

Lanterns In The Sky

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"Come on, Sara!" Juliana whispered, holding my hand.

I shivered as I felt the cold night's air ruffle the back of my blouse.

"Careful, Sara, there's a log here."

"Miss Juliana, ain't it time to stop yet? I'm growing awful tired!"

"Quit your complaining! You're worse than my mother! You want to be free, don't you?"

"Yes'm, but I'm growing mighty tired!"

"I know, but we have to walk until sunrise, and then we will stop and rest."

We walked in silence for the next few moments. I thought about Juliana. She's gonna miss her rich white folks, fancy clothing and home cooking.
"Miss Juliana, how much further we havin' to go?"

"For the tenth time, Sara, until-careful-tree limb, bend down-until we reach Canada. Now don't you go getting me upset. This will take some time. You just have to learn to be patient." Still holding my hand, she guided me under a large tree limb. I could hear the crackling of fallen twigs beneath our feet.

"Miss Juliana, are you sure you're up to this? We can always go back." I was worried about her safety. She's not use to roughing it like this.

"Sara, you're beginning to sound like you don't really want to be free! But I would never do that to you-get your hopes up just to let you down. I've thought about this for quite awhile and we're going to Canada; you will get your freedom. Now enough about this going back nonsense!"

Miss Juliana was so smart. Would I ever be as smart as Miss Juliana? I don't ever like to get Miss Juliana upset, because she's right all the time. She'll be a teacher or something. I don't understand what all those big words mean, but I enjoy listening to her. I

never was able to fancy schooling like Miss Juliana, or any schooling for that matter. Miss Juliana tried to teach me things whenever she could, as long as no one else ever found out. Since we've been on this journey, she's taught me even more things. When I worked hard in the fields I dreamt of going to Perkins School in Boston. There would be other people just like me and would understand me, for once. I want Miss Juliana to be there, too.

"Okay, we can rest here, Sara."

Juliana let go of my hand and I heard her digging through her bag.

"Sit down, Sara. It's all right. Go ahead. Here's a blanket. Want some bread, Sara?"

"No thank you, Miss--"

"Sara, call me Juliana, plain old Juliana."

"No thank you mi- Juliana-, I'm not hungry."

Mama always told me to respect our superiors and I was never to call them by their first name. I never wanted to risk getting whipped again. I was whipped once for knocking down an expensive vase.

"Come on, Sara, we're not at home, you can eat. You're skin and bones! Let's see if I can fatten you up some," she said placing the bread into my rough hands. "Here, have some beef jerky, too." She used to sneak me food back at the plantation, too. I would share it with Mama and everybody else because I felt guilty being greedy and keeping it all to myself.

"Thank you, Juliana." I couldn't ask for a better friend.

*Juliana is the only person
that has ever been kind to me.*

Once Juliana let me touch her long, soft hair. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever touched. It wasn't like my dry short hair. We all wore rags on our heads. Juliana treated me like no one else ever treated me. To other people, I am a "burden." I was always falling, knocking things over and dropping them.

Once I remember I was so sick and weak, I could hardly move. Everyone thought I would die. And I think everyone was secretly hoping I would. Juliana's father said that it was costing them more to keep me alive so it would be better if I would just pass on.

*I have always been weak,
ever since I was born.
Mama didn't think
I would make it past the age of two.*

I was so sick I laid on the floor for two days straight in a deep sweat. Juliana came to me with fresh milk and some homemade soup. I hadn't eaten food in two days. It was the best food I have ever tasted in my entire life. I remember lying on the floor, praying that God would just take my life and end this misery. Then when Juliana came to me, I realized I had reason to live. She stroked my head with clean rags to wipe off the sweat and told me everything would be all right. And it was. She was always right.

"Ahh . . . it's such a beautiful night . . .
the stars are so . . ."

Juliana was trying to be polite. "Keep on talking,
Juliana, I enjoy it."

I tried to imagine what stars looked like. "Juliana,
what do stars look like?"

"Ohh . . . they're just like lanterns in the sky to guide
you at night."

"Oh . . . sounds nice." . . . lanterns in the sky . . .
"Juliana, do you think I'm -you know- pretty?"

"Pretty?!" she laughed, "why you're not pretty, you're
beautiful."

"Really, you think I'm beautiful?"

"Yes, of course."

"Beautiful." I repeated. "How splendid." I knew it was wonderful to be beautiful, but I didn't actually know what it felt like to be beautiful. Maybe people would love me if I were more beautiful.

"But I mean -am I beautiful- like you?"

I could tell she was shocked. "Beautiful -like me?
Whatever do you mean?"

"I can tell you are beautiful because you know all the answers, you're pleasant to listen to, and you have nice, soft, long hair. And like mama says: 'you only have one handicap to overcome in life.' And that's why I know you are beautiful."

"And what is my handicap, Sara?"

"Your sex."

Juliana knew what I intended. I had three handicaps -my color, my sex, and my blindness.

"Juliana, how does it feel . . ."

"What feel?"

"feel to be . . . white?"

Usually Juliana never hesitated before answering because she knew everything. I don't think anyone had ever asked her that before because she didn't know what to say.

"I mean . . . does it make you happier? I know it makes you prettier and smarter-"

She sounded shocked, she answered in a high-pitched tone. "No, it doesn't. It doesn't make you any worse or any better, prettier or uglier, more intelligent or less."

"Then why are there colors?"

"Because that is the way God made us. You want to know something ironic? White is actually a boring color. Black is much more exciting."

"Really?"

"Yes, white is the color of the clouds, and anyway, I'm not that color. I'm not white; I'm peach. And you're not black; you are the color of maple wood. And because your skin is darker, it makes your teeth stand out a beautiful color like cotton."

"I don't understand. You're a fruit and I'm a piece of wood?"

"Well, maybe I'm more of an apricot."

"What do you mean? That's still a fruit."

"What I am trying to say is we are all different because God loves variety. Just like the birds and flowers.

*If there were only daffodils in the world,
we would get sick of them.
And if there were only cardinals flying around,
we would get bored with those too.*

Likewise, if we were all the same color, it would be boring. There would be nothing unique about us. You are special."

I thought about what Juliana said, but I didn't feel special. Maybe I would feel special if more people loved me.

"Sara, do you want to stay here for the night? There is a tree that will block the wind for us and will conceal us. And there are plenty of leaves on the ground that will make it softer for us to lay on."

No one had ever asked me to make a decision before.

"Why yes, it seems fine, here."

"Here is a blanket, Sara. You can lie right here. I'll sleep right beside you."

I laid down and Juliana laid right beside me, close, blocking what wind the tree did not. She helped wrap the blanket around me and then she held my hand. This ground was softer than where we spent the night last night. I still have pain on my right side from sleeping up against a rock. The leaves were still damp from the rain the night before. I laid my head against the damp leaves and tried to remember the last time I was able to take a bath. I don't think my hair had been washed for three weeks. My head was starting to itch and the leaves weren't helping any, at least it was comfortable. I smiled and thought about what it would be like when we reached our destination. I would be able to take a bath anytime I want. I would learn how to read Braille. I would make new friends. I could even work hard to get Mama and the rest of everyone to join me. I had so many things that I would do.

"I can taste freedom, Juliana. And it tastes so good."

"Yes, it's close. We're almost there. . . . Sweet dreams, and don't forget to say your prayers."

"What should I pray for, Juliana? I already have a best friend and my freedom."

"Not yet, Sara, not yet."

"Sara, come on." Juliana said shaking me to wake me up. "Time to go."

We grabbed our bags and blankets. Juliana folded our blankets and put them in her pouch. Juliana held my hand and began walking. I was still half-dazed from just waking up. Juliana handed me a piece of bread. It was starting to dry out now.

"Here's breakfast. We have to eat and walk; we don't have enough time to stand still. We're already a little behind schedule. Careful Sara -duck, branch."

The crackling of the sticks beneath our feet and the chirping of the crickets were the only sound.

"Juliana . . . what if . . . what if they get the dogs after us?"

"Oh nonsense. We needn't worry about that, they won't."

I had a different feeling, but I didn't want to disagree. She had never been wrong before, so why should I stop believing her now?

"Will I ever be smart like you, Juliana?"

She laughed, "Why of course you will. You will go to Perkins and learn how to read Braille. I know you will be smart because you ask so many questions!"

I thought about going to Perkins. It would be wonderful to go, but how could I? I would never be able to go to Boston, especially as a run-away. "Juliana, how is it that I can go to Perkins?"

"Now you needn't worry. We'll figure something out."

Juliana had a plan for everything. That was my biggest dream. I will always be discriminated against because of my color. I cannot change my color, but I can always change how smart I am. Juliana doesn't know how it is to feel dumb. But some day I will know how it feels to be smart. . . . Some day . . .

"Watch out, there's a log."

*I wondered if Juliana was doing this because
she felt sorry for me or because
she believed it was the right thing to do.*

Why was she so set on getting me my freedom? Maybe it was because she was ashamed of her parents. I thought about Mama. Did she cry when she found out I was gone, or was she mad? Did she want to come, too? What about Jerry? Did he miss me? Someday we will all be free. We will live together in the Promised Land. Mama probably thought I was a burden finally out of the way.

"Careful Sara! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm use to it," I said getting up.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Just be careful."

"I'm tryin'."

"I know. It must be terrible not to . . ."

Juliana was always so concerned with offending me. I never worried about it; it didn't bother me. Juliana was my best and only friend in the world.

"No, it's not really terrible," I said. "I was born this way, so I don't really know any different. Everything is normal to me. People make such a big deal about how you look. I think not seeing is a blessing. I don't see how bad people really are. I can hear the hatred, but I can't see it. You see all the hatred and ugliness in the world. You have to make sense of colors. Colored and not colored. It doesn't make any sense to me. I feel sorry for you because you cannot hide your eyes from the ugliness in the world." For the first time in my life, I felt useful and smart.

"Sara, why didn't your mother have any children after you?"

"It wasn't exactly like it was her choice. But maybe it was because she was afraid of having another burden—"

"You're not a burden Sara, you help—"

"Yeah, all I do is pick cotton all day and get yelled at for not being as fast as the others."

"Maybe it was because she wanted to give birth to a free child, so they didn't have to suffer. It certainly was not you're fault . . . or your mother's fault."

"No, I guess it wasn't."

"How would she know to stay away from Jerry when she was pregnant with you?"

Jerry was another slave around the plantation. He was nice to me, but he was always so busy. Mama says he has not been the same since he had the measles. Maybe he feels guilty for causing my blindness. I don't blame him; it wasn't his fault.

"Okay, let's rest." Juliana guided me to a log. "You can sit here." Juliana started looking for something, I could hear the rustling in her bag. "Did you hear something?"

"No, Sara, why?"

"Oh. I guess it's just my imagination."

"There's a bird over there, pecking on a tree. That's probably what you hear."

But was it just a bird? I hear a lot of stuff other people don't. I have to rely on my ears to let me know what is going on and I thought I heard something else. I did hear the pecking, but I thought I heard something further away, off in the distance. Or it could just be the rustling of Juliana's papers. "What are you looking for, Juliana?"

"A map; I'm trying to see if this is the correct house."

"Correct house for what?"

"Come on, it is," she said pulling me forward.

"We're not going inside, are we?"

"Yes."

"What if—"

"These people are nice. I told you we are going to get our freedom, and we are."

"What do you mean 'our' freedom, Juliana?"

"I felt like a slave myself inside of that house, wearing fancy, stuffy dresses, going to school only to pretend I'm not as smart as the boys, talking and eating a particular way. Leaving the house is like me getting freedom, too. Our lives will both improve from here, Sara. You'll see."

"You mean you really didn't like it there?"

"No. I couldn't do the things I really wanted to do."

"Juliana—"

"What?"

"Thanks . . . for everything . . . I love you."

No one has ever told me they love me and I've never

told anyone I love them. This was special. I loved Juliana. I could feel it.

"I love you too, Sara. But now you better stay put. DO NOT MOVE! I'm going up to that house. It's not far from here, but just don't move. Stay perfectly still."

"How do I know if—"

"Just stay here. Everything's going to be all right."

There wasn't anyone else in the world like Juliana, with determination like hers. She knew how to make a person feel good. I thought about what she said before: "different . . . unique . . . special." I guess I am special. Only it seems as though Juliana is the only one that appreciates it. She won't stop until I'm free. I love Juliana. She helped me to learn so much.

I heard a noise again, but I couldn't tell where it was coming from. The hairs on my neck started to stand up and I broke out in a sweat because I was so nervous.

I heard footsteps. "Juliana!" I whispered.

"Yeah. This is the one. We're going inside. The lady said it's all easy from here. We made it, Sara! The lady said we're crazy, but she admires us. Sara, you're sweating, what's wrong? We made it Sara, we made it! You're free! This is no time to be scared! I told you this lady is nice, we have nothing to fear from here."

"Wait . . . Shh . . . what is that? I hear it again!"

"Hear what?"

"Dogs!"

I heard a loud bang, "Juliana?"

She moaned weakly. "Keep going! Just run!"

I didn't understand. Where was I to run to?

"What? You know I can't leave you! Come on Juliana! What are you waiting for? You said we made it!"

I heard the sound of the approaching barking dogs and yelling men. I realized what had happened. I bent down and gently stroked her face. I could feel her wet blouse, it must be from her blood. I thought about the time I was laying on the floor and Juliana took care of me. Only I didn't know what to do to take care of her.

"Oh my God, Juliana! What should I do?"

"Just run!" she whispered in pain.

"No. I'm not leaving you. I don't even know where to go. Give me your hand."

"Sara, just know that I will shine brightly in the sky. Never let your lantern burn out. Don't ever give up!"

I could feel tears rolling down my cheeks. I cried for the first time in my life. I never had emotion until Juliana.

"No, I won't let you go. Juliana . . . I love you . . . JULIANA!"