Land of My Fathers

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The duration of the passage and the perils associated with it had prepared us for the worst, but the first few days of azure skies and blazing sun dispelled our fears. We sat on deck at sunset to while away the time, hardly ever sleeping for our excitement, and sometimes we sang and talked of life on the plantations until dawn. I would lean against the rail to relish the pleasant sea breeze and to gaze at the gleaming waters stretching endlessly around us. Occasionally, the sound of the waves lashing against the ship would reach me like a song from far across the ocean, soothing my nerves, and dispelling my fears of the unknown. Meanwhile the ship edged on, pushing through the churning waters, moving further away from America and heading steadily towards our destination.

There were days when I would choose to keep myself to myself, refusing to join others for prayer. Prayers were led by Reverend Robert Barclay, a remarkable man. He was born a freeman and had acquired a sound education and was now on his way to Liberia to set up and lead his own church, 'to convert the natives,' he told me. His brother was a prosperous trader in Liberia, exchanging goods with European merchants

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and importing scarce commodities from America. Reverend Barclay would come on deck and share his experiences and those of his father with me. He told me that his father had bought his freedom before the age of thirty-five and had married a freewoman. The reverend was a gifted orator. He was endowed with a booming voice and the ability to hold a person with his portentous and sometimes frightening sermons on things to come.

By now I had acquainted myself with all the passengers on the ship, most of whom were surprised that I was a reverend myself. We exchanged personal histories that were often very much alike, varying only in the length of time spent on the plantations and our struggles for freedom. Some of the passengers had relatives in Liberia, a few were returning after a brief sojourn in America, but the bulk had not been to the country. There was an entrepreneur who was now transferring his thriving business to Liberia. The women were reuniting with their husbands and relatives.

We were on friendly terms with Captain Rupert West and his crewmen. The captain was my age, forty, or thereabouts, a squat fellow, with a bushy beard and fat, seafaring hands. His father, a former planter who owned one of the biggest plantations in the south had set all his slaves free and sent them in this ship captained by his son. Captain West had been to Liberia several times, transporting people and goods between the two shores, and he knew its short history like its inhabitants.

One quiet afternoon, while on deck, I asked Captain West to tell me about Liberia, but he turned to me and said:

'Wait until you see it for yourself.'

The first days were uneventful, but one morning we awoke to a violent storm. The ship lurched sideways, rocking back and forth, an experience I found frightening, for I had come

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to set much store by this life as a freeman. Our captain went on giving forlorn orders to his men, as all of them struggled to keep the ship on course. We kept below, gathered together, praying fervently to the Lord to make true his words that he would deliver his people to the Promised Land. The storm raged on for a whole night and day.

On the morning of the next day, five of the passengers, two men and three women, became seasick and before dusk their condition had deteriorated. While the skies still cracked asunder, Reverend Barclay and I kept vigil beside them, praying constantly for their recovery.

Our prayers, however, failed to save two of the five sick people, who were women. They expired on the morning of the third day.

The ship mourned them. Some of the passengers, distressed by their loss, rushed out onto the deck to vent their rage at the elements. They screamed and called it names. The prospect of a better future in Liberia became a remote one. Some even contemplated returning to America on their arrival in Liberia. That side of the black republic about which I knew little was then revealed to me: Liberia, I was told, was a land founded on uncertainties and with a haphazard economy. Settlers roamed the streets of its capital without a skill, and the few with skills could hardly find work. The whole attempt to set up a colony on a disease-infested continent had been a failure, an unrealistic dream.

But after some feverish sermons by the ever-energetic Reverend Barclay and me, the bedraggled and disheartened passengers kept faith. Reverend Barclay and I said some prayers, and then performed a sea burial. Crowding around the bodies, we wrapped them in sheets of white cloth and added some heavy objects for weight. One of us offered a Bible which

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was divided into two and wrapped with them. The winds blew hard, whining like lost souls. Then, bearing the bodies to the windward side of the ship, we committed them to the sea. We watched the bodies being teased by the ravenous waves, nibbling at them once, twice, and then sweeping them away in a single violent lurch.

We stared in contemptuous silence at the ocean. As if we had quenched its hunger with that ceremony, the ocean soon calmed and a bright sunshine broke upon us. Life returned again to the ship. Some of us could now dare to smile and laugh. Our confidence was fully restored and we could sing hymns of praise to the Lord. Even the captain and his men joined in the festivities. As the men sang, my mind went to my beloved Charlotte in Liberia. I remembered our meetings at the sandy spot. The memories of those moments together I had nurtured even during those periods when every hope of ever seeing her had waned. I was also anxious to meet the natives who featured in my mother's stories, especially the Vais. Perhaps I would meet my stepfather, if he was still alive. Not only was my mission to reunite with Charlotte and to propagate the words of God to the natives, but to observe their customs, to learn their ways and their stories.

After three weeks of seeing nothing but the endless expanse that was the ocean, the men gave up their songs and nightly revels. We now gazed at the ocean with accusing eyes, anxious to be delivered from the grip of its vastness. Sometimes Reverend Barclay and I would stare ahead of us in silence for a long while, and then we would retire to our sleeping corners. Sometimes, from being pure and clean, the air would change to a pungent smell that assaulted our noses, causing breathing difficulties. As a result, I became seasick for two days, but fortunately to the relief of everyone on board recovered. Now in our fourth

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week, the excitement of approaching our destination was evident on our faces. We talked about Liberia as though we had already landed on its soil. One afternoon, after more than forty days at sea, we caught sight of the shores of Liberia.

There was Monrovia, the capital, named after James Monroe, the fifth president of the United States, stretching out into the sea like a peninsula. The city was surrounded by an opulence of verdant, exotic bush. Palm fronds edging its shores danced to the winds, and birds circled the skies, perched on the fronds and then took off into flight.

Then and there, I knelt before the Lord to express my profound gratitude for leading me safely to these shores, to Charlotte.

We disembarked. Because of the bustle of activity and the confusion around the ship, I did not have time to bid farewell to Reverend Barclay and the captain properly, both of whom had been of tremendous help to me during the passage. On setting foot on the shore, Reverend Barclay was swept up in the throng of people who had come to receive him. Shouts of recognition rose every time a passenger saw a relative among the crowd.

Besides our ship there were other vessels docked at the port, probably English or French. The two great powers, Captain West had told me, traded in this part of the country and ruled over lands, north, east and west of Liberia, causing much insecurity to the existence of the tiny country. A large chunk of land which Liberia had hoped to include within its sphere of influence one day had already been taken by the French and British. There was a constant dispute between them and the Liberian government regarding trading posts and the payment of customs duties when traders called at a port on the Liberian coast.

I searched around desperately, trying to figure out a way through the crowd, and my eyes fell upon a young man with

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a haughty look. He was dressed in a long frock coat and a black topper. I drew up to him and asked him about a woman named Charlotte, adding some information about her. On hearing Charlotte's name, the young man's face clouded with irritation, and he turned away from me and sucked his teeth. His indifference and strange behaviour angered me, and I was about to deliver him a slap but restrained myself. There was something about him that suggested his anger might be a shield of sorts to protect his own vulnerability, so I went up to an old man to enquire from him.

The old man, a tall and big black man, who reminded me of my stepfather on the plantation, was dressed in the manner of the young man, differing only in the colour of the frock coat, which was grey. His searching eyes seemed to drink in the sight of every passenger. At the mention of Charlotte's name, hesitation passed over his face and he turned to the young man who was still staring at me, as if I were a source of fascination. He was silent for so long that he began to get on my nerves.

'Please speak to me,' I entreated him, now fearing for the worst. Charlotte must have passed on, I thought, but to my relief the man nodded and said that he would lead me to her. I threw my scarce luggage across my shoulders and followed him.

Monrovia surprised me. As we hurried along its dusty streets, I saw houses built of wood, spacious and grandiose and with front gardens, much like those in America. Here and there were stores trading goods imported from America, alongside African merchandise like camwood, ivory and palm oil which were sold to European traders. The churches were gracefully built as if the country was founded on a stone-hard faith. The people of Monrovia were keen on appearance. Women walked the streets in dresses that were in fashion in America, and as

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if to compete with them in elegance, the men wore black silk toppers.

We saw the home of the president, one of the most beautiful houses in the city. This was the heart of Liberia, the dream of the freedmen. I was certain now, long before reaching my final destination, that I could make this land my home, this America in this paradise of trees. I could thrive in peace here and practise the word of the Lord according to my ability. Here I could preach with the zeal and passion that I felt must accompany such an endeavour.

The sun, fierce and hard, beat down on us and the air was unusually sultry, peppered with the fiery and oppressive odours. Drenched in sweat, I followed the guide, hardly keeping pace with him. Perhaps once upon a time in America he had been a hard overseer, a relentless and feared slave trader, or a skilled plantation worker favoured by his master. Now he walked in huge, determined strides that suggested a man of strong will who condoned no foolishness. Out of courtesy or the fear of being rebuked, I refrained from asking him questions.

We had now traversed the main centre of Monrovia and were heading for the outskirts. The grandeur of the houses diminished to be replaced by mud-walled thatched huts. Some of the huts were huge and could house ten or more people, but most were small and dingy. Children in rags and in the poorest of condition played outside.

My guide stopped at one of the huts, the worst in that area, its door falling apart, its thatched roof riddled with holes. Hordes of flies buzzed about an uncovered bowl of food, and a stench rose up that compelled me to pinch my nose. Was this Charlotte's home?

My heart skipped a beat when he exchanged a greeting with someone inside. The occupant's language sounded like English but was slightly different to the ear.

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Giant trees with hollows at the roots as huge as caves towered over the earth, and on both sides of the path there were impenetrable thickets of vegetation. I had the unusual feeling that we were being followed, but whenever I turned around I saw no one. Strange birdsongs rent the air, and I heard the barking of a dog somewhere close by. The fear that my guide was some madman leading me into grave danger now took hold of me, but in the middle of the forest he led me to a solitary house with a garden. It was newly built but of mud. Thinking that this was my beloved's home, I stopped. But the old man moved on. I could bear it no longer and called out to him. He turned to me with a hard gaze intended to put an end to what he perceived as my childish behaviour.

The path we now walked was a narrow strip with intertwining bushes on both sides, which at times hindered our progress. A snake slithered from one side of the path to the other. I trembled with fear. There was no sign of a house. Emerging from the thickets, we entered a sugar-cane plantation twice the size of the fields of our plantations in America. Voices echoed from it, tired and worn out, fading into the depth of the lush greenness. We saw men harvesting sugar cane, which the women bundled and carried to the mill. The old man exchanged greetings with them and moved on. At a certain point, my mute guide took up a song I had not heard in years. It was a plantation song.

I thought of America with a heavy heart.

We took another path. A profound and almost palpable peace reigned over that place. The path led to a wooden house, unlike the houses in the centre of Monrovia, but equally elegant.

The old man pointed at the house. I thanked him and tried to hand him a coin, but he sucked his teeth as if I had insulted him by offering the coin. Then he turned to head back to Monrovia.

I took a step towards the house, towards Charlotte.

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It was as if my heart was about to wrench itself from my body. With every step I tried to persuade myself that I was exaggerating the importance of the moment and that I should move in steps befitting a man of my age and experience. But my heart reproached me. It brought to bear my nights of solitude and the years of tilling arid soil and picking cotton, and of seeing Charlotte's face in my mind's eye, taunting me about my failure to remember her features, the shape of her nose and lips, her eyes, her touch, and her arms. And of how that first time at the sanctuary had felt as I held her in my arms and guided her to the sandy ground.

On approaching the house, I encountered nothing but silence. The aroma of delicious cooking wafted about. The house was a one-storey building with a verandah whose pillars were decorated with vases of plants and flowers. A simply carved wooden crucifix with the agonised face of the Lord guarded the door. Chairs made of reeds, probably the work of the locals, stood here and there on the verandah. Hanging between two trees in front of the house was a hammock. Somewhere around the house, perhaps at the back, a faint, almost ethereal voice rose with a song.

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I went up the front steps and paused before the door and called out, but received no answer. I gazed into the face of the Lord as if to ask permission. Pushing the door open, I went the length of the passage and stopped at the opened back door to listen for a presence in the house. Except for the sound of the song somewhere, it was silent.

After going down some steps, I looked around but saw no one except a garden of eggplants and collard greens on one side of the house, and a coop with a hen and its chicks. I walked on until I encountered the form of a woman bowed over a scrubbing-board, washing clothes in a bucket of water. She was humming and singing a song softly.

I paused to drink in the whole sight: the ochre earth which she stood on, bearing secrets that were thousands of years old; her hands wringing out the clothes with great deftness, and her song that was once composed in a different tongue in the heart of this continent and then borne by strong and careful people across the Atlantic and brought back centuries later to its root, unchanged, undistorted by time.

The wind sighed through the trees, wafting the pleasant smell of the cooking to me. Somewhere, a bird chirped a single note.

I drew myself up to my fullest height.

'Charlotte,' I called.

She went on washing and singing. She had not heard me.

'Charlotte,' I called again.

It was as if the world had ceased to move. Charlotte stopped, bowed, fixed in her posture, but her hands were trembling.

'Edward!' she said without turning to me.

It was a call tinged with sorrow and surprise, relief and hope.

Slowly, she straightened herself up.

'Edward!'

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She called me now in the tone of one who had expected this moment all along but was now not sure it was happening.

'Edward Richards!'

She turned to me, her hands wet with soapsuds, her mouth agape in surprise and wonder. A long silence ensued as we faced each other. Her once frail, slender body was now plump and shrouded in a simple blouse, her face beaten, her breasts sagged. There was a faint presence of grey in her hair. From the way her feet stood firmly on the ground, they had become much stronger now, the delicacy gone. She was shrouded in the mysteries of this land, in the grip of its terrifying beauty and she seemed edgy and on her guard.

But she remained the same Charlotte. Her eyes had not changed. They were accusing in their steadiness, yet forgiving, berating yet soothing, telling me of the longing that had pinched her face, and that had sucked every warmth and joy out of it and had hardened it to deal with the harshness of living in a place filled with mysteries, questions and riddles.

I moved towards her and flung my arms clumsily about her, sniffing the warmth of her body and relishing the kisses with which she covered me. We stood entangled in each other without words, each understanding what the other had gone through, and why I had to forgive her for the silence, and she me for times endured without me.

We could have remained like that, perhaps forever, were it not for a voice, terrible in tone, which called out her name.

'Charlotte, what is this?'

It was a man's voice. We disengaged with some difficulty.

A man wearing a permanent frown on his face and dressed in working clothes emerged from the house; he came down the steps with his eyes looking me over as though sizing me up.

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The hen had left its coop, followed by its fluttering chicks as they pecked the ground for crumbs. The leaves rustled to the rise of the wind. The sun blazed as after a brief rainfall.

'I told you about Edward many years ago,' Charlotte said.

Her voice sounded strangely calm.

The man sucked his teeth, his gaze fixed on me.

'What is he doing here?' he asked.

I wanted to speak, but Charlotte said: 'He left America to come to me.'

'He should not be here.'

I stood there aware of the power of time to crumble and build, to bring together and divide. Charlotte moved towards me, but stopped short of touching me. Her eyes wet with tears, she pleaded to me to understand.

But how could I understand this life?

It was with a sense of dismay that I left the house with Charlotte calling after me. My heart raced with thoughts, but it pained me to think. I thought of returning to face Charlotte and hear, in her own words, what she felt about me, but brushed it off. It was obvious that she had shunned me with her accusing eyes, sent me off with her silence.

Now I began to doubt the eternity of love, and of its power to survive all odds. Yet, there was that suffering face of the Lord on the cross along the road, staring intently at me. How could love not be eternal? How could it not survive time that was merely the dawning of days and the fall of nights?

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