The Book of Negroes

Lawrence Hill

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Extract

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I have set before thee life and death,
the blessing and the curse.
Therefore choose life.
—Deuteronomy 30:19

So geographers, in Afric-maps,
With savage-pictures fill their gaps;
And o'er unhabitable downs
Place elephants for want of towns.
—Jonathan Swift

Book One

And now I am old

{LONDON, 1802}

I SEEM TO HAVE TROUBLE DYING. By all rights, I should not have lived this long. But I still can smell trouble riding on any wind, just as surely as I could tell you whether it is a stew of chicken necks or pigs' feet bubbling in the iron pot on the fire. And my ears still work just as good as a hound dog's. People assume that just because you don't stand as straight as a sapling, you're deaf. Or that your mind is like pumpkin mush. The other day, when I was being led into a meeting with a bishop, one of the society ladies told another, "We must get this woman into Parliament soon. Who knows how much longer she'll be with us?" Half bent though I was, I dug my fingers into her ribs. She let out a shriek and spun around to face me. "Careful," I told her, "I may outlast you!"

There must be a reason why I have lived in all these lands, survived all those water crossings, while others fell from bullets or shut their eyes and simply willed their lives to end. In the earliest days, when I was free and knew nothing other, I used to sneak outside our walled compound, climb straight up the acacia tree while balancing Father's Qur'an on my head, sit way out on a branch and wonder how I might one day unlock all the mysteries contained in the book. Feet swinging beneath me, I would put

down the book—the only one I had ever seen in Bayo—and look out at the patchwork of mud walls and thatched coverings. People were always on the move. Women carrying water from the river, men working iron in the fires, boys returning triumphant from the forest with snared porcupines. It's a lot of work, extracting meat from a porcupine, but if they had no other pressing chores, they would do it anyway, removing the quills, skinning the animal, slicing out the innards, practising with their sharp knives on the pathetic little carcass. In those days, I felt free and happy, and the very idea of safety never intruded on my thoughts.

I have escaped violent endings even as they have surrounded me. But I never had the privilege of holding onto my children, living with them, raising them the way my own parents raised me for ten or eleven years, until all of our lives were torn asunder. I never managed to keep my own children long, which explains why they are not here with me now, making my meals, adding straw to my bedding, bringing me a cape to hold off the cold, sitting with me by the fire with the knowledge that they emerged from my loins and that our shared moments had grown like corn stalks in damp soil. Others take care of me now. And that's a fine thing. But it's not the same as having one's own flesh and blood to cradle one toward the grave. I long to hold my own children, and their children if they exist, and I miss them the way I'd miss limbs from my own body.

They have me exceedingly busy here in London. They say I am to meet King George. About me, I have a clutch of abolitionists—big-whiskered, wide-bellied, bald-headed men boycotting sugar but smelling of tobacco and burning candle after candle as they plot deep into the night. The abolitionists say they have brought me to England to help them change the course of history. Well. We shall see about that. But if I have lived this long, it must be for a reason.

Fa means father in my language. *Ba* means river. It also means mother. In my early childhood, my *ba* was like a river, flowing on and on and on with me through the days, and keeping me safe at night. Most of my lifetime has come and gone, but I still think of them as my parents, older and wiser than I, and still hear their voices, sometimes deep-chested, at other moments floating like musical notes. I imagine their hands steering me from trouble, guiding me around cooking fires and leading me to the mat in the cool shade of our home. I can still picture my father with a sharp stick over hard earth, scratching out Arabic in flowing lines and speaking of the distant Timbuktu.

In private moments, when the abolitionists are not swirling about like tornadoes, seeking my presence in this deputation or my signature atop that petition, I wish my parents were still here to care for me. Isn't that strange? Here I am, a broken-down old black woman who has crossed more water than I care to remember, and walked more leagues than a work horse, and the only things I dream of are the things I can't have— children and grandchildren to love, and parents to care for me.

The other day, they took me into a London school and they had me talk to the children. One girl asked if it was true that I was the famous Meena Dee, the one mentioned in all the newspapers. Her parents, she said, did not believe that I could have lived in so many places. I acknowledged that I was Meena Dee, but that she could call me Aminata Diallo if she wanted, which was my childhood name. We worked on my first name for a while. After three tries, she got it. *Aminata*. Four syllables. It's really not that hard. *Ah–ME–naw–tah*, I told her. She said she wished I could meet her parents. And her grandparents. I replied that it amazed me that she still had grandparents in her life. Love them good, I told her, and love them big. Love them every day. She asked why I was so black. I asked why

she was so white. She said she was born that way. Same here, I replied. I can see that you must have been quite pretty, even though you are so very dark, she said. You would be prettier if London ever got any sun, I replied. She asked what I ate. My grandfather says he bets you eat raw elephant. I told her I'd never actually taken a bite out of an elephant, but there had been times in my life when I was hungry enough to try. I chased three or four hundred of them, in my life, but never managed to get one to stop rampaging through villages and stand still long enough for me to take a good bite. She laughed and said she wanted to know what I really ate. I eat what you eat, I told her. Do you suppose I'm going to find an elephant walking about the streets of London? Sausages, eggs, mutton stew, bread, crocodiles, all those regular things. Crocodiles? she said. I told her I was just checking to see if she was listening. She said she was an excellent listener and wanted me to please tell her a ghost story.

Honey, I said, my life is a ghost story. Then tell it to me, she said.

As I told her, I am Aminata Diallo, daughter of Mamadu Diallo and Sira Kulibali, born in the village of Bayo, three moons by foot from the Grain Coast in West Africa. I am a Bamana. And a Fula. I am both, and will explain that later. I suspect that I was born in 1745, or close to it. And I am writing this account. All of it. Should I perish before the task is done, I have instructed John Clarkson—one of the quieter abolitionists, but the only one I trust—to change nothing. The abolitionists here in London have already arranged for me to write a short paper, about ten pages, of why the trade in human beings is an abomination and must be stopped. I have done so, and the paper is available in the society offices.

I have a rich, dark skin. Some people have described it as blue black. My eyes are hard to read, and I like them so. Distrust, disdain, dislike—one doesn't want to give public

notice of such sentiments. Some say that I was once uncommonly beautiful, but I wouldn't wish beauty on any woman who has not her own freedom, and who chooses not the hands that claim her.

Not much beauty remains now. Not the round, rising buttocks so uncommon in this land of English flatbacks. Not the thighs, thick and well packed, or the calves, rounded and firm like ripe apples. My breasts have fallen, where once they soared like proud birds. I have all but one of my teeth, and clean them every day. To me, a clean, white, full, glowing set of teeth is a beautiful thing indeed, and using the twig, vigorously, three or four times a day keeps them that way. I don't know why it is, but the more fervent the abolitionist, it seems, the more foul the breath. Some men from my homeland eat the bitter kola nut so often that their teeth turn orange. But in England, the abolitionists do much worse, with coffee, tea and tobacco.

My hair has mostly fallen out now, and the remaining strands are grey, still curled, tight to my head, and I don't fuss with them. The East India Company brings bright silk scarves to London, and I have willingly parted with a shilling here and there to buy them, always wearing one when I am brought out to adorn the abolitionist movement. Just above my right breast, the initials *GO* run together, in a tight, inch-wide circle. Alas, I am branded, and can do nothing to cleanse myself of the scar. I have carried this mark since the age of eleven, but only recently learned what the initials represent. At least they are hidden from public view. I am much happier about the lovely crescent moons sculpted into my cheeks. I have one fine, thin moon curving down each of my cheekbones, and have always loved the beauty marks, although the people of London do tend to stare.

I was tall for my age when I was kidnapped, but stopped growing after that and as a result stand at the unremarkable height of five feet, two inches. To tell the truth,

I don't quite hit that mark any longer. I keel to one side these days, and favour my right leg. My toenails are yellow and crusted and thick and most resistant to trimming. These days, my toes lift rather than settling flat on the ground. No matter, as I have shoes, and I am not asked or required to run, or even to walk considerable distances.

By my bed, I like to keep my favourite objects. One is a blue glass pot of skin cream. Each night, I rub the cream over my ashen elbows and knees. After the life I have lived, the white gel seems like a magical indulgence. *Rub me all the way in*, it seems to say, *and I will grant you and your wrinkles another day or two*.

My hands are the only part of me that still do me proud and that hint at my former beauty. The hands are long and dark and smooth, despite everything, and the nails are nicely embedded, still round, still pink. I have wondrously beautiful hands. I like to put them on things. I like to feel the bark on trees, the hair on children's heads, and before my time is up, I would like to place those hands on a good man's body, if the occasion arises. But nothing—not a man's body, or a sip of whisky, or a peppered goat stew from the old country—would give anything like the pleasure I would take from the sound of a baby breathing in my bed, a grandchild snoring against me. Sometimes, I wake in the morning with the splash of sunlight in my small room, and my one longing, other than to use the chamber pot and have a drink of tea with honey, is to lie back into the soft, bumpy bed with a child to hold. To listen to an infant's voice rise and fall. To feel the magic of a little hand, not even fully aware of what it is doing, falling on my shoulder, my face.

These days, the men who want to end the slave trade are feeding me. They have given me sufficient clothes to ward off the London damp. I have a better bed than I've enjoyed since my earliest childhood, when my parents let me stuff

as many soft grasses as I could gather under a woven mat. Not having to think about food, or shelter, or clothing is a rare thing indeed. What does a person do, when survival is not an issue? Well, there is the abolitionist cause, which takes time and fatigues me greatly. At times, I still panic when surrounded by big white men with a purpose. When they swell around me to ask questions, I remember the hot iron smoking above my breast.

Thankfully, the public visits are only so often and leave me time for reading, to which I am addicted like some are to drink or to tobacco. And they leave me time for writing. I have my life to tell, my own private ghost story, and what purpose would there be to this life I have lived, if I could not take this opportunity to relate it? My hand cramps after a while, and sometimes my back or neck aches when I have sat for too long at the table, but this writing business demands little. After the life I have lived, it goes down as easy as sausages and gravy.

Let me begin with a caveat to any and all who find these pages. Do not trust large bodies of water, and do not cross them. If you, dear reader, have an African hue and find yourself led toward water with vanishing shores, seize your freedom by any means necessary. And cultivate distrust of the colour pink. Pink is taken as the colour of innocence, the colour of childhood, but as it spills across the water in the light of the dying sun, do not fall into its pretty path. There, right underneath, lies a bottomless graveyard of children, mothers and men. I shudder to imagine all the Africans rocking in the deep. Every time I have sailed the seas, I have had the sense of gliding over the unburied.

Some people call the sunset a creation of extraordinary beauty, and proof of God's existence. But what benevolent force would bewitch the human spirit by choosing pink to light the path of a slave vessel? Do not be fooled by that pretty colour, and do not submit to its beckoning.

Once I have met with the King and told my story, I desire to be interred right here, in the soil of London. Africa is my homeland. But I have weathered enough migrations for five lifetimes, thank you very much, and don't care to be moved again.