

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi

THERE WAS NO DRINKING GOURD, no spiritual soothing enough to mend a broken spirit. Even the Northern Star was a hoax.

Every day, Ness picked cotton under the punishing eye of the southern sun. She had been at Thomas Allan Stockham's Alabama plantation for three months. Two weeks before, she was in Mississippi. A year before that, she was in a place she would only ever describe as Hell.

Though she had tried, Ness couldn't remember how old she was. Her best guess was twenty-five, but each year since the one when she was plucked from her mother's arms had felt like ten years. Ness's mother, Esi, had been a solemn, solid woman who was never known to tell a happy story. Even Ness's bedtime stories had been ones about what Esi used to call 'the Big Boat.' Ness would fall asleep to the images of men being thrown into the Atlantic Ocean like anchors attached to nothing: no land, no people, no worth. In the Big Boat, Esi said, they were stacked ten high, and when a man died on top of you, his weight would press the pile down like cooks pressing garlic. Ness's mother, called Frownie by the other slaves because she never smiled, used to tell the story of how she'd been cursed by a Little Dove long, long ago, cursed and sisterless, she would mutter as she swept, left without her mother's stone. When they sold Ness in 1796, Esi's lips had stood in that same thin line. Ness could remember reaching out for her mother, flailing her arms and kicking her legs, fighting against the body of the man who'd come to take her away. And still Esi's lips had not moved, her hands had not reached out. She stood there, solid and strong, the same as Ness had always known her to be. And though Ness had met warm slaves on other plantations, black people who smiled and hugged and told nice stories, she would always miss the gray rock of her mother's heart. She would always associate real love with a hardness of spirit.

Thomas Allan Stockham was a good master, if such a thing existed. He gave them five-minute breaks every three hours, and the field slaves were allowed onto the porch to receive one mason jar full of water from the house slaves.

This day in late June, Ness waited in line for water beside TimTam. He was a gift to the Stockham family from their neighbours, the Whitmans, and Tom Allan often liked to say that TimTam was the best gift he'd ever received, better even than the gray-tailed cat his brother had given him for his fifth birthday or the red wagon he'd received for his second.

'How your day been?' TimTam asked.

Ness turned toward him just slightly. 'Ain't all days the same?'

TimTam laughed, a sound that rumbled like thunder built from the cloud of his gut and expelled through the sky of his mouth. 'I s'pose you right,' he said.

Ness was not certain she would ever get used to hearing English spill out of the lips of black people. In Mississippi, Esi had spoken to her in Twi until their master caught her. He'd given Esi five lashes for every Twi word Ness spoke, and when Ness, seeing her battered mother, had become too scared to speak, he gave Esi five lashes for each minute of Ness's silence. Before the lashes, her mother had called her Maame, after her own mother, but the master had whipped Esi for that too, whipped her until she cried out 'My goodness!' – the words escaping her without thought, no doubt picked up from the cook, who used to say it to punctuate every sentence. And because those had been the only English words to escape Esi's mouth without her struggling to find them, she believed that what she was saying must have been something divine, like the gift of her daughter, and so that goodness had turned into, simply, Ness.

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