

The Long Song

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THE
LONG
SONG
ANDREA LEVY



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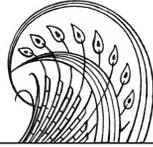
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FOREWORD



THE BOOK YOU ARE now holding within your hand was born of a craving. My mama had a story—a story that lay so fat within her breast that she felt impelled, by some force which was mightier than her own will, to relay this tale to me, her son. Her intention was that, once knowing the tale, I would then, at some other date, convey its narrative to my own daughters. And so it would go on. The fable would never be lost and, in its several recitals, might gain a majesty to rival the legends told whilst pointing at the portraits or busts in any fancy great house upon this island of Jamaica.

It was a fine ambition from a noble old woman for whom many of her years were lived in harsh circumstance. This wish demanded respect.

Unfortunately for my mama, she then proceeded to convey her chronicle to me at some of my busiest hours. Indeed that sweet woman never seemed to grow too tired to seek me out: early morning, at the heat of midday, or late, late into the night; following me about the house while I was in the process of dressing or washing; whilst I waited for a meal to be brought; as I chewed; as I pushed the plate away; as I was deep in talk with my wife; even at my place of work as several of my men waited, curious for my instruction. It shamed me to find that I did not have time enough to give it heed—that on most occasions I feigned listening to her yarn when, in truth, not one word of it was entering my ear or my mind's eye. Oh, how often did I nod to her when a vigorous

shake of the head was what was required? I will not here go into the trouble that this caused within my household, but be sure to know there was plenty of it. No, let us pass with pleasure on to the solution that was eventually found.

A chapbook—a small pamphlet. My mama's words printed upon paper, with the type set down in the blackest ink for ease of reading. Upon its cover there could be the ornamentation of a sturdy woodcut—a horse or cart or bundled sugar cane (for I know a man who can render these with such skill as to trick your eye into believing you were gazing upon the true item).

I explained to my dear mama, once spoken these precious words of hers would be lost to all but my ears. If, though, committed to a very thin volume, I could peruse her tale at my leisure and no word would be lost when my fickle mind strayed to some other purpose. And better, for the excess books which would be produced from the press could be given for sale, taken around the island so others, far and wide, might delight in her careful narration.

But my mama began her life as a person for whom writing the letters ABC could have seen her put to the lash, for she was born a slave. The undertaking of committing her tale to words that might be read and set into printed form was, at first, quite alarming for her poor soul. She fretted, following me about the house and town to chatter at me of her anxiety of writing upon paper. She feared she would not have the skill to make herself understood in this form; and what if she were to make some mistake in its telling? Then surely it would be there, for ever and a day, for all to find amusement in her errors!

However, my trade is as a printer. Indeed, although it is not usually within my character to brag about my achievements, I need to explain that I am considered by many—be they black, white or coloured—to be one of the finest printers upon this island. My particular skill is an ability to find meaning in the most scribbled of texts. Give me writing that looks to have been made by some insect crawling dirty legs across the paper and I will print its sense, clear and precise. Show me blots and smudges of ink and I will see form. Let blades of grass

blow together in the breeze and I will find words written in their flowing strands.

So I was able to assure my precious mama that I would be her most conscientious editor. I would raise life out of her most crabbed script to make her tale flow like some of the finest writing in the English language. And there was no shame to be felt from this assistance, for at some of the best publishing houses in Britain—let me cite Thomas Nelson and Son or Hodder and Stoughton, as my example—the gentle aiding and abetting of authors in this manner is quite commonplace.

She thankfully agreed. Then forsook the pleasures of cooking her cornmeal porridge, fish tea, and roasted breadfruit, of repairing and sowing our garments and other tasks which, in truth, were quite useful about our busy household, to put all her effort into this noble venture, this lasting legacy of a printed book.

The tale herein is all my mama's endeavour. Although shy of the task at first, after several months she soon became quite puffed up, emboldened to the point where my advice often fell on to ears that remained deaf to it. Some scenes I earnestly charged her not to write in the manner she had chosen. But, like the brightest pupil with an outworn master, she became quite insistent upon having her way. And agreeing with a resolute woman is always easier.

Now, only one further word of explanation is required from me; although this story was intended to be accommodated within the limited size and pages of a pamphlet or chapbook it, however, grew. Notwithstanding, let me now conclude this mediation so my mama's tale might finally commence.

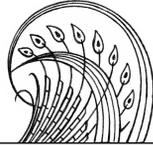
Thomas Kinsman
Publisher-editor
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PART 1



CHAPTER 1



IT WAS FINISHED ALMOST as soon as it began. Kitty felt such little intrusion from the overseer Tam Dewar's part that she decided to believe him merely jostling her from behind like any rough, grunting, huffing white man would if they were crushed together within a crowd. Except upon this occasion, when he finally released himself from out of her, he thrust a crumpled bolt of yellow and black cloth into Kitty's hand as a gift. This was more vexing to her than that rude act—for she was left to puzzle upon whether she should be grateful to this white man for this limp offering or not . . .



Reader, my son tells me that this is too indelicate a commencement of any tale. Please pardon me, but your storyteller is a woman possessed of a forthright tongue and little ink. Waxing upon the nature of trees when all know they are green and lush upon this island, or birds which are plainly plentiful and raucous, or taking good words to whine upon the cruelly hot sun, is neither prudent nor my fancy. Let me confess this without delay so you might consider whether my tale is one in which you can find an interest. If not, then be on your way, for there are plenty books to satisfy if words flowing free as the droppings that fall from the backside of a mule is your desire.

Go to any shelf that groans under a weight of books and there, wrapped in leather and stamped in gold, will be volumes whose contents will find you meandering through the puff and twaddle of some white lady's mind. You will see trees aplenty, birds of every hue and oh, a hot, hot sun residing there. That white missus will have you acquainted with all the many tribulations of her life upon a Jamaican sugar plantation before you have barely opened the cover. Two pages upon the scarcity of beef. Five more upon the want of a new hat to wear with her splendid pink taffeta dress. No butter but only a wretched alligator pear again! is surely a hardship worth the ten pages it took to describe it. Three chapters is not an excess to lament upon a white woman of discerning mind who finds herself adrift in a society too dull for her. And as for the indolence and stupidity of her slaves (be sure you have a handkerchief to dab away your tears), only need of sleep would stop her taking several more volumes to pronounce upon that most troublesome of subjects.

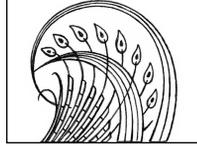
And all this particular distress so there might be sugar to sweeten the tea and blacken the teeth of the people in England. But do not take my word upon it, peruse the volumes for yourself. For I have. And it was shocking to have so uplifting an act as reading invite some daft white missus to belch her foolishness into my head.

So I will not worry myself for your loss if it is those stories you require. But stay if you wish to hear a tale of my making.

As I write, I have a cup of sweetened tea resting beside me (although not quite sweet enough for my taste, but sweetness comes at a dear price here upon this sugar island); the lamp is glowing sufficient to cast a light upon the paper in front of me; the window is open and a breeze is cooling upon my neck. But wait . . . for an annoying insect has decided to throw itself repeatedly against my lamp. Shooing will not remove it, for it believes the light is where salvation lies. But its insistent buzzing is distracting me. So I have just squashed it upon an open book. As soon as I have wiped its bloody carcass from the page (for it is in a volume that my son was reading), I will continue my tale.



CHAPTER 2



JULY WAS BORN UPON a cane piece. Her mother, bending over double, hacked with her cane bill into a thick stem of cane. But it did not topple with just one blow. Weary, she straightened to let the fierce torrent of raindrops that were falling run their cooling relief upon her face and neck. She blinked against the rain, wiping the palm of her hand across her forehead. When the serrated edges of the cane leaves dropped their abrasive grit into her eyes, she tilted her head back to permit the rain wash them with its balm. Then she stooped to grab the base of the cane once more to strike it with a further blow.

So intent was she upon seeing that the weeping cane was stripped of its leaves—even in the dampening rain its brittle edges flew around her like thistledown—that she did not notice she had just dropped a child from her womb. July was born right there—slipping out to fall bloody and quivering upon a spiky layer of trash.

As July lay vulnerable upon the ground, she viewed the nightmare of tall canes that loomed dark, ragged and unruly around her, and felt the hem of a rough woollen skirt drag its heavy wetness across her naked body. Then, all at once, she beheld—wrestling a long spike of cane, swinging it in the air and slicing at its length and leaves before hurling the stripped pole away—the mighty black woman that was her mother. Her mother's arms, flexing under this strenuous work, were as robust as

the legs of a horse in full gallop. Her thick neck looked to be crafted from some cleverly worked wood. Her bare breast, running with rain and sweat, glistened as if lacquered.

This colossal woman was still determined upon her work, unaware that she had mislaid anything. When July let forth a fierce, raw bellow that rustled the canes and affrighted the birds, her mother, cane bill raised, suddenly stopped to wonder upon the source of that desperate yell and saw, for the first time, her misplaced child lying there upon the trash. July's mother cleaned the blade of her cane bill and slipped it into the cloth around her waist. With one hand she then commenced to unwind a scarf that was wrapping her head, whilst with the other hand she gathered up her newborn child in the cup of her palm. Within a fleeting moment that headscarf had July swaddled secure and warm against the solid wall of her mother's back—whilst her mother, withdrawing the cane bill from the band at her waist, continued with her work.



And so ends the story of July's birth—a story that was more thrilling than anything the rascal spider Anancy could conjure. With some tellings it was not the rain that beat down upon July's tender, newborn body, but the hot sun, whose fierce heat baked the blood from her birth into a hard scabrous crust upon her naked flesh. Other times, it was a wind that was blowing with so fierce a breath that her mother had to catch July by one leg before her baby was blown out of the cane field, over the big house, and off into the clouds. While a further version had a tiger, with its long, spiky snout and six legs, sniffing at the baby July, thinking her as food. No matter what glorious heights her tall tale acquired, July always avowed that she had been born upon a cane piece.

But, reader, I cannot allow my narrative to be muddled by such an ornate invention, for upon some later page you may feel to accuse me of deception when, in point, I am speaking fact, even though the contents

may seem equally preposterous. Although you may deem your storyteller humdrum for what hereinafter follows it is, with no fear of fantasy, the actual truth of July's delivery into this world—and you may take my word upon it.



Kitty, July's mama, gave birth to her in her dwelling hut. For eight long hours Kitty did pace about that hut—first five steps in one direction, then a further five in the other. All the while with her palms pressed to the small of her back, for she feared the protrusion at her belly had the might to pitch her pell-mell on to the ground. The coarse linen shirt she wore was so sodden with sweat as to appear to be made of gauze, and did bind about her tight as a dressing. At times she stopped in her feverish pacing to place her hands high upon the wall, lean her weight on to her arms and pant with the fury of a mad dog.

Kitty's perspiration was turning the soil underneath her feet to a slippery layer of mud. So Rose, the woman who was attending her, requested that Kitty stoop a little that she might be permitted to mop her face and neck with rags—for Kitty was nearly six feet tall and Rose no more than four. Rose had had two children in her childbearing days—one was delivered stiff as stale bread and the other was sold away before she had properly finished suckling him. But she was the favoured attendant for births upon the plantation, for children born by her physic thrived with the vigour of the most indulged white missus child. But Kitty would not stoop to permit Rose to wipe her. Rose was forced to jump, like some feeble house slave charged to dust a high shelf, to brush the cloth across Kitty's forehead.

Neither would Kitty smell the bunch of sticks that Rose wafted around her, 'Come, it will soothe. Smell,' Rose insisted. When, finally, Rose pushed the smelly bundle against Kitty's nose, Kitty began at once to choke upon their pungency. She then wrested the sticks from out Rose's hand and threw them upon the ground. The strip of goat skin with which Rose had wanted to rub Kitty's bucking belly

had Kitty crying out, 'No touch me, no touch me!' Fortuitously for Rose, she ducked just before Kitty's hand lashed out to swipe her across the room—for it was performed with such fierceness that the diminutive Rose would surely have found herself embedded within the wattle of the wall.

Then Rose pleaded that at least Kitty should eat some mouthfuls of breadfruit that had been left for her. When Kitty refused, Rose ate it herself while repeating, in tones that ranged from commanding to begging, that Kitty should squat upon the mattress to find relief from the pain of this birthing. For over an hour did Rose implore her, until Kitty, screeching louder than a cockerel before the dawn, cried, 'Hush, Miss Rose—me caan suffer yer jabber no more.'

But Kitty did at that moment fall upon her knees and, with her heavy belly brushing the dirt floor, crawl upon the mat. Soon the trash, which was the substance of her mattress, was soaked through with Kitty's sweat—it squelched underneath her as she writhed, tormented, for some position that might ease her pain. But at last Rose could reach all the parts of Kitty that she required in order to commence her fabled physic. Rose, calling from the door of the hut, commanded some children to fill a pail with water from the river. She then cursed at the tiny drip of water that the useless pickney handed her back, before shooing them from the dwelling. But Rose dipped in a rag and pressed the cool water against Kitty's dry and cracked lips.

It was after a further two hours that Kitty began to howl. Kneeling upon the mattress, her hands upon the wall, she screamed that this pain was like no other that she had endured. Oh come, driver, lash her, brand and scorch her, for Kitty was sure no trifling pain of humankind could ever injure her again. This pain was jumbie-made; its claws were digging deep inside her so this child might be born.

'Me must dead, Miss Rose,' Kitty roared. 'Me must dead!'

'Pickney soon come, soon come now,' Rose tenderly whispered.

'Pickney no come. Me must dead here,' Kitty wailed.

It was then the overseer, Tam Dewar, entered in upon the dwelling

shouting, 'Why is there so much noise? Shut up, damn you. My head aches from it!'

Aroused from his supper table by the unholy row that had reached his ears, he was breathing heavy as a man sorely vexed. Until, that is, the stench from within Kitty's dwelling began to assail him. His face, that had been wrinkled with fury, began to contort into a sickened grimace—like he was chewing upon rancid meat. He placed his lamp upon the ground so he might better rummage for his handkerchief to muffle his nose and mouth, before exclaiming through the cloth, 'What is happening in here?'

Rose, curtsying to the overseer, said, 'She birthing, massa—soon come,' while Kitty quickly laid herself down flat upon the mattress, covering up as best she could with the wet cloth of her shirt. She set herself to be still and raised her eyes to look upon Tam Dewar's crooked face. In the cast of the lamplight his mouth looked all the more twisted, his hairless head all the more like it was crowned with the shell of an egg. But Kitty could not be quiet for long, for a pickney the size of the moon was pushing out from within her. She let forth a yell so fierce that it buckled Tam Dewar at his knees and caused him to wince as if it were he that had the greater affliction.

'Be quiet, be quiet, I tell you!' he squealed before commanding Rose, 'Stop up her mouth!'

Rose gazed upon this man in puzzlement. 'Stuff up her mouth with rags, come on, come on,' he insisted once more. Rose took a rag, dipping it in the water from the pail and brushed it against Kitty's lips. But Tam Dewar, exhaling with annoyance, commanded, 'Not like that!' He snatched at the rag that Rose held, then forced the damp cloth down into Kitty's mouth. 'Like this, you fool, like this.'

Rose protested, 'Massa, she birthin', she birthin'!' as Kitty choked to accommodate the bulk of cloth in her mouth. Soon Kitty bit down hard to catch the overseer's finger within her teeth, for this white man's fist was blocking her throat.

'Damn you,' he wailed. He wrenched his finger from her bite, then whipped back his hand to slap Kitty around the head.

Rose hastened to stand between Kitty and this white man saying, ‘She birthin’, massa, she birthin’, massa . . .’ for she could see this man was preparing to strike Kitty again. ‘Pity, massa, pity, no lash her, she birthin’, massa,’ Rose pleaded.

Tam Dewar threw the tiny figure of Rose aside and was ready to strike Kitty once more, for the impertinence that still throbbed at his fingertips. While Kitty, cowering from the coming blow, wrapped one arm around her massive belly and thrust out a splayed hand at this man to keep him far from her. And in that moment, Tam Dewar was stilled. He stared at her then dropped his raised hand. He knelt down next to Kitty, palms raised, saying, ‘Shhhh, shhhh,’ to calm her as he spoke softly to her. ‘My sister has sent me some strawberry conserve from Scotland. It’s very fine. Delicious. I was just eating it, but then the noise you were making . . . I cannot stand the noise. I have a pain in my head, you see, that I cannot remove. So you must be quiet.’ He lifted up the lamp so Kitty might behold his earnest face. She saw a dollop of strawberry jam upon his cheek and smelled the sweet confection upon his breath. He turned, as if to leave, but then, leaning over again said, ‘Hush, Kitty or I’ll take a whip to you, so help me, God, I will, because I cannot stand the noise.’

Kitty made no reply to this man, but bit down hard upon the cloth that was still within her mouth so she would make no sound that could cause his mood to change. For Kitty had managed to live without feeling the lash from his whip for four years. But this white man had fathered the child she was birthing and if he was not gone soon, she thought to rise from the mattress, grab this ugly bakkra by the leg, swing him above her head and hurl him like a piece of cane so far-far that he would land head first in a heap of trash upon some other talked of island. But she just bit harder upon the rags, as he, pressing his handkerchief once more to his nose, stood up as if to take his leave. He made two steps before remembering a thought. Heedful to point at both his slaves in turn he said, ‘And be careful with that wee baby—it will be worth a great deal of money.’

When the pickney was finally released from within Kitty she yelled

with so mighty an exhalation that the trees bent as if a hurricane had just passed. Tam Dewar, startled by that immense cry, banged his fist hard upon his supper table and his precious strawberry conserve did topple down to spill upon the floor.

