

Celeste Rita Baker

JUMBIE FROM BORDEAUX

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I was frighten from de time I wake up. I ain't trust de way de sun creep over de top of de mountain, like it sneaking. I ain't trust de way de chickens crowing, instead of de sing song dat make me think dey telling jokes, I hear a squawking, kinda bawling, like ain't nothing funny. I ain't want to leave me bed.

But I get up and go outside, round de back. De chickens scatter like dey never see me before. I put me hand over de coal pot and feel de heat. It have some dough dere on de side, but it ain't fry. Where Mommy? Mommy never leave a hot coal pot alone, where we children could reach. Ain't I a child no more? I musta get grown in de night, cause a child does get breakfast, piece of dumbbread, or johnny cake and I ain't see none for me.

I strut off to find everybody, hands in me pockets like a big man. Plantation quiet quiet. Even though I don't like to get up, I like de morning cause de air smell like it just bathe. We high up from de sea but when de morning breeze blow it bring de sea smell. Sometimes I close me eyes, when it blow little hard and is like I feeling de small waves push me 'round. Like when we had go down to de sea and Daddy hold me under he arm like a soggy tree branch and tell me to lay out on de water like is Mommy lap I laying on. See how nice he tell me, soft and warm. Leave de water hold you up he say. And it did. I was floating. I jump up to tell Mommy "Look!" and de float gone. Daddy laugh and grab me again. I float all day feeling de small waves rocking me.

Today not even little breeze blowing. De bad feeling come round again. Dis time a morning everybody be cutting cane already. I going try meet up with de wagon. Is my

job to tie up de cane in bundles. Big piles of cane lay down here and dere and de wagon man Joseph and me, since I make me seventh birthday, travel up and down de field gathering dem. All day we go back and forth, hauling what Mommy, Daddy and de other grown folks cut, all de way to de clear yard by de Massa house near de front road. Is hard work, but de new Massa say I big enough to do it. De ole Massa die, and he wife and children all leave when de new Massa come. He come with evil ways Daddy say. But Mommy say hush, try not to think on dat. But I don't like looking at de new Massa, or Missus neither. They skin too paley paley, like this de first dey ever see sun and he eyes had make me itch. De day he make us line up, de day he tell me I was big enough to bundle, was de first time I see him close up and he eyes almost clear, like lizard belly, and I think on de dead lizard I see de day before, covered over with black ants. I start to scratch and rub, 'til Mommy pinch me, tell me be still. 'Til now he does make me itch when I see him.

I hear somebody crying. And somebody shushing dem. Coming from down by de clear yard. I don't want to go, but me feet take me. Is a long walk dat take only a short time.

I ain't look up. Just follow de dusty trail 'til I reach a circle of ragga skirt hems almost reaching de ground. Pant leg too. Some short, showing lot of scarred up legs, some long, dragging in de back like foot have tails. I 'fraid to look now, what I had want to find, I ain't want to see.

Everybody standing tight together. Quiet.

Is not really hot, but I sweating. I start looking for me Mommy, me Daddy, pushing through de big people. Mommy woulda make me stop pushing and say 'scuse me, but I can't self find she yet. Everybody gather round de two tamarind trees. Dey stand big in de clear yard, and shade de house. Two a dem, so close together and so big, dat de high branches all tangle up. Me and Jacko and Maryann does climb to get de ripe tamarind when Massa not home.

When I done push me way near de front, me Auntie grab me and hold me tight 'gainst she back. Me chest push up on she butt. She two arms reaching back to hold me two arms.

“...don’t care what you did before, but I’m your new master and there will be no more fornication! Do you understand me? No sex. No men and women laying together. No sleeping together. No sneaking around at night to get to one another. I’ve told you this before and I will not tolerate disobedience!”

Me ain’t know what Massa yelling about, but de grown folks ain’t like it. Is like all a dem just turn to stone. I can’t see nothing but Auntie dress back and I try turn me head. Nobody say “yes, Massa,” nobody say “no, Massa. No breeze blow, nobody breathe.

“Now, this one..umh, Audra and this one, Louis, have been caught at...are known to be...when I want you to breed, goddammit, I will breed you!”

I don’t know what all he say but Audra and Louis is me Mommy and Daddy. I know Mommy name is Audra, only Daddy does call she dat. ‘Specially at night, so far night is almost morning, I does hear he calling she Audra ‘steada Sal, what everybody else call Mommy. Dey does be talking and whispering and making loud soft sounds and dat’s how I know dat Audra and Louis is Mommy and Daddy.

I getting more frighten now and I need to find dem bad bad. De sun hot on me head and I ain’t know why Auntie holding me so tight. I can’t self breathe and me legs feeling like jellyfish look. I jerk round hard and before Auntie could wrench me back, I see.

What I see make me head throw back and a scream fly out. So loud and so long I could feel it. Dat too frighten me and I feel like candle wax, melting into de ground. Is like de sound alone make into a ting and me insides ripping out.

Tie to de trees, no clothes on, is me *Mother*. And me *Father*. De Massa standing on one side, de headman on de other. Dey gon’ whip them. De whips long long and brown. Three piece a leather braid up together, de bottom free like feathers. Long time dey hang on a hook by ole Massa door. De only time I ever see dem move from dere was when a slobbering, red-eyed dog had come in de yard and everybody chase him down. Ole Massa had grab de whip den and whoosh it through de air so fast you ain’t sure you see it. It land on de dog back and bright red blood come out.

I see de whip handle in new Massa hand, raise up high over he head. Massa and headman watch each other, like they gon' race. De people quiet. 'Cept for me, I ain't stop screaming. Me Uncle, John Frank holding Massa gun.

"Shut dat boy up," Massa say. He voice like dark cloud holding rain, and Uncle John Frank point Massa gun at Auntie and me. I see tears rolling down he face.

I still screaming when de first lash come down. Den me Mommy join me. She call de angels with she mouth, but dey ain't come. We two voices soaring through de morning like cutlass. Auntie try cover me mouth with she two hands. Daddy shaking like fish quiver when it come on land. De lashes falling on me parents bare skin.

De *helplessness* jump out a me and latch onto something dat *could*. Is like I fly right out me own mouth. Went with me own scream and find meself high up in de air, swooping down from de sky like a stone from a slingshot.

I see de tops of de two tamarind trees and de half circle of people gather round. I see me Mother and Father stake out on de ground like two pigs for roasting, they brown bodies looking blurry in de brown dirt. Everybody still but Auntie. She turning round now, trying to hold me up, but me body fall right down to de ground, heavy like sleep.

Every time de two whips draw back dey smacking leaves off de trees. Leaves falling like sweat.

I rush at Massa first. I meaning to take out he eye. Gouge out he throat. Snatch de whip from he hand like I does snatch worm from de dirt.

De whip nearly catch me when I dive in, but I reach he face and try plow me whole body in through he eye hole. He arm fly up and try bat me away. I feeling stuck in de mush of he eye and is like sucking mud to try get 'way. I use me feet to scabble and claw. He screaming too now and de lash fall with no force.

I turn and fly at de headman. He watching me come, mouth hanging open, looking stupid. He gone catch more than flies today.

Massa yelling, clutching he face, "Shoot it! Shoot it, John Frank! Shoot!"

Straight for de headman's face I go, me talons stretch out like I ready to clutch a rat. He try raise he whip to me, but it too late, I grab hold of he two cheeks and try reverse meself and take he flesh with me.

Uncle John Frank can't shoot. I too close. He swing de gun like a club, but I gone already and he bash in headman nose. I drop headman two cheek in de dirt and fly away.

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Dey leave Mommy and Daddy tie up dere in de dirt.

Auntie had done take de body where I used to be and lay it on de selfsame bed I ain't want to get up from. She know I dead, and she crying.

Auntie go back and cut de ropes holding Mommy and Daddy down by sheself. Nobody else would come. She bring water for dem. Blood oozing every time dey draw breath. Dey eyes open but dey ain't really seeing. Can't stand up, can't sit down, de whole back a dem torn up. Auntie crying, not letting she tears fall on de deep deep cuts. De Missus in de window watching. And I dere, in de tamarind tree, watching she back.

Auntie bring a bowl a water for me too. She watch me with she face turn sideways, but she call me by me name. "Come, Clem, drink," she say and is den I feel to cry. She know me. Auntie know me. I ain't self know meself, bound up in feathers with beak and ting, same bloody as de two whips drop down in de dirt.

I never sleep inna bed again.