

The Portland autumn sun used to hit the church window pane of amber and rose stained glass at just the right angle to touch my prayer-clasped hands and bring out the giddy feeling I would get before one of my far-traveling mindspells. I never told my husband, Andrew, just why I would always choose the exact same pew to sit in come the fall, of how I looked forward to the moments of long ago memories that he had no part of. Even though my spouse was ever-present and sitting by my side in the pew, tugging on the collar of his one-size-too small shirt and fanning himself against the stifling heat as he listened closely to the words of the visiting preacher; I could feel myself slipping into a golden haze of childhood memories going back in time and to what I now know is a place on the other side of the American continent ...

"Ellen, wake up. It's first light, Ellen." I yawned and rubbed the sleep from my eyes as I sat up in the common bed in response to mother's repeated calling of my name. Birdsongs punctuated the pre-dawn silence and the air hung heavy with the promise of another sultry day on the Chesapeake. I could almost taste the hot grits bubbling on the cooking fire, and see through the gloom to the silent figure of my mother who was for once not dressing for another day in the fields, in the drafty one room shack we called home at the edge of the Judge's plantation. On the crude wooden platform we all shared as a bed, my "grannie" was still curled on her side, her breath whistling softly through her toothless gums as she was in the embrace of sleep reserved for the very aged.

I quickly progressed to awakeness and moved over to the bench by the hearth where Rachel started to pull a comb through my sleep-tangled curls. After twenty minutes of this annoyance, I squirmed on the bench and started to swing my legs under the bench, scant inches from the earthen floor. Rachel put down the comb and chucked me gently under the chin as a ray from the resolutely approaching dawn of the glinted through the large gaps between the crude door and its frame. "Now, Ellen," my sister chided me, as she finished wrapping and pinning the coils of my tightly braided hair around the nape of my impatiently craned neck. "How on earth, can I get you ready for your 'appearance at the big house if you keep movin' around like a squirrel in winter lookin' for a buried nut? Stay still and let me finish makin' you look good for the 'numerator."

Rachel was eight years older than me, more experienced and already burdened with the cares of the world, as she was a personal maid to the Judge's mischievous twelve-year old daughter, Lavinia. At the tender age of seven and four months old, I was still too young and somewhat shielded from the realities of life. A world no bigger than this fallow corner of the 400 acre plantation with 21 slaves was all I and the other children from the adjacent slave housing knew only as a personal playground, a waiting place for our older brothers and sisters to return to after duties were done at the Big House, and for our grim-lipped parent(s) to settle their weary bones after a marathon day of picking cotton that sometimes continued long past the first dark.

As a careless child, I did not fully understand what the older members of my family dealt with on a daily basis, mercifully, I was somewhat incredibly insulated against the gross incursions that the institution of slavery made against my family and my race, as a whole. On the few occasions that my mother let a sob slip from her lips in the rude bed we all shared at night, I thought she was crying because she missed my daddy, who had been sent away down South, when I was a babe-in-arms being rocked to sleep and watched over by a still-alert 'grannie." I was impatient to get back into my 'grubbies" and to play hide and seek with the neighboring plantation children and didn't look forward at all to meeting this stranger from another world.

Dutifully, I served out three portions of hot grits and started to dig into my bowl while my mother and Rachel wrestled 'grannie" into a sitting position and her withered arms were lifted for the removal of her tattered sleep shift. My mother finally spoke in exasperation. "Today's 'numeration day, grannie," she pleaded. "The Judge wants us up at the house bright and early today and we can't be late. It's past first light already." The ancient woman moaned slightly when the hand-me-down calico dress was eased onto her frail body as the sudden movement of her body awakened her lumbago. Mother continued to whisper placating words to 'grannie" who had begun to shake her head and say "no" to mother's pleading..

"What is the num... numeration day and why do we have to meet this stranger?" I breathlessly asked Rachel. Visitors coming to the Plantation were few and far between, and we never had to

dress up for visitors before. "You'll see soon," Rachel answered in between bites of her breakfast. "I'm only twice your age and I've already been through one of these here cense-sus things," she said. "It's like the bible the Missus reads to us at Chris'mas time...where poor li'l Baby Jesus' kinfolk (while he was still in heaven waitin' to come down to earth) had to walk to Jerusalem to be counted by the Romans. Only now they're comin' to Mary-land, to count us all."

I brought over a pair of scuffed slippers to "grannie's" side of the bed and knelt down to place her hard and calloused feet into the shoes. Mother finished dressing herself and slipped out of the cabin to ask the father of the family next door to carry 'grannie' up to the Big House. Rachel continued to prop "grannie" up, and babysat her to keep her from ripping off the clothes that had been painstakingly draped over her emaciated body.

Soon my family, and part of the first group of slave families were making our way up the road at the appointed time, past the other slave family cabins and further past the rows of planted tobacco that only held the future promise of aching backs and long hours for the plantation slaves. The big house still lay hidden in the long shadows cast by the oak trees and was yet to be touched by the sun. Big Dan carefully cradled a sleeping 'grannie' in his arms as he strode in the middle of our little party.

The sky brightened as the sun went up a few more notches, when we made the final turn leading up to the veranda. Sam, the overseer was waiting for our party, and led us through an archway with columns around to the right wing of the house by the servants entrance and kitchen. The full heat of the morning sun followed us into the patio where the Judge and a small man were waiting by a rocking chair. Sam took the sleeping 'grannie' from Big Dan's arms and carefully placed her into the rocker, and then motioned us into position as the Judge ascended the staircase and cleared his throat.

"As some of you know from past years," he intoned, clasping his hands behind his back as if he were addressing a council or assembly. "when ever ten years goes by, the government requires that every person be counted for a census. Since the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act

in the United States, the Census also includes a new "Schedule 2—Slave Inhabitants" that has to be filled out. Here the Judge paused and turned to look at 'grannie" who had stirred faintly in her chair and sighed.

"Assistant Marshall Bastabile, the enumerator here, has told me that this year's census requires the counting of slaves age 100 and over," the Judge continued. "I've been told that "grannie" here is 103 years old, and will be included in this special category, even though I've been told by my brother in Prince George County that a plantation owner there has one that's 110 years old."

"Now you don't have to bother your heads knowing why it has to be taken, or of what use the information is to the government. Just answer all of the assistant marshall's questions so that he can get on with his work in another part of Maryland. The faster this is done, the sooner you all can get back to work in the fields and the house. It also means that 'grannie" here doesn't have to spend too much time under the sun. Don't you people have any hats for "grannie." The Judge took off his straw hat and placed it on 'grannie's" head. Then, as if he were ashamed of his sudden show of humanity, the Judge spun on his heel and walked around the side of the house to the garden and left us in the hands of the overseer and the enumerator.

Sam had our party stand in family clusters to make it easier for the enumerator. We stood around "grannie" shielding her from the glare of the suddenly hot sun as he came around to us. The enumerator carried a sheaf of papers and a pen with which he scribbled down notes while Sam the overseer hovered around him like a bird of prey. The combination of light and heat had worked its magic on "grannie" and her eyelids fluttered open in surprise as she took in her surroundings and the faces of the white folk standing around her.

Noticing her movements, the enumerator knelt down to face "grannie" on a level field of vision. "Do you remember when you were born, little lady?" he asked with a smile. As 'grannie" lifted her head under the broad-brimmed hat and looked into his hazel eyes, she cackled and placed withered fingers over the enumerator's pen hand, but didn't or couldn't

answer his question. The enumerator slowly rose up to his full height and looked at the overseer for help, but Sam was digging through his papers that he kept in a file similar to the box that he would bring around to the slave cabins when he was taking inventory of the household goods parceled out to each family when they first moved in. “ I can’t find any records of her birthday or birthplace, although she was purchased at the slave market in Charleston” Sam said. “These records go back before the turn of the century. But I remember reading in the Judge’s grandfather’s receipt book that ‘grannie’ was purchased in the same year that the judge’s family first subscribed to the building of the memorial to the revolution. Add 18 to 20 years to that and she’s got to be older than 100.”

In the end, the enumerator gave her centenarian status on his form, based upon my “grannie’s” Native African features, her weathered and wrinkled skin, and the inherited receipts. His form didn’t have any special lines on which to fill out the information about “grannie”, so he scribbled the information in the margins of the census form next to his name. Then the enumerator went on to fill in the rest of his form for the remainder of us without asking questions, merely taking note of our complexions, gender and estimated ages. We were summarily dismissed and a second grouping of slaves walked forward to take our place.

On the walk back towards the cabin, “grannie” drooped in Big Dan’s arms, a victim of the high heat and humidity. I was profoundly silent, and actually listened to what my elders were saying about the Fugitive Slave Laws and about something called the Underground Railroad. I realized that my mother didn’t know ‘grannie’s” birthdate, that in fact none of us knew the calendar year or date that we had entered this world...we were just born and became slaves. That was all we were meant to be, a half-remembered name, an unfulfilled destiny, a checkmark on someone’s inventory list like cattle or furniture. Somewhere, deep inside me, I knew that I couldn’t settle for this wretched existence.

Enumeration Day became my passage into an early adulthood and marked the end of my days of innocent and painfully ignorant childhood. By the next Christmas reading of the Bible, I had

been pressed into service at the Big House, where I was being trained as a house servant. By Eastertide, I was “leased out” and living on a neighboring plantation where the mistress needed help with her ever growing brood of children. She was quick to find fault and I was beaten more than once for imagined infractions like falling asleep after 20 straight hours of tending the children. A disheartening reality set in as I started to imagine myself in the future, at “grannie’s” age and still somebody’s property.

A year after Enumeration Day, I had to go down to the parlor to help the mistress carry up the twin boy babies and I overheard the men talking over brandy and cigars about a place called Fort Sumter. Names that at the time means very little to me like “President Lincoln” and “Union.” But I liked hearing the words “liberty” and “Freedom” because it put me in mind of when the mistress read the Bible and what it said about Father Abraham leading his people out of captivity in Egypt. As I looked outside at night at the moon and the stars overhead, I wondered if those words would ever apply to me.

The second anniversary of Enumeration Day came and passed, and with it, a greater desire on my part for freedom for me and my family. In part, because “grannie” finally died in her sleep, and my sister Rachel was sold by the Judge to a plantation owner down South. I started to keep track of the days, and remember that in the last week of August I had been loaned out to the sister of my new master, as she was bedbound, awaiting the birth of a child. As I didn’t have any belongings but the clothes on my back, the trip was short and uneventful, and the carriage deposited me at their farm situated between Hagerstown and Dunker Church as twilight settled upon the quiet countryside.

I stepped down from the carriage, and stood in dismay in yet another doorway to another prison, when someone tapped me on the hand and called out my name “Ellen, wake up, Ellen,

my love, services let out five minutes ago.” I shook my head as if to clear it and fixed my gaze on the speaker of those words of endearment. The indulgent and worried face of my husband, Andrew, floated into my vision as I gradually became aware of my surroundings. The choir leader, Mrs Phillips, had loosened the lace at my throat, and Reverend Davis all looked at me with concern as he handed me a glass of water. Andrew squeezed my hand and smiled at the small crowd that parted to give me air. “She’s okay now, praise the Lord. She’s come back home. She’s left Antietam and she’s back in Portland, Oregon.”