Penalty

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Published by Walker

Extract

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WE WERE RIVER people, fishermen. People of the river spirit, Loma, who is slow and green and clever. We were not warriors, so when the fierce people from beyond the forest attacked our village we did not know what to do. They came out of the trees, howling, at the time of light-but-no-sun-yet, when my mother and the other women were waking the first fires.

I picked up my young sister who was playing at the front of our house and ran with the others towards our boats. Some of us fell with spears in our backs. I looked for my mother and saw her go down broken beneath the feet of the fierce people who swept over her like water. And when we reached the sands we saw two great war canoes on the river, and in them there were terrible No-Skins who killed more of us with their fire sticks. My father was one who died there. He went onto his knees with his hands on his chest

full of blood and then he fell with his face in the water. The air was so full of screaming that I could hardly breathe it. We were trapped, and I thought we would all die, and I tried to make myself ready. But they did not kill us. Not there, not then.

The war canoes came onto the beach, breaking our boats. The fierce people and the No-Skins used their spears and their fire sticks to beat the women and children back towards the houses. They tore my sister from me. She did not cry out even when they threw her down, but her eyes were huge and her mouth was open like a person found drowned.

I was kneeling beside my father, chanting for his spirit, when I looked up and saw a No-Skin looking down at me. His face was the colour of a peeled animal with the fat still on it, but there was yellow fur around his mouth.

That was how I thought, then: peeled animal, yellow fur, fire sticks. Because I had never seen white men before, or their guns.

I was terribly afraid. I thought the one standing over me was Lord Death from our stories. He kept his raw-looking eyes on me and shouted in his language. Hands seized me and forced me to where our other men had been gathered. Our hands were tied together and our necks fastened to a long chain of iron.

That is how I was stolen. Even though I was fourteen years old and would not be a man for another three parts of a year.

* * *

We walked for many days, many days. Four white men and some fierce people came with us. If we fell they beat us. Once a day they fed us a terrible porridge like vomit. At night they made us sleep without coverings on the ground, so we woke up cold and wet. Three of us died of the shivering sickness. The white men cut them free of the chain and left them alone in the forest without any ceremonies, and this filled the rest of us with so much fear that we tried very hard not to die.

Then at last we came to the top of a hill made of sand and I saw ahead of me that the sky was cut in two, the lower half darker and full of small white running clouds. It was the sea, and in my ignorance I thought it was beautiful.

When we saw the white men's ship we were struck with terror, not knowing what it was. My thought was, This is their object of worship. Because huge skeletons stood on it, hung with sheets the colour of death. And I thought I knew why we had been brought here. To be sacrifice. To be fed to this god of theirs. And in a way I was right.

Sometimes in my village when the men pulled in the nets there would be many small fish as well as the good fat ones. These small fish we called *panga usha*, babies' fingers. We did not throw them away. When the catch had been sorted, the women packed the panga usha into tubs made of tree bark. There was a way of doing it. First, a circle of fish

around the bottom of the tub with their noses against the side. Then another circle, noses against the tails of the first circle of fish. And so on, fish nose to tail, smaller and smaller circles, until the bottom was covered. Then the women would cover this layer with sweet-smelling leaves, and start again. Another layer of fish, nose to tail, more leaves. Many layers. When the barrel was full, heavy pieces of wood went on top, then it was buried in the sand. On ancestor days, the barrels were dug up and we would eat the fish. Now their bones were soft and their flesh was sweet.

That was how the whites packed us into their ship, head to toe. We lay there with our mouths open and eyes wide in the darkness, like panga usha, waiting to be eaten. But the layers between us were not sweet leaves. They were floors of wood that smelled of human filth.

I do not know how many we were. There were some that we knew, from other villages along the river. There were also many Other People, who had very dark skins and did not speak our language. We were all mixed up together. There were some women too, but they were packed into another part of the ship.

We lay in fearful silence for a long time. There was no light to reckon the day by. Then there was shouting, and many hard feet passing above our heads, and a terrible clatter like rocks being tumbled down a stream in flood. The wood walls all around and above groaned and screeched

and everything tilted one way. Our bodies rolled onto each other. The darkness was full of clutching hands and flying chains and limbs all mixed together with howls of pain and terror. I thought that if this violent burial lasted an hour, half an hour, we would all be dead.

It lasted fifty-two days.