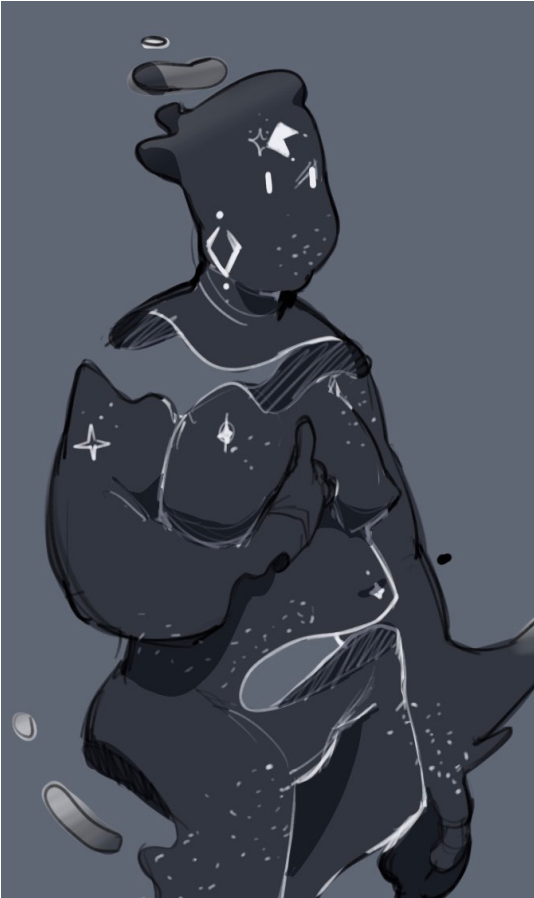


# FOR PAGE & SCREEN MAGAZINE

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# A Trip to Barbados

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Take me to this land  
of sweet sugar cane and Mount Gay Rum,  
I want to taste its sweetness  
and feel its tropical sun,  
Take me to Barbados!*  
—Charmaine J. Forde

The rice harvest had ended in February and when Aisha Oludara sought work on the cassava crop, she was turned away. Finding herself without employment, she took her troubles to her uncle Momoh. “Aisha, we are poor and I can hardly manage to keep my family fed. You need to leave Kambia and go to the coast, where you should be able to get work.”

She gritted her teeth and accepted. “Thank you so much, Uncle. I will do as you counsel. But, how do I get to the coast? It’s too dangerous for a single woman to walk there.”

“My friend Sheku will leave soon for Mambolo, taking a cart with the swamp rice he grows to a mill there. I’ll ask him to take you with him.”

“Will I find work in Mambolo?”

“Seidu Koroma, a cousin of Sheku’s late wife, is the chieftain at Mambolo. You will be under Koroma’s protection. He’ll get you work.”

\* \* \*

They set off at a brisk pace but, upon arrival at the Mombolo rice mill, they found it already closed. A group of young men, idling on the square across from the building, quickly surrounded the cart.

“Please tell Seidu Koroma that his cousin Sheku is here.”

An older man then came forward: “Seidu Koroma isn’t here anymore.”

Sheku was shaken by this news. “Where is he?”

“He and his three wives were taken to the slave market in Tasso Island. The Temnes are out. We, the Susu, are in control now. I’m Ibrahim Kanu, Chief of the Mambolo District. And Temnes like you are not welcome here.”

Chief Kanu then gave Aisha an appraising eye.

“What do we have here?” he questioned with a leer. “A young girl?”

“Let her be!” screamed Sheku. “She’s only fifteen!”

There were yowls and guffaws all around him.

“And she’s a virgin!” he added, in desperation.

One of the young men, excited by this revelation, began to tug at Aisha’s blouse. A bark by Chief Kanu froze him on his tracks.

“Stop, everybody, and quiet down. Let’s take these Temnes down to Tasso Island. We’ll go south in the morning.”

\* \* \*

Tamba Sesay was the Chief of the Pepel territory, which comprised Tasso Island. As luck would have it, he was on the island when Chief Kanu arrived bringing a desiccated Temne oldster and a stunning young girl. Sesay broke into a wide smile when he recognized his colleague.

Kanu returned the grin and gave his customer a respectful handshake: “My friend, I came personally to deliver a special treat for you.”

Sesay frowned. “That old man is more dead than alive. How can he be a treat?”

“No, my friend. Not him. He’s nothing. You can have him for free, and if you can’t sell him, you can feed him to the dogs. I’m talking about the girl. She is a princess from the Kambia region, she is beautiful, and she is a virgin to boot. Ain’t that precious?”

Sesay replied: “But my friend, I already have two wives and several concubines. What use could I have for a child, pretty as she may be?”

“No, my friend, she is not for you. I expect that the Western traders would pay good money for a girl in the bloom of her youth.”

“That may be so, but most slaves are purchased to be resold as field workers or craftsmen, not bedmates. Marketing a potential concubine is risky.”

“Well, you know about your business better than I. Perhaps I’ll take these captives to Bunce Island and try my luck there.”

“Perhaps. Anyhow, what are you asking for her?”

Kanu grasped his chin. “Depends on what you have.”

Bargaining was conducted in low voices for some time, until at the end Kanu declared:

“My friend, you drive a hard bargain, but we have a long relation. I will accept your offer, as long as you throw in some textiles. Do you have any?”

“Of course, I do.”

“And how about some rum?”

“Yes, let us drink a cup together.”

The Chiefs clasped hands again.

\* \* \*

The Royal African Company had built in Tasso Island a fortified compound designed to hold slaves and other trading goods until winds were blowing in a favorable direction for sailing ships to travel from England and to the ports where the goods would be sold. Sheku and Aisha were imprisoned in that compound for many weeks awaiting transportation.

Their wait was over when *Bucephalus* dropped anchor on Tasso Island.

*Bucephalus* was a two-hundred-ton English brig, a large vessel with two square rigged masts whose hull had been modified to create a hold so it could transport slaves. It had a crew of twenty men led by Captain Jason Roberts, a brutal man who had made half a dozen trips on the triangular trade route (England to West Africa to America to England).

Roberts was hoping to load as many as four hundred slaves and transport them to Barbados, where they would be sold to sugar plantation owners. By the time he arrived, Sesay had provided to the Royal African

Company only two hundred or so captives. That number did not meet the instructions from the consortium that owned *Bucephalus*. He was to make sure it travelled full of slaves, to maximize profits and ward against the inevitable losses during the passage. Thus, Roberts agreed to buy the available captives as a lot and wait on the island in hope of further arrivals.

Because they were sold as a lot, no separate deal was struck for Aisha, who was part of the crowd of hungry and scared prisoners. Her head had been shaved and she was covered in rags. She was just another filthy soon-to-be slave, almost unnoticed among her fellow captives.

Almost, but not entirely, unnoticed. The moment Aisha was shoved onboard the ship and into the women's section of the hold, Sebastian Currey followed her with covetous eyes. Sebastian was the First Mate, second only to Captain Roberts and sharing many of the captain's duties while having many others of his own. His most important tasks, however, related to the human cargo. Sebastian oversaw the security of the vessel, making sure the enslaved were kept under control, checking their chains closely and placing sentinels on guard in the men's holds. He was also responsible for the slaves' feeding, exercise, and health and kept them in as good a shape as possible.

\* \* \*

When they boarded *Bucephalus*, Aisha and the other women slaves were separated from the men and the children and crammed into their own compartment. She was chained to a narrow space without room to move or the possibility of standing up and was greeted by a loathsome stench.

Aisha became depressed and was unwilling to eat. When two sailors came around with bowls of rice and beans and offered her some of the food, she refused it. One of the sailors held Aisha fast by the hands while the other flogged her as an example to the other women.

The flogging ceased abruptly as a bearded white man, wearing better clothes than the rags that covered the sailors, came into the women's hold. Seeing the situation, he uttered a sharp command that even Aisha (who knew no English) understood: "Stop!" He waved the sailors away.

To Aisha's surprise, the man then spoke to her in Kissi, a language similar to Temne:

"Don't be scared. I'm Sebastian Currey, second in command of this ship, and I'll make sure you are not molested."

Aisha tried to focus her eyes and look at the stranger. In the dimness of the hold, she could see that the man was only a few years older than herself, very pale, with yellow hair and a scraggly beard, and piercing blue eyes.

"What's your name, and where are you from?" he continued.

"Sir, I'm Aisha, daughter of Thaimu Oludara. I'm from Kambia, upriver from Mambolo."

Sebastian took a good look at the captive. Beneath the grime and bruises lay a beautiful young woman. Aisha was fully figured, but not fat. Tall and shapely, she had a dark honey complexion and prominent cheekbones in an oval face dominated by lively brown eyes and a sensuous mouth.

"You're very pretty" admired Sebastian, seizing Aisha's face and squeezing her cheeks. Aisha cringed, and attempted to draw away from the man. Shackled as she was, though, there was little she could do to escape.

"You'll look better when you are cleaned up" he declared. "I'll send our cabin boy to give you a scrubbing."

Soon after Aisha had been sponged with warm water to wash away most of the dirt and grime, Sebastian returned accompanied by two sailors. "Remove her chains and bring her to my cabin. I'll meet you there," he ordered.

The sailors dragged Aisha into Sebastian's cabin and dropped her on the narrow bed. Sebastian, who was gazing at the bay out of a porthole, turned around and motioned to the sailors to leave.

"By Jove, Aisha," he exclaimed with mock surprise. "You are even prettier when clean."

Aisha started to tremble.

"Have no fear, lass. You should be glad to be here with me. Do you know what happens aboard a slave ship?" When she said nothing, he added: "It is common for our sailors to take the African women, and lie upon their bodies, and take their pleasure lying on the floor, in plain sight of everyone. I think it is a revolting spectacle, not befitting Christian men. Do you agree?"

Aisha continued to shake without uttering a sound.

“Come, child. I’ll be nice.” Aisha recoiled and attempted to make a run for the door. Sebastian’s next words stopped her cold: “I posted sailors outside. If you come out trying to escape, they’ll do naughty things to you.”

He seized her by the shoulder and, not too gently, dragged her to the bed.

\* \* \*

A dreadful routine developed. At some point every day, two sailors would remove Aisha’s chains and carry her to the first mate’s cabin, where Sebastian awaited. There would be small talk and the officer would lead Aisha to the bed. Later, he might offer her a bit of food and open the door of the cabin, letting the sailors seize Aisha, drag her belowdecks, and chain her again. He beat her when he was in a sour mood or drunk.

\* \* \*

Two weeks after the ship anchored in Tasso Island, the deaths began. Most of the casualties were from dysentery and fevers brought about or aggravated by the ship’s conditions. The air became unfit for respiration due to a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on sickness and eventual death. Three sailors also took ill and died.

As deaths mounted, the ship’s physician—one Robert Stubbs—was brought belowdecks to examine the captives. Those he found too infirm to recover were deemed to have suffered a "commercial death," and being of no value, were tossed overboard to drown. Aisha later learned that Sheku, her companion on the ill-fated trip to Mambolo, had been drowned with several other Temnes. She shed a few tears, but by then she had become so hardened that she took the death of her uncle’s friend as another atrocity by the white devils.

\* \* \*

Aisha had not been feeling well; she woke every morning needing to vomit, and felt nauseous throughout the day. She suffered

from severe headaches, which were aggravated by the tumbling of the ship.

One of the deposed Seidu Koroma's wives, who was chained next to Aisha, had a quick answer to her complaints:

"Girl, you are with child."

Aisha was stupefied and rejected the idea vehemently. "No, it can't be! I'm only fifteen!"

The other woman smiled bitterly and replied: "I had my first baby when I was thirteen. Any time after your first blood you can become a mother."

"I don't want no child from that terrible man. I wanna get rid of the baby."

The woman commiserated: "On land, I could help you with that. Here on a ship, I could try massaging the baby out of your tummy, or shoving something sharp inside you, but you and the baby might die. Unless you want to chance dying, you'll have to keep him."

It took Aisha several days to gather enough courage to confront Sebastian. He reacted jovially: "That's great! Another slave to our cargo! You must start taking care of yourself! I'll see to it that you are able to take walks around the ship!" Aisha had to accept that carrying the baby to term was inevitable and tried to become used to becoming a mother.

\* \* \*

The day after Aisha announced her pregnancy, Sebastian walked to Captain Robert's cabin.

"Ah, Currey. Any novelty onboard?"

"No, Sir. But I've got a request."

"What's it?"

"I understand your contract provides, in addition to your pay, a privilege of two slaves for every 100 that arrive alive at our destination. Is that correct?"

"Yes. We have discussed that before."

"Right now, we have 353 men, women, and children on board. Assuming a fatality rate of fifty percent, which is standard, we'll arrive at Barbados with roughly 175 saleable slaves, which should give you a privilege of at least three, maybe four, slaves for you to own and be able to sell for a profit."



“Perhaps. What of it?”

“Sir, I would request to give back half of my pay to you in exchange for one of your slaves.”

Captain Roberts reacted coolly. “I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

“Sir, with respect, you never enter the hold of this ship, where the slaves are kept. I personally take that risk every day, as I risk a mutiny by the cutthroats in our crew. I gladly take all these risks for you, but I feel my remuneration is not equal to my responsibilities and the risks I assume.”

“Currey, I never heard of a captain exchanging a portion of his privilege for a few guineas, and am not about to be the first to do so.”

“But Sir, maybe you are not aware of this, but there are on board over two hundred members of one of the most ferocious African tribes. I’ve only fourteen men under my command. In the event of a riot, they’d sweep us aside and you’d soon be dead.”

Captain Roberts’ face became quite pale. “And how do you propose to safeguard the ship against that?”

“Sir, in some ships they cut off the legs of a few recalcitrant slaves to terrify the rest. I’m willing to take such a measure, but since it is sure to further inflame our cargo, I won’t do so unless I’m rewarded appropriately.”

An ominous silence ensued. Finally, Captain Roberts sighed. “Alright, Currey, you win. We’ll do what you want.”

“Great Sir. I’ll have the papers drawn and the agreement executed before Mr. Stubbs and a couple of witnesses.”

“Currey, do you have any particular slave you would like transferred to you?”

“I do, Sir, but sea travel being as hazardous as it is, I’d prefer to exercise my choice upon arrival in Barbados.”

\* \* \*

The journey from West Africa to the West Indies usually took about two and a half months. *Bucephalus*, however, encountered rough seas and fierce westerly winds that kept pushing it back in an easterly direction. Christmas drew near before *Bucephalus* was within sight of the city of Bridgetown, on the southwestern coast of Barbados. By that time, the slave population on board had decreased by forty percent. Of

about 210 remaining slaves, 28 had become crippled and were thrown overboard on the pretext that, as supplies were running low, the captain was justified in jettisoning part of his “cargo” in order to save the rest. Six more slaves, in horror at the inhumanity of the slavers, jumped into the sea. The 177 survivors included 110 males, 44 females and 23 children. One of the females was a very pregnant Aisha.

\* \* \*

The arrival of the slave ship was greeted with anticipation by the white inhabitants of Barbados, since the island’s 60,000 African and African-descended slaves were not enough to meet its sugar plantations’ requirements. There was to be an auction two days after the ship’s arrival and Captain Roberts and Sebastian Currey made busy unloading the slaves, penning them in temporary corrals, and arranging to meet with the representative of the ship’s owners.

Their contact was Archibald McBean, a solicitor that was to review the ship’s manifesto and other documents. Upon verification that there were 177 slaves in marketable condition, McBean stated: “Captain Roberts, according to the terms of your engagement, in addition to your wages you get a privilege. Your privilege entitles you to 2 and 3/4 slaves, which is rounded up to 3. Before tomorrow’s auction you must designate which of the slaves will constitute your privilege, so they can be released to you.”

At this point Sebastian interjected: “Captain Roberts and I have a side deal under which I am entitled to one of the privileged slaves.” He produced his contract to McBean, who perused it and returned it to Sebastian.

“Very well” he said. “Prior to the start of the auction, Captain Roberts will identify two slaves and Mr. Currey another, and you will tell me whether you wish to take possession or have them included in the auction.”

\* \* \*

It was a crisp, sunny winter morning as the crowds gathered in the square in front of Bridgetown Harbour to witness the slave auction. Both Captain Roberts and Sebastian Currey arrived a bit early, dressed

in their best finery but well-armed. McBean joined them and got down to the point. “Gentlemen, have you selected the three slaves that will be deeded to you as privilege?”

Sebastian and the Captain nodded their assent.

“Very well,” continued McBean. “Captain, you go first. What are your choices?”

Captain Roberts produced a folded piece of paper and read two names, belonging to healthy males identified by Mr. Stubbs, the physician.

“And you, Mr. Currey?”

“I choose Aisha Oludara.”

Captain Roberts gasped. “Isn’t she the woman who is close to term?”

“Indeed, she is.”

Captain Roberts became livid. “Wait a second. My deal with you was for one slave. You may have that Oludara woman but the child, when he’s born, is mine.”

Sebastian’s remained cool. “Captain, you don’t own the unborn child of Oludara. That boy or girl, if born alive, is mine, to be MY slave.”

“You were planning this from the moment you suggested our deal! You cheat!” screamed Captain Roberts.

McBean was about to intervene, but the captain did not give him a chance. Roberts quickly drew a pistol from his sash and took a shot point blank at Sebastian. Sebastian also drew out his pistol at almost the same time and shot Roberts in the head.

Both men fell to the ground. Sebastian had a large hole on his belly. Captain Roberts’ face was gone.

\* \* \*

Captain Roberts was perhaps the most fortunate of the two, since he died instantly. Sebastian agonized for three days as the mortal wound slowly took its toll on his body. As he lay in pain, he asked McBean to bring Aisha to him.

She came, wide eyed, to meet her tormenter. She stood by Sebastian’s bed watching as he, distorted in pain, took one labored breath after another.

McBean was about to leave, but a feeble motion from the bed stopped him.

“Please stay. I’d like to make provisions for my slave.” There was a pause as he gathered strength. “I want to grant her freedom.” Turning to Aisha, he explained: “Aisha, I’m setting you free. You can stay in Bridgetown, or try to find your way back to Africa or some other place.” Turning to McBean he continued in English: “I also want my wages for this trip to be given to this woman.”

“I’ll see to it, Mr. Currey. I’ll draft and come back later with the manumission papers,” replied McBean.

Sebastian turned to Aisha and continued: “I’ve relatives in England to whom I’m leaving a lot of money and any child of mine, even if illegitimate, may contest the dispositions in my will. I’ll grant you freedom in exchange for your promise to kill this child after his birth.”

“Why spare me and murder my child?” asked Alisha, her hands circled protectively around her belly.

“My time is now measured in hours. You’ve given me pleasure and deserve to live. That child is trouble and deserves nothing.”

Aisha blanched. “It’s like you to give me freedom at the price of the life of my own son. May my curse follow you beyond the grave!”

“Will you do it, though?”

Aisha spit on the floor and waved a menacing fist at the dying man, but nodded in acquiescence.

That evening, McBean brought the papers for Sebastian to sign. The dying man signed them with a trembling hand as Aisha towered over his bed.

Later that night, Aisha sneaked back into his room and suffocated Sebastian with a pillow. “I’m making sure you don’t change your mind,” she said venomously as she left the dead man.

\* \* \*

Aisha would tell a different version of the story to her daughter Amara, skipping the bad parts and concluding her lies in an uplifting tone: “Your father was a good man. He would have been a loving father to you.”

Amara, once an unwanted child and now the apple of Aisha's eye, nodded approvingly. She would grow free, and in time would become even more beautiful than her mother.



Born in Cuba, MATIAS TRAVIESO-DIAZ, a gay writer, migrated to the United States as a young man to escape political persecution. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in paying anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of paying publications. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" was released in February 2023 and is available from Amazon and other retailers.