gorgeous summer’s day with a light breeze. My mother was in the hut carefully preparing breakfast as I rather reluctantly opened my eyes, and my younger brother Dumaka was still asleep. The smell of the yam was so lovely as the sunbeams cooked my back. Cockerels crowed, disturbing my sleep, and the taste of food was already lingering in my mouth. Smiling joyfully, my mother began her unique daily tune about life:

*“Sun and moon,
Perfect tune,
A good heart,
Will bring one far.*

*Be kind and find,
Within your mind,
A courage to aid,
Even to wade.*

*Being a lion today,
Not led astray,
I would rather be,
Than a sheep eternally.”*

Her sweet voice swooped over the sunrise, gilding it with gold. This always woke me up: such a glorious tune paired with such an important message. No sooner had I stretched my arms though before *they* came... yes, kidnappers. They were here *again*. Terrifying scenes flashed before my eyes of friends who had been lost to slavery in the past: the trees were burning, the ground was rough, the ammunition was booming and the dirt tasted horrid. A shadow hung solemnly over the

village, creating a deafening silence... and then there was chaos. The wind howled through the trees and the sky cackled above us. I had somehow escaped nine, maybe ten times. Today could be my time... my time to leave... my time to submit.

They always claimed we had 'committed a great fault against their lord' and the whole village would attempt to escape. The current situation was no different. However, soon intimidating artillery was brought out and had I moved so much as an inch I would be dead meat. The slavers were a magnet for us. In a simultaneous fashion all the survivors of the attack walked reluctantly and solemnly towards the kidnappers. It all went so rapidly, quicker than a fire spreading. This was an Igbo's fate.

By this time, it was almost the norm on the Bight of Biafra to become a slave. I had escaped so many times but not today. We had a choice- submit or die- and a very simple one it was. The nightmares I had experienced consistently every single night were coming true. In a group, the assailants restrained us in a coffle (flinging us about as if we were merely circus animals) and marched us directly to the Atlantic Coast. The journey was lengthy and tedious, taking a few weeks at least. The birds squawked menacingly, the ground was rough to the skin and the food tasted obnoxious. It was soon discovered that these assailants were in fact callous, rapacious African rulers from Dahomey, promised exceptional gifts for our sale. Our spirits were down because the oppression had begun. Once the oppression had begun, there was no going back. To go back was to die and to die would be pointless. A hierarchy was already established and we lay right down at the bottom.

At the coast, the attackers traded us with Portuguese slave merchants, for masses of fine cloth. That was our value in the Europeans' eyes- no more than that of cloth. My eyes welled up with tears and my head drooped as the fact that *they* regarded us as standard cargo, lacking human emotions and thoughts, became apparent. The exact details of the sea voyage were blurred in my mind now but it was certainly cramped and squalid. Many died during the journey, but luckily my mother, brother and I survived. The slave ship was running low on resources and the slavers threw several of us off into the sea, never to be seen again. That was the tough life of a slave. We soon lost weight, the difference obvious between us and the white people. Those of us who seemed like we would not make the journey would also be thrown overboard whilst we were still alive. I was so happy I was only nine years old then since the slavers forced girls thirteen and over to try for babies with male slaves, as any we had would become the white people's property. Life onboard was perilous, my stomach was constantly rumbling and the stench was putrid. Our shoulders were practically touching, the crew shouted constantly and the food onboard was tasteless. The voyage lasted a few months and dug a gaping hole in my heart.

When we finally arrived in where I conjecture was Southern America, preparations for the slave auction swiftly began. *They* prepared us meticulously. First, we were washed thoroughly and were given fresh attire to wear. I put on a comfortable white frock made of calico and accessorized myself with a handkerchief around the head. After all was done, the sellers led us into a colossal room in the front section of the building. Yes, it was training time! I had always tried to be optimistic in life and that day was no exception. It was clear just from looking at their faces, that most of the other slaves were thinking about the imminent torture and inevitable hardship that was to come. On the other hand, I tried to find even just one positive aspect of slavery but it was fruitless. Not a single one existed... not for us 'negroes' anyway. I was left with no choice but to face the harsh truth. Slavery was no better than death and there was nothing I could do about it.

It was at this point that we were segregated by gender and arranged by height. After food was given to us, we paraded and *they* insisted we danced. Not long afterwards, the bidding commenced. Strange men examined me as the price went higher and higher. It took some time but I was eventually knocked down to the highest bidder, at 48 pounds. The seller handled me like he would a wild beast and thrust me into the hands of a burly, stout English man. I knew my life was doomed... doomed to be a life not worth living. There were lamentations coming from all corners of the room. The hardest part of the auction was yet to come though: I had to part from my loved ones. My family and I had not talked much on the voyage as we knew that our imminent fate would cause us to wail at one another. I tried to do this now but it could not be the case. The least my relatives deserved was a proper farewell. As if reading my thoughts, my little brother and my mother ran straight towards me (hugging me through our chains and kissing me). Dumaka's birthmark touched mine: we always said his resembled a baby's hand. My angelic loved one was reminding me of my bondage to him, when we were about to lose it. The salty tears fell into my mouth and I was engulfed by various wails of loss. It was only now that my mother and I were able to stand this close to each other, that I noticed her looking rather sickly.

"Mum, are you feeling alright?" I asked tentatively.

She would not listen. She mourned over me, wishing me to remember my morals and to follow my master's commands. As I was pulled away from my family with a vicious tug, I heard my brother scream in terror. My mother had collapsed to the ground- hand clasped on her chest- and stopped breathing normally. "Noooooooooooooooo!" I screamed, my woe piercing through the air like an opera singer. I struggled to run to her side, but was restrained more and more. Despite the noise all around me, I saw my mother with her watery eyes lift her head to look at me one last time. She whispered, "never... f-f-orget my tune" and then her head rolled sideways as her eyelids fluttered. The air was cold and the white men stunk of avarice. My brother was close enough to kiss her a final goodbye as her body convulsed, and her last breath wafted through the air. All I wanted to do was to dig a hole and hide deep in it, gone from people's memories forever. Dumaka and I became further and further apart until he was but a speck amongst the bustling crowd. I decided there and then that I would forget all my childhood including that day. It was for the better: the more I remembered, the worse my life as a slave would seem. To a plantation in Georgia was I brought and there I began a new life, but not one I wanted.

As I contemplated on those times, tears came like a waterfall down my face but were interrupted by a familiar tune and one that stung my heart with nostalgia:

*"Sun and moon,
Perfect tune,
A good heart,
Will bring one far.*

*Be kind and find,
Within your mind,
A courage to aid,
Even to wade... "*

Only one family knew that tune- mine. I cautiously, but with curiosity, turned my head to see that beautiful melody coming out from one of the new slaves' mouths. Stunned, I scrutinised his features- just an ordinary man from Africa as far as could see. I saw the boy's brown eyes, black hair and brown skin. There was nothing unusual... yet something in my mind forced me to look again. It was then that I recognised the birthmark... a baby's hand. No. It could not be... I was being ridiculous. My

mind would not rest though: was this man my brother? He saw me staring at him, the shock coming over him too. Almost instinctively, as if to confirm our thoughts, we sang the last verse of the song simultaneously. A warm glow was building up in my heart. Could this really be? :

*“Being a lion today,
Not led astray,
I would rather be,
Than a sheep eternally.”*

Neither of us could believe what we had just heard the other do. We were confident of it now. We had found our sibling.

“Brother Dumaka, is that really you?” I said, rather gingerly.

His eyes glistened with hope as tears trickled from mine. It was pretty much impossible that a slave would meet a member of their family ever again after the decisive auction... well, it had never been reported to have happened.

“I believe so,” he replied, just as shell-shocked as I was.

I rubbed my eyes, shook my head and cuddled him, tears streaming down my cheeks. He burst into tears as well, but they were tears of rapture. Against all odds, we had found each other again. This situation gave me a new-found strength. We knew we would be punished but that was not the point. The point was in our song- our song of resistance. Yes, we were going to resist the evil of our master.

The last four lines of the melody stuck in my mind: its message was to be resolute and fearless for a single day is better than being a puny follower all your life. It could not be more truthful. We could no longer blindly follow the demands of our masters, but instead fend for ourselves. True, this would be a rebellion... but one for the good amongst the evil.

As savage as a tiger, the master got out his whip and together were we punished, but we would not go down just like this. Petrifying noises were made as the whip hit my back and I could smell our master smoking tobacco. Sure, the lashes stung my back. Sure, I had to control my lacrimation. Sure, I doubted for a second whether our plan would be worthwhile. However, 50 lashes were not going to ravage our mission! My brother and I were going to resist in a peaceful manner: we never believed ruthlessness would be the solution. We would refuse to eat, even if it meant we starved to death. It would be tough; men would try to force-feed us; other slaves would tell us this was not wise; we would presumably get whipped until we ate; yet I was as stubborn as a rock. There was no chance of us giving in. *They* needed to learn a lesson.

As soon as our punishment concluded, it was time to eat. We did not join them, yet the master was astute: he knew what we were up to. Without delay, he flung us into a dungeon, like he would a creature into its cage. We rejected subsistence for another 2 weeks, despite our master persistently shoving our mouths ajar... we just spat the food out. At the end of the second week though, we were both feeling intensely ill. My stomach rumbled, my bones were prominent, the air tasted horrid and the dungeon smelt of rotten bodies. Starvation was indeed poison. I contemplated surrendering but Dumaka’s words spurred me on:

“My heartbeat’s still going. Your heartbeat’s still going. We can keep going.”

Two days later, as dawn rose, I felt even worse for wear. My head was pounding, I could barely stand up and I felt nauseous. To keep our spirits up, we sang our song of resistance all that day:

*“Sun and moon,
Perfect tune,*

*A good heart,
Will bring one far.*

*Be kind and find,
Within your mind,
A courage to aid,
Even to wade.*

*Being a lion today,
Not led astray,
I would rather be,
Than a sh-sh-eeep e-e-tern-n-ally.”*

I choked on the last two words, struggling to get them out. I was ailing. My throat felt tight and my chest felt like it was being stabbed a million times. My mind collapsed and my vision became blurred. I felt my body swaying vigorously and I plummeted to the floor, clutching my head.

“Noooooooooooo!” I heard my brother’s deep voice call. I tried to touch his hand but it was forlorn.

“Goodbye, Brother.” I had to pause, gasping for air.

“Please don’t waste your breath, just relax. Please, I’m begging you.”

I knew I had only minutes left to make my mark in this world though. With tears streaming down my eyes, I tried to speak but a lump blocked my throat. My head began to roll sideways, yet I would not go down without a fight. With the little strength I could muster,

“Please...”, I trailed off. I could not leave this world just yet. “Do not let them win,” I mouthed. I felt my body convulse and my breath fly into the air, but then an unconscious awareness came over me.

There was a loud whisper of, “*they will not,*” from Dumaka, lying against my chest. I saw him shaking my case violently, feeling, listening for any sign of life, but I had already flown away. Within my heart, a profound content grew. Then it was just black and I found myself falling down a never-ending hole of splendid darkness. Good would win against evil: all would resist.