

Daring to Fly

Dreams and Destinies



Through the gone years, across the now years, and in out the maybe years. It was all the same, her life was relentless, soul-crushing toil.

Washing, scouring, sweeping, scrubbing, patching. Hoeing, hacking, digging, pruning, chopping, dragging and pressing; never getting, never reaping; exiled, robbed, emptied, tangled, shackled, never enough knowing, never fully seeing.

This was Miriam's life-world. She had dwelt in it for sixteen years, since her birth—though no one knew for certain where or when her birth had been. This was true of all the slaves, they were not allowed to know when and where exactly they had been born. And now Miriam had a baby in the world with her.

Her baby slept on her back as she worked in the plantation., hoeing, chopping, pruning, planting. The sun beat down, the same sun which in Africa had warmed and softened and delighted Miriam's foremothers and forefathers, and all her other ancestors, but which now, in the slaveryland of America, was hard and ferocious, cruel, pitiless and implacable, savage in its casual, unthinking, careless brutality.

Tiny babies do not slumber long, least of all when they are empty and thirsty, and when their mothers are stretched with pain and worry. Miriam's baby awoke on her back and began to cry. He cried out at the sun, at the plantation, all his whole life-world. He cried for softness, for tender love

spaciously given. 'Stop that! Stop that thing's noise, stop it, put an end to it, I say!'

The plantation overseer rode up to Miriam, cracking his whip. She looked up wearily at his white face, towering on his horse high above her, and her baby continued to cry. Crack, the overseer's lashed both Miriam and her baby deep into their skin. She fell sobbing to her knees as her baby screamed, and the overseer rode on, forgetting Miriam and her life-world in less time than it takes to crack a whip.

An old slave, Moses, happened to see. He came over to Miriam. 'You must go, little mother, it's time for you to go. You can dare to go, little daughter, you can dare to fly to Africa. Kum buba yali, kum buba tambe. fly little sister. You shall be the first, you shall be the motheR of us all.'

She stepped up onto the air, first with one foot, then with the other. Next she was gliding, and her whip wound was healed, and her baby's wound was healed, and she was floating, soaring into the breeze, free as an eagle, and she was on her way home. The overseer on the land beneath her caught sight of her, and he roared with fury, and he began to pursue her. But on she flew, over the fields, over the fences, over the cabins, over the streams, over the woods, and out of sight.

The following day four young male slaves dropped exhausted from where they were working, and were lashed without mercy by the overseer and left for dead. 'Kum buba yali, kum buba tambe.' whispered Moses approaching them. 'Dare to fly, my young brothers, fly away home, fly to your Africa.'

The overseer boiled with fury as the four young men, beautiful now, stepping up onto the air, first with the one foot then with the other, and floating and gliding over the fields, over the fences, over the cabins, over the streams, over the woods, and out of sight. He hurried away to report the matter to the slave-owner.

'It's time for us all to go well,' murmured Moses. 'Kum buba yali, kum buba tambe. All of us must dare.' And he moved swiftly through the plantation, partly running and partly flying, speaking to everyone. And each and every slave, every woman and every man, every girl and every boy, stepped up onto the air, first with one foot then with the other, and they all hovered in the air above the slave-owner and the overseer on their horses, and they turned and rose higher, like eagles, free in the bright air.

Soaring, rising, floating,, gliding, hoping willing, dreaming, trusting, cherishing, dancing, singing, praising, pulsing with beauty, rejoicing in their own strength and grace, firm and determined, and with their love into freedom, and on their way home now, to give birth to new life.

The story soon began to spread around, about how the people dared fly. Oh, they tried to suppress the story, the slave-owners, but there was no way

now the story could be suppressed. All over slavery-land the story was told and year after year. Even after the slavery-time, people still told the story.

And even outside of slavey-land the story is known.

In prisons and war-zones everywhere, on treadmills and conveyor belts in all lands, in homes and workplaces, markets and arenas, parks and fields, in Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas, in our hearts and in our memories.

We cherish that special day, and those special words, Kum buba yali, kum buba tambe, and we cherish that it has happened, and that it has been learned, that people dare fly.

Source: Traditional tale known in communities and families throughout the United States, and also in Brazil, Canada and Cuba. This version appeared in *Accounts and Agendas: reflections in memory of David Ruddell*, Birmingham Library Theatre, September 1991, subsequently published by the Development Education Centre in Birmingham and in *Inside Stories: wisdom and hope for changing worlds* by Angela Wood and Robin Richardson, Trentham Books 1992.

Throughout the 1980s David Ruddell (11 August 1944—23 June 1990) was one of the principal pioneers in England of antiracist education.

The image at the start is by Pralea Yasile from Pixabay.