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How Long, O Lord?

Araminta Ross!” Minty heard Annie’s call, but the young girl’s toes just wiggled deeper into the warm dirt as she sat partially hidden by the drying bush. A slender snake slowly zigged its way toward the fields, enticed out of winter hibernation by the balmy morning. The buzz of insects announced that the cold spell was over. Minty hugged her brown knees as she lifted her face to the warmth and opened her mouth as if to invite the sunshine deep inside.

“Minty, you ain’t foolin’ Annie. Git yourself in here and tend to these little ’uns.” The timeworn woman punctuated her words with the sound of a willow switch whipping against the door frame of the cabin.

It didn’t take much for Minty to imagine the feel of that switch against the back of her legs. The old slave woman rarely used it, but it was long remembered by the children.

“Comin.” Minty jumped up and tried to brush the dirt off her rough linen shift. She gave up. It was so soiled already, a little more dirt hardly mattered. “I’m comin’ fast as I can, Annie.”

“You help git these babies fed, or Annie’ll teach you some sense.”

Annie talked tough, but Minty already knew that most of it was bluster. Annie loved her babies, including the grown ones like Minty.

A trough half full of cornmeal mush was placed on the hard-packed dirt floor and children toddled toward it from all sides of the cramped cabin. Minty handed pieces of mussel shells to those children who were old enough to use them as utensils. The littlest ones used their fingers and managed to find their mouths most of the time. Children weren’t issued clothing until they were almost ready to work, so cleanup was always easy.



Minty was born a slave on a plantation near Bucktown in Tidewater, Maryland. Her basket name, given to her on the day of her birth six or seven years ago, was Araminta, but everyone called her Minty. When full grown, she would be called by her mother’s given name—Harriet. Her mother never used the name Harriet. She went by Old Rit, even to her children most of the time. Minty didn’t see why she couldn’t have Harriet now since Old Rit never used it. Her mother just

laughed when she asked, and told her, “Be patient, honeygirl. By ’n’ by. Jes’ be patient.”

Minty hated those words. They were her mother’s answer to everything. How could she be patient when she longed to jump and run and grow up all at the same time?

Minty’s father, Ben, and Old Rit were slaves on the same plantation, owned by Edward Brodas. Most of the slaves on the Brodas Plantation lived in the Quarter—a collection of ramshackle cabins located in a dirt clearing between the barn and the fields.

Minty loved the closeness of the cabins and the way it made all the slaves in the Quarter sort of feel like family. Minty’s cabin was like all the others—rough-hewn timber walls chinked with mud, covered by a sagging roof. Inside was a single room with a packed dirt floor. A wattle and daub fireplace stood against one end. There were no partitions or windows. The dark, smoky room was home to Minty’s entire family. Piles of worn quilts and scratchy blankets lined the walls and served as the only furnishings, but most of the living was done outdoors anyway. In one corner, a deep hole had been dug out of the floor. An old board covered the opening. Rit’s hoard of sweet potatoes stayed cool long after harvest in this potato hole.

A broken piece of mirror was fastened to the wall near the door by two bent nails. It was too high for Minty, but every now and then Ben would lift her up so she could see. Wasn’t much to see. She was small for her age, but sturdy. “Built like

a bantam rooster,” Ben used to say. Minty liked that. Those bantys were tough little birds. She laughed at the thought of herself hopping around the yard, scrapping for corn.

Old Rit worked in the Brodas house all day, helping the Missus. Ben worked in the woods cutting timber.

“Didn’t used to cut so much timber,” Ben said one day after work, “but times been settling hard on the Brodas Plantation lately.”

Many nights Minty pretended to be asleep and listened to her parents’ whispered conversations.

“Started on a new stand today, Rit,” her father whispered, talking about a new grove of trees he was to cut down.

“What’ll he do when the timber runs out?” Rit asked. Minty could always tell when her mother was worried because she’d rub her thumb and finger together real fast-like. Her rough hands made a sound like someone was sanding wood. That sandpapery rhythm often lasted long into the night.

“Tobaccy’s bad these days. Not much call for cotton, or wheat neither,” Ben whispered. “Just ’smornin’ I heard the field hands marking time with a singin’ of ‘Poor Massa.’”

“Master Brodas best not catch wind of it,” Rit said. The rubbing sound got faster. Minty knew the words of the song:

Poor Massa, so they say;
Down in the heel, so they say;

Not one shilling, so they say;
God Almighty bless you, so they say.

Rit slowly sucked air between her teeth—a sound that meant trouble was brewing. “Been noticing things lookin’ pretty shabby ’round the Big House. Don’t look like Master’s growing enough of anything to keep the place goin’.”

“Seems Master’s mostly raisin’ colored folk these days for hirin’ out or worse,” Ben said.

Minty knew what her father meant by “worse.” Each time the slave trader came to nearby Cambridge, Master rode into town. Since the invention of the cotton gin, plantations down South couldn’t seem to get enough slaves. Congress halted the slave trade in 1808, so no more slave ships could land, bringing newly captured slaves from Africa. The only way to get more slaves was to buy them from other plantations.

Each time Master returned, Minty’s stomach ached and she couldn’t get a bite of food to go down. She waited for the sorrowing to begin. It didn’t take long. Screams and cries erupted throughout the Quarter as families were told that one of their own had been “sold South.” Late into the night, groups of slaves huddled together to sing in mournful tones:

This time tomorrow night,
Where will I be?
I’ll be gone, gone, gone,
Down to Tennessee.

Sometimes they recited Scripture in unison: “The Lord is my Shepherd . . .” When the reciting finished, a lone voice broke the silence:

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin’ for to carry me home.

Other voices joined in to swell the song:

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin’ for to carry me home.

When all the folk were sung out, the night hushed. Even the crickets, whippoorwills, and hoot owls quieted. Slaves made their way back to their cabins, and long into the night you could hear the keening, weeping sounds of those who knew they’d never set eyes on their loved ones again.

Minty’s own family still sorrowed. She had ten brothers and sisters, but just before harvest last year, two of Minty’s sisters were sold South. Never would the young girl forget the picture of her sisters, chained by neck and leg shackles to a coffle—a chain gang of slaves—gathered from other plantations. The slave driver kept snapping his rawhide whip toward the coffle so that none of the slaves dared linger. Tears silently streaked her sisters’ dusty faces.

Minty sat atop a fence post and watched them until she could no longer even see the dust from their trail. She

continued her vigil for hours longer, squinting into the sun. Her stomach ached for days afterward. At night she listened to her mother rock back and forth on the floor, crying and praying, “How long, O Lord? How long?”



Annie was too old to be sold. She was too old to work the fields, either, so Master set her to tending the children in the Quarter. Minty helped Annie by tending and feeding the little ones. After the children finished scooping up the last of the mush, Minty carried the tray back to the cookhouse. She loved the happy jumble of toddlers and babies in Annie’s cabin, but oh, how she hated being cooped up indoors. Whenever she was in the cabin she felt jumpy—kind of like she couldn’t breathe.

Today, she took the long way ’round, circling by the fields. She lingered as she watched the field slaves move to a throbbing rhythm hummed in time with the motion of their work. Sometimes the song was a call and a response—someone would sing one line and everybody else would answer. No matter what, it sounded beautiful to Minty’s ears. Sometimes she almost imagined she could feel the deep hum through the soles of her feet.

“Hey, you. You, gal.”

Minty’s heart began to thump in her chest. It was the overseer. He was in charge of the plantation and answered directly to Master Brodas. This swaggering man with a sweaty, beet-red

face carried a long, braided leather whip. Many times Minty had seen him slash it across the backs of slaves to speed up a task. Sometimes, for no reason, he got a funny look in his eyes and the corner of his mouth twitched. The slaves knew it meant he was itching to whip someone—anyone.

“Yes, suh?” Minty looked at the ground. You didn’t dare look white folk directly in the eye, else they might think you too bold.

“How old are you, gal?”

“’Bout six or seven.” Minty was never quite sure, since slaves didn’t mark birthdays. Someone said she’d been born in 1820 or 1821.

“Whose child are you?”

“Old Rit and Ben.”

“Hmmm.” He shaded his eyes from the sun with his hand as he lowered his head and looked at her for a long minute.

“Well, you git, now. You hear?”

He didn’t have to tell Minty twice. She turned and ran back to the dark safety of Annie’s cabin. *Old Rit’ll be mighty unhappy to hear ’bout the overseer takin’ notice of me. Can’t do no good to come under his calculatin’ eye, that’s for sure.*

Go Down, Moses

Minty always waited until all the mothers picked up their children before she left. Today, one of the mothers didn't come. The setting sun was already beginning to color the sky and baby Nicey was still at Annie's.

"Somethin's wrong, Minty. That's for sure." Annie rocked faster. "Um, um, um."

"Where's Nicey's mother?" Minty asked.

"Um, um, um." Annie shook her head as she made the dire sound deep in her throat.

It was nearly dark when one of the young women came to get Nicey. "Don't do a body no good to get that ol' overseer riled," she said.

"Where's Ruby?" Annie asked. Ruby was Nicey's mother.

"We was hoeing 'round the corn shoots today and she chopped one of the plants off by mistake. Jes' chopped it off. Overseer started hollerin' and yellin'."

“Lawd, have mercy.” Annie continued to rock almost as if it could keep trouble away if she rocked hard enough.

“Made her so nervous-like, she chopped off another one.”

Minty picked up the baby and gave her a piece of rawhide to chew on since Nicey was cutting teeth. Minty knew what was coming next. She should have recognized that satisfied glint in the overseer’s eye when she ran into him.

“Overseer picked up his whip and slashed the clothes right off her back.”

“Um, um, um.”

“When Ruby wouldn’t get up, he hauled her over to that hickory tree and tied her hands ’round with a strip of rawhide and whupped her and whupped her and—”

“Um, um um.” The chair creaked under Annie’s furious rocking.

“She been cut down now and Old Rit is layin’ pork grease on her back.”

Minty had to get outside. The room felt too close. With Nicey on one hip, she walked ’round and ’round the yard. How she hated slavery. All her life she had heard stories like Ruby’s.

“When I grow up, Nicey, I’m gonna be free.” Minty didn’t know how, but even if she had to fly like a bird, she’d be free. “Maybe I’ll take you with me. You’d like to be free, wouldn’t you, Baby?”

“That kind of talk gonna get you whupped, girl, just like Nicey’s mama.” The young woman, done telling about Ruby,

came up behind Minty and took the baby from her arms. “You be careful, now, Minty-girl. Y’hear? You don’t need to go talkin’ crazy.”

After saying good-bye to Annie, Minty headed over toward her cabin. The Quarter was quiet tonight, so she took the long way—weaving in and around the other cabins before going home to supper. Once she got home, she’d be indoors again. As she meandered, bits of hushed conversations punctuated the quiet. The smell of night-blooming jasmine was a welcome relief from the stench of the outhouses.

Minty caught the smell of supper cooking all around the Quarter. The house slaves usually ate the leftovers from Master’s table, but most of the families cooked their own evening meal.

Slaves never got paid for their work, but they did get a ration of food and clothing. Master Brodas would see that each slave received a portion of the cornmeal ground from the year’s crop. They got pickled herring and pork occasionally, usually just enough to flavor the food. Sometimes a little wheat flour was added to the ration. Each family was allowed a small plot of land they could use to grow vegetables. Old Rit grew sweet potatoes and collard greens, black-eyed peas, cabbage, turnips, and beets. The men trapped rabbit and possum regularly. Sometimes on Saturday afternoon they fished in Buckwater River, snagged oysters out of one of the oyster beds, or trapped crabs. Depending on the season, sometimes they had plenty to eat. In the winter, stores got low and Minty

went to sleep with an almost-empty stomach many nights.

The clothing was made by the slaves from cloth woven and dyed on the plantation. Every field hand was given two changes of clothing each year and one pair of shoes. Older children got a shift, almost like a long shirt. Little children and babies could run naked, so they received no clothing.

When the family's clothing wore out, Old Rit was careful to save every scrap. The threadbare scraps were pieced into quilts and stuffed with cotton when she could get it, corn shucks when she couldn't. Torn pieces of clothing were made over for the children.

As Minty drew near their home, she knew it was time to go in. She heard the sandpapery fidgeting of her mother's fingers even before she stepped into the cabin. A piece of pork fat was sizzling in the iron kettle hanging from a hook in the fireplace. It smelled good and reminded Minty it had been a long time since the noon meal.

Two of her brothers and a sister were sitting on the quilts along the edge of the room, but most were out and about. Everyone managed to converge on the cabin right about supertime. It was always dark in the smoky cabin, but tonight even the open door yielded no light since the sun had set and supper was late. Old Rit must have stayed with Ruby until her husband came home.

"Minty, I hear you walked 'round by the fields this afternoon and came under the overseer's eye."

Minty could tell that her mama was none too pleased.

“Last thing I wanted was for that man to see how you grow-in.” The rubbing sound stopped as Old Rit poured water from the bucket into the kettle. A cloud of steam rose from the first splashes of water on the hot iron. The water would have to come to a boil before the cornmeal could be thrown in.

Rit sat and pulled Minty down next to her. “I had hoped to have you working with me up at the Big House before that man got any ideas.”

“I’d rather work in the field.”

“Araminta Ross, you don’t know what you be sayin.” Old Rit shook her head. “Fieldwork is hot and hard. If you got on at the Big House, the days are filled with work, but not the back-breakin’ kind.”

Minty knew fieldwork was hard. She heard talk about slaves, broken from the endless work, who had to be sold down South. Cotton and tobacco growers were so hungry for labor in the Deep South that they were willing to make do with the last few years of a slave’s working life.

“I hate being cooped up inside, Mama.” Minty wasn’t telling her mother anything she didn’t already know.

“Oh, child, I wish you’d throw off those notions. There’s nothin’ a body can do ’bout being a slave, but I want your life to be as good as we can make it. If I can’t work you into the house—well, I don’t want to speculate ’bout it.” The fidgety finger rubbing started back up.

Minty said nothing.

“You mightn’t be any bigger’n a sack of cornmeal, Araminta

Ross, but you carry more stubbornness in that stiff back of yours than any slave on Brodas Plantation.”

Minty knew her back was usually stiff out of fear, not stubbornness.

“You tell Annie I want you carryin’ water to the field hands, startin’ tomorrow. If you look busy-like, maybe that man leave you alone.”

Her mama’s worried voice sent a shiver over Minty.



That night after supper, Ben and William Henry, one of Minty’s brothers, brought in the big washtub filled with water. Minty knew it meant the slaves would be gathering for a singing, even though it wasn’t Sunday.

Annie told Minty that slaves used to have their church right out in the open with singing and shouting and praising the Lord. Slave owners were getting more and more suspicious of their slaves lately and didn’t like seeing them get together, even for church.

“They be afraid slaves jes’ gonna raise up and slay they own masters,” Annie said as she rocked back and forth. “It ain’t the church folk they need be worryin’ about.”

There was a hollow by the creek bottom past the stables that they called the praying ground. Here, on a Sunday, they could gather to sing, preach, and pray without fear of disturbing Master or his family. On other days, the Brodas’s slaves often met in one of the cabins for a midweek meeting.

Master Brodas hadn't forbade church meetings as many other plantation owners had, but word traveled like wildfire from plantation to plantation and the Brodas's slaves thought it wise to keep their worshiping to themselves—just in case.

That's why the washtub was here. Folks gathered around the tub and the water caught their voices to keep the sound from carrying through the night air. Ben laughed one night after service as he and William Henry emptied the tub. "After this water's done absorbed all the words and songs offered tonight, must surely be living water like in the Good Book."

They didn't have a Bible in their services. Even if they had one, none of them could read it. Slaves were forbidden to learn to read and write. The Bible stories, the Psalms, and the gospel were passed on by telling and re-telling. Much of what Minty knew about God she learned from her father. And even more from the singing.

Old Rit once told her, "Listen to the songs that Master Brodas's people sing when they get together. They all be about winnin' wars and cryin' and moanin' about lost love." She snapped her fingers as if to dismiss those subjects. "Our songs kep' us climbin' up the mountain and crossin' the deep river. Singin' done carried us on this sorrowin' journey. It be the words of our music, Araminta, that turned us slave folk from those Africa gods carved out of wood and stone to a livin', breathin' Jesus."

It was time for the meeting to begin. Minty loved to see her father stand and start the song. His voice was low and

rumbly. At night, when he sang to the children, Minty loved to lean against him and feel the vibration of his song. Tonight he stood. He never told the people what song he was going to sing; he just started out:

Go down, Moses.

Everyone joined in, singing in harmony:

Way down in Egypt-land.
Tell ol' Pharaoh
To let My people go.

There was a swell of feeling when they came to the line:

Oppressed so hard they could not stand . . .

The song went on for a long time, sometimes with a deep humming underneath the words, other times in full voice. When the song finally wound down, Ben began to preach. "Moses was sent by the Lord to free the Hebrew slaves."

Several voices were raised in agreement. "Yes, sir," said one man.

"Um-huh," said one of the women.

"We spend our days lookin' for our deliverer," Ben said, "but we can't be forgettin' that Moses had to come under the eye of ol' Pharaoh before he could help his people. Like my

Araminta.” He looked over at Minty. “Today, she come under the eye of the overseer.”

Minty heard some mumbling and a “Lawd, have mercy.” Ben continued, “Me and Old Rit know how Moses’s mother must have worried when Pharaoh’s daughter pulled that basket out of the bulrushes, but we be trustin’ in the Lord.”

Minty could see William Henry making faces at her. He was laughing because Ben compared her to Moses. She knew it must have seemed a funny comparison, but she loved hearing her father entrust her to God. If only she could have the courage of Moses.

Her father preached on for a long time. Sometimes Minty was pulled in by his words, but most of the time she just listened to the musical rise and fall of his voice. The rhythm of her father’s teaching and the softly mumbled responses of the believers soothed her like singing, making her feel as if they were all working together to worship God.

The meeting ended on a happy note when everyone stood up, pushed the quilts over to one side of the room, and began a ring shout. Ben was the singer and another man was the sticker.

The sticker grabbed his broom and upturned his wooden box so he could beat out the rhythm with the broom handle on the box. Two other men were the basers. The basers answered Ben’s song and set the intricate hand-clapping rhythm. Once the beat and the song led off, the women and

girls started to move in a circle, singing and shuffling their feet to the beat.

Minty knew they could have gone on with the ring shout for hours, but work came early, so they only did “Lay Down Body,” and after several variations, they closed the meeting with prayer—praying especially for Nicey’s mother, Ruby. Everyone hurried off to their own cabins after the amen.



Minty wondered if her arms might just pull right out of her body. They ached from the heavy pails of water she hauled from the springhouse out to the field hands. She wouldn’t complain, though. She was working out of doors, not stuck inside a windowless cabin or shut up in the Big House. She wondered how many times she made the trip today after she lost count. She was glad that she was able to give dippers full of cool water to the hardworking slaves.

She couldn’t help thinking about her father’s preaching last night. Did Moses ever give water to the Hebrew slaves who worked for the Pharaoh? She knew Moses must have hated slavery as much as she did. She couldn’t help wondering if she could ever be as bold as Moses. It made her happy to think about being brave, but she was only a girl and a scrawny one at that.

“Hey, you.” It was the overseer.

“Yes, suh?”

“You Araminta Ross? Ben and Old Rit’s child?”

“Yes, suh.” She kept her head down, but managed to catch a glimpse of him out of the side of her eyes.

“Master wants to see you.” The overseer was grinning in that dangerous way that made it hard for Minty to breathe.

She looked around to see if she could see her mother or father, but she knew Old Rit was off working in the Big House and Ben was out cutting trees.

“Just leave the bucket, gal,” he said. “Someone else will have to carry water to the hands.” He laughed. “Won’t hurt them to go without for a few hours neither.”

Minty headed toward the Big House, hoping she’d run into her mother before she had to face Master Brodas. Old Rit was nowhere to be seen, but the Master was in the yard talking to a man seated in his wagon.

“Here she is, Mr. Cook,” he said.

“She looks a mite young, don’t she, Brodas?” The man was looking her over with a skeptical look on his face.

“Look, Mr. Cook, you said you could only afford to hire a child. Minty’s all I can afford to let go for that price. Take her or leave her.”

Hire? Master was hiring her out?

“All right, I’ll take her, but we better be able to get our work outta her.” The man called Mr. Cook talked in a coarse way—different from Master Brodas. “Get in the wagon, girl.”

“No!” Minty was frantic as she spoke to Master Brodas. “I’ll work hard here, Master. Please let me stay with Old Rit and Ben.”

The Master turned his back and started to walk away. The man called Mr. Cook reached down and yanked her up by one arm. She scraped her leg on the splintery boards of the wagon as he dragged her across, dumping her on the seat beside him.

“Please . . .” She stood up, trying to reach toward him for mercy.

The man yanked her arm to pull her back into the wagon. “Shut up, girl. Stop fussin’ or I’ll whup you till you can’t do nothin’.”

“Master Brodas,” she yelled toward his back, “can I make my farewells to Mama?”

No answer.

“Please, Master, please . . .”

Mr. Cook made clucking sounds to the horses and flicked the reins. The wagon pulled out onto the dirt road leading away from the plantation. The muffled clip-clop of the horses’ hooves sent puffs of dust into the air. Minty looked back, hoping for a glimpse of her family, but all she saw was the Big House—getting smaller and smaller as she moved away from everything she knew and everyone she loved.

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