

Oh Lord Take Me Home

So while my boss Bwana and his family are out clinking rum-and-coke glasses and shaking their wobbly backsides at fancy parties down the road, I've been assigned duties in his office to sort through his ledgers. I used to hope that the celebration of Voodoo mass would be the one day off in the year for us slaves – but oh no, it's business as usual.

Outside the window the palm trees which line the avenues are decorated with gold and silver streamers. They are tall, sleek, snooty with the deportment of those who grow up balancing the precious milk of coconuts on their heads; and dangling from their glossy green fronds are flickering oil lamps sitting in red-painted cassava gourds.

The cobblestone pavement has been swept smooth of yesterday's sandstorm and the hawkers selling takeaways have been sent packing.

Frogs and crickets provide a drunken night-time chorus while camel-drawn carriages deliver stoosh party guests to our neighbouring compounds. The men wear flamboyant kaftans and their glamorously fat women try to outdo each other with peacock-print headscarves tied up into the most extravagant girlie bows.

All the houses are freshly whitewashed, with stained-glass windows depicting the gods: Oshan, Shangira, Yemonja. Stone sphinxes guard porches and stationed by doorways are torch lamps on tall marble plinths – their flames are slippery blue fingers grasping out at the sticky night-time air.

From the upper rooms of the houses blast the hectic

electronic beats of the young, and from downstairs comes the mellow music of the marimba, amid the laughter and bantering of people who have every reason to celebrate this season of goodwill, because they are free men and free women in the heart of the most expensive piece of real estate in the known world: Mayfah.

Chief Kaga Konata Katamba I is the Bwana in question. He made his fortune in the import-export game, the notorious transatlantic slave run, before settling down to life in polite society as an absentee sugar baron, part-time husband, free-lance father, retired decent human being and, it goes without saying, sacked soul.

My boss is also a full-time anti-abolitionist, publishing his pro-slavery rants in his mouthpiece *The Flame* – a pamphlet distributed far and wide – as a freebie.

In spite of myself, I'd just begun to flick through the latest godawful issue, feeling my stomach constrict and my throat tighten, when a hand shoved a folded note through the open office window and vanished before I could see who it was attached to.

I opened the note, read the magic words and felt my head suddenly drowning.

Waves crashed and thundered inside my skull.

I let out the most almighty, silent howl.

Then I passed out.

How long for, I've no idea, maybe a few minutes, but when I came to I was slumped in my seat, my head dropped forwards, the note still in my hand.

I read it again through a film of water.

It was real and it was true – I was being given the chance to escape.

Oh Lord.

After so many years on the waiting list the thing I most desired was in the palm of my hand. Yet it was all too quick. I sat there frozen. A thousand *what ifs* ran through my mind. In returning my life to its rightful owner – me – I would also be putting my life at stake. If I wasn't careful or lucky I'd end up at the local whipping post or chopping block.

Then my survival instincts kicked in.

My head cleared.

I was back again.

I ripped the note to shreds.

I stood up and looked at the wooden mask of Bwana's face on the wall.

And I gave it the right, royal one finger salute.

The note told me that the Underground Railroad was operating again after service had been suspended owing to derailment. It was often the case when energy couldn't be filched from the city's power station or the train broke down due to the overload of escaping slaves wanting to cadge a safe ride out of the city, to begin the long journey back to the Motherland.

I hoped I could trust the message because the Resistance was often infiltrated by sleepers who eventually went operational to betray whole rebel cells.

Deep down I knew that the slave traders were never going to give up their cash cow. It was, after all, one of the most lucrative international businesses *ever*, involving the large-scale transport of whytes, shipped in our millions from the continent of Europa to the West Japanese Islands, so called because when the 'great' explorer and adventurer, Chinua Chikwemeka, was trying to find a new route to Asia, he mistook those islands for the legendary isles of Japan, and the name stuck.

So here I am in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa (UK or GA for short), which is part of the continent of Aphrika. The mainland lies just over the Ambossan Channel. It's also known as the Sunny Continent, of course, on account of it being so flaming hot here.

Great Ambossa is actually a very small island with a growing population to feed and so it stretches its greedy little fingers all over the globe, stealing countries and stealing people.

Me included. I'm one of the Stolen Ones.

That's why I'm here.

The note gave me only one hour to get to the disused Paddinto Station and directions on how to find the manhole hidden behind some bushes through which I could slip down into the subway. There I would be met by a member of the Resistance who would lead me through its dank subterranean tunnels. That was the promise, anyway, and if it wasn't the practice I'd be done for.

Slavery had taught me that promises never came with a money-back guarantee and if you complained to customer services they'd report you to management and then you'd really get it in the neck.

But I am a firm believer in hope. I am still alive, after all.

The city of Londolo's Tube trains had officially stopped burrowing many years ago when the tunnels started collapsing under the weight of the buildings above them. The city returned to the slower but more reliable modes of transport: carriages, horses, carts, camels, elephants, stagecoaches and, for the really nutty fitness fanatics, velocipedes. The only vehicle we slaves owned was called Shanks's Pony.

But here's the thing: at some point, a bright spark in the Resistance had a brainwave and the disused subway was put

to use, enabling many to make their way out of the heavily guarded city of Londolo as far as the docks, where they began the long, hazardous trip back to Europa.

For the first time since I had been taken away, I could seriously consider that I might be returning home. Was it possible? I still had such vivid memories of my parents, my three sisters, our little flint cottage on the estate, and my beloved cocker spaniel, Rory. My family were probably all dead now, if they had survived the raids by the Border Lander men who had been my first captors.

The Ambossans called us tribes but we were many nations, each with our own language and funny old customs, like the Border Landers, whose men wore tartan skirts with no knickers underneath.

The Ambossans also called Europa the Grey Continent, on account of the skies always being overcast.

But oh, how I longed for those cloudy grey skies.

How I longed for the incessant drizzle and harsh wind slapping my ears.

How I longed for my snug winter woollies and sturdy wooden clogs.

How I longed for Mam's warm dripping sandwiches and thick pumpkin broth.

How I longed for the fire crackling in the hearth and our family sing-song around it.

How I longed for the far northern district from whence I was taken.

How I longed for England.

How I longed for home.

I am proud to declare that I come from a long line of cabbage farmers.

My people were honest peasants who worked the land and never turned to theft even when it snowed in summer or rained all winter so that the crops miscarried in their pods and turned to mulch.

We weren't landowners, oh no, we were *serfs*, the bottom link in the agricultural food chain, although no actual chains clinked on the ground when we walked around. Nor were we property, exactly, but our roots went deep into the soil because when the land changed hands through death, marriage or even war, so did we, and so tied we remained, for generation upon generation.

The deal was that we were leased some fields by our master, Lord Perceval Montague (Percy, behind his back), the umpteenth eldest son in the family to whom my family had an umbilical bond. In return all male serfs were conscripted to be foot soldiers in his battles, and believe you me it was a lawless society back then. It was pretty wild in the far north in those days. If someone wanted to raid your land or steal your flock, they did it through brute force, unless you were able to meet fire with gunpowder, or rally a private army to defend yourself, even if it was just a motley crew of shambolic farmhands.

So we worked our patch of land, as well as Percy's.

Whatever we harvested, we had to give half to him.

He was supposed to offer poor relief, but rarely did.

We were charged for extras such as taking his cart to go to market or using his grain mill or bread oven, which, if we had poor harvests, meant a debt carried over on our annual accounts for several years.

Montague Manor was an imposing pile of granite, tomb-like slabs framed against skies which shuddered beneath the chain mail of the north's daily bout of rain.

It proved an irresistible attraction to us kids yet I was the

only one of my sisters with enough derring-do to risk succumbing to the lure of the big house.

Once, when everyone was at the annual summer fayre on the estate, my sisters peeping through some bushes as cowardly witnesses, I sneaked in through the manor's heavy wooden door into the cavernous Grand Hall. I tried to tiptoe, but my clogs echoed around the high ceiling.

The walls were hung with tapestries of fair maidens stroking the horns of unicorns, reindeer antlers spread out like the branches of trees, and a massive bear's head with salivating gnashers was stuck up directly opposite the front door. Its wet, limpid eyes followed my every move.

When I heard moans coming from deep underneath the ground, I panicked, about-turned and charged out, bumping into a stuffed wolf by the front door, which looked ready to lurch and take a bite. The moans must have come from Percy's legendary dungeons where he imprisoned poachers and captives from the Border skirmishes. Eventually they'd be packed off for the long trek through the forests to the next ship docked on the coast bound for the New World – or so we'd heard.

To us peasants the New World was a distant land far across the seas about which we knew nothing, except that no one wanted to go there, because those that did never came back.

Home was Apple Tree Cottage on the edge of the estate. A hotchpotch of timber beams and earth-packed walls. It was infested with rustling insects. Indeed the whole house was alive with vermin – from the wasps nesting in the straw-thatched roof to the body-hopping fleas for whom our blood was the elixir of life. A front door opened onto a tiny parlour with an earthen floor and a peat fire. Two sleeping spaces were separated by heavy green woollen drapes either side of

the corridor which served as the kitchen. We couldn't afford window glass because of the tax, and so with the shutters closed it was always winter inside.

Me, Madge, Sharon and Alice shared a straw mattress. We slept under a multicoloured quilt made out of cast-offs stitched by two great-aunts who'd died before we were born. I bagsyed the middle, kept warm by my sisters during those freezing north-easterly nights.

Then there was Rory the dog who was always bounding around knocking things over even though he wasn't 'a puppy no more', as Mam'd shout. Her foot would send him on an impromptu long jump from which he'd land with a squeal, legs comically splayed flat.

Our Pa and our Mam were Mr Jack and Eliza Scagglethorpe.

Pa's muscles clung to him in hard sinews because there was little fat to shelter his bones. He had a bushy scrag-end of a beard which he 'couldn't be arsed' to trim and his cheeks were blistered from where the bitter winds had rubbed them raw. He had the stoop of a thin tree blown forwards by a gale, because he'd been planting and digging up cabbages since he was a tiny kid.

Pa's hair was the dark ginger of the folk from the Border Lands. It fell to his shoulders in spirals beneath the wide-brimmed farmer's hat he always wore when outdoors.

Before I was old enough to know better he'd roll up his smock, instruct me to put a finger to the throbbing pulse of the veins on his arms and tell me centipedes lived inside them. I'd run away shrieking with him chasing me, both of us knocking over stools, pails and my sisters in the process.

Pa was passionate about his cabbages, said they had to be treated lovingly, like children. What didn't I know about flaming cabbages! January King was 'crispy and full of flavour',

the Autumn Queen was dark green and the Savoy King was 'a tough little bugger'. What didn't I know about the Cabbage Wars of old, when the Scagglethorpes had fought victoriously for the Montagues against the Paldergraves?

I hated eating cabbage in those BS (Before Slavery) days. What I'd give for one now.

Pa never once complained about not having a son but we all knew what was on his mind, because sometimes when he looked at us, his disappointment was undisguised.

Who was going to carry on the Scagglethorpe cabbage farming tradition?

He'd always shake it off, though.

'Go on,' he'd urge us girls. 'Tell me I have one wish.'

'What wish?'

'Don't be so stupid. Tell me I have a wish. That you can grant me.'

'But we don't have special powers, we're not fairy godmothers.'

'It's a game, you silly lot, give me one wish or I'll throw a cabbage at your thick skulls.'

'All right then, Pa, you have one wish.'

'Well, now, let's see. What would I want? Oh, I know what I'd wish for,' he'd say, scratching his chin like the thought was just coming to him.

'To see my girls in those crinolines with expensive whale-bones that those ladies up there wear, pretty paste on your cheeks, pearls around your swan-like necks; to see you swirling around at dances with kindly gentlemen on your arms, winning smiles on your lips and glass slippers on your feet.'

'Oooh, don't be so soppy,' I'd say, before going to fetch the looking glass to see if my neck really was 'swan-like'.

That night I dreamed of a lacy, yellow crinoline with puffed-

up sleeves. My gown was so *exquisite*, my glass slippers so dainty, that when I ran across the meadows, hair flowing in the wind, everyone gasped at how elegant I'd turned out.

Then I ruined it by getting bunions because the slippers were too tight and one of them cracked and the glass cut into my foot, waking me up with the pain of it.

Pa rose before daylight had kicked night-time into touch. He'd return after dark when he'd be mardy until he'd eaten.

He liked a tankard of ale (only ever admitted the one) of a Friday night after dinner when he'd go to Johnny Johnson's barn over at None-Go-By Farm for a 'wee session' with 'the lads' – all old men pushing forty. He'd come home reeking of the barley and herbs in his ale, singing a bawdy song which we could hear from fields off, then catching his breath as he leaned against the opened door frame blasting cold air into our parlour, ranting on about how 'the working man will have his day', before staggering inside in his manure-caked boots and collapsing into his chair, legs sprawled open, head thrown back so that his bristly Adam's apple stuck out and quivered.

'How are the *lads*?' Mam would say out loud once he was snoring, not looking up from her knitting needles which clacked like warring swords.

I'll never forget the first time it was my turn to take Pa hot bread and dripping for lunch.

The clouds had sunk so low from the heavens I couldn't find him for ages, until there he was, looming out of the fog, one hand rested on his pitchfork, looking for all the world like a scarecrow, and I suddenly saw how all the back-breaking work had drained him.

He was singing, but not one of his usual smutty songs which made us girls giggle and our Mam scowl. Instead he sounded like one of the choir boys at church whose voices

hadn't become coarse and mud-filled and angry from years of breaking up icy ground with shovels, slopping out donkey shit or chopping wood for hours in freezing winter dressed in rough sackcloth, with their bare feet shod only in clogs.

It was the voice of the boy inside the man. The child inside my father.

His heart was full of yearning, for something he'd lost or wanted to have.

My heart crumbled like stale bread.

Are you going to Scarborough Fayre?
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme,
Remember me to one who lives there,
She once was a true love of mine.

On my tenth birthday it was my turn to go out onto the fields blindfold to pull up the first cabbage of the season. Aged ten you'd already survived the pox, the sweat and just about every other disease that spirited children away early, so it was likely you might grow to adulthood. If the cabbage came up with a lot of earth attached it meant you'd be rich, if not then you'd be poor.

That spring dawn we all trekked across the damp grass and past trees beginning to unfurl the tiny lavender-coloured petals of blossom.

I'd already decided on my career path. I was going to become one of those rare silk-trading women, like that young Margaret Roper from the village at Duddingley who went off on the back of a cart and came back in her own carriage. Like her I'd be apprenticed for seven years, then I'd run my own business. First I had to persuade Pa to persuade Percy to let me go. I knew Pa would scoff at the idea of one of his silly daughters becoming a proper businesswoman.

It didn't put me off.

The debt would take many years to pay off but eventually I'd be rich enough to settle it myself.

I had it all sorted.

As you do, when you're ten.

The cabbage came up with a huge clump of sod attached.

I did a cartwheel, singing out, 'Wey, hey, hey, the cat and fiddle and the cow jumped over the moon.'

Oh, so it really sodding worked then, didn't it?

Memories would not get me to the station on time.

I flew out of Bwana's office like a leopard on cola nuts and rushed across the compound, the largest in the city. Across the freshly sprinkled, squeaky-green lawn, past the rockery studded with cacti, past the wide-hipped, big-mama palms of the pineapple grove, past the orange and pink slides and roundabouts of the adventure playground, past the saccharine scent of the mangosteen, pawpaw and vanilla trees, past the open-air swimming pool with mosquitoes buzzing over its stagnant surface, past the camel paddocks, and behind all that, finally, to the secreted slave quarters, which had been considerably built next to the sewage dump and pigs' pen.

There I entered the tiny hut I shared with my room-mates: Yomisi and Sitembile.

Yomisi was in her thirties, like me. Only she'd been born Gertraude Shultz on a wheat farm in Bavaria. Aged eighteen she was kidnapped by slave-catchers as she made her way back from church one chilly Sunday morning, foolishly taking the short cut across the graveyard. She eventually ended up in Londolo, sleeping side by side with yours truly. It was an unlikely bonding: I was the optimist, she the pessimist. I clutched my return ticket to my chest, always dreaming of

escape; she'd ripped hers to shreds the very first time she was gang-raped by her three kidnappers shortly after capture.

She'd been hell-bent on revenge ever since.

Yomisi was Bwana's cook. Steel-thin, green-eyed, heavy-lidded, she was forced to wear an iron muzzle in the kitchen to prevent her eating on the job. It encaged her face in metal bands which clamped a perforated plate over her mouth. A lock secured this contraption at the back.

Her lips cracked. Her mouth dehydrated. Her tongue swelled. Her gums bled.

Even when the muzzle was removed at night she spoke through gritted teeth.

Sometimes Bwana vomited the night away or one of his children ran a fever. The runs were commonplace. Bwana's regular hallucinations bordered on insanity, and the entire family frequently broke out in rashes so unbearable they could be seen clawing off layers of skin in a communal frenzy.

All fingers pointed to the juju of Bwana's business enemies, none at the passive, stick-like cook.

Crushed glass.

Rotten meat disguised by strong herbs and spices.

Fungi.

Plants she would not name.

It was the only thing that gave her pleasure.

My second room-mate was the cheery young Sitembile, who was in her early twenties. She liked to remind we lesser mortals that she was born Princess Olivia de Champfleur-Saxe-Coburg-Grimaldi-Bourbon-Orleans-Hapsburg in a palace in the ancient land of Monaco. Taken hostage in a war with the French, she was sold into captivity when her father the King wouldn't pay for the release of a girl child when he already had five sons in line to inherit the crown.

Sitembile held the honoured position of household toilet

cleaner, emptying approximately fifty toilet pots each morning, before spending the rest of the day scooping out the bog holes and hosing them down with lime disinfectant to deter bugs and flies.

When time allowed, and it rarely did, she sat on our stoop, chattering away, embarking on a conversation in her head, letting the listener in halfway through and then being surprised when we complained we didn't have a clue what she was going on about.

She'd sit there twisting her hair into pigtails mixed with clay, rubbing ochre into her skin to darken its pigment in the hope that she might be spotted by one of Bwana's nicer, younger, more handsome business associates and be whisked away to a new life as a favoured mistress. With substantial curves either side of a naturally tiny waist, it was just possible.

Yomisi tried to dampen Sitembile's enthusiasm with her oft-declared dictum that dreams and disappointment were inseparable bedfellows.

I helped rub ochre into Sitembile's smooth, undamaged back, countering that dreams kept our spirits buoyant.

We three women had slipped into each other's lives and found a way to be together.

Now I was slipping out.

Without saying a word.

Our shack was constructed out of corrugated iron which was boiling on summer nights. Not for us the fancy, cool, white-washed wattle-and-daub residences spread out at the top end of the compound with palm-thatched roofs and mangrove posts and windows and wraparound verandas. No, we either roasted or we froze in our grubby tin boxes, and our neighbour next door was a twelve-foot-high termite mound, which