

Redemption Deferred

Back to the Space Traders

We passed through that curtain of darkness into a vast enclosure, a realm of light. Above us, around us, glowed and pulsed all the colors of the rainbow, dazzling my eyes, softening my grim expectations. From somewhere over our heads, a hidden voice spoke.

"Raise your arms and clap your hands."

This was no longer the clone of Ronald Reagan's voice, with which the Space Traders had opened and conducted their negotiations with the United States. This was a black voice, warm and resonant. Whether a man's voice or a woman's, I couldn't tell.

As we raised our arms in response to the command, the manacles and chains that bound our hands together and us to one another, fell off with a fearsome clattering.

"Look down!" Again, the voice, sounding now even more familiar, a harmonious blending of Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee.

Obeying again, we found at our feet a folded piece of beautifully woven cloth. We understood that we were to pick it up. As we did, each unfolded into a soft robe, which we put on to wrap around our near-nakedness.

"Take a deep breath," came the voice, "and stand perfectly still." The soft colors surrounding us coalesced into a brilliant flash of light. Behind me I heard Geneva's soft voice, "Keep the faith, friend!" Then, darkness.

I stood in place with everyone else, neither awake nor asleep, bound but immobilized, relaxed yet not lethargic, unable to act yet clear of mind. I knew that time was passing, but had no idea how much. I wondered, By

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what means—what miracle, really—have the Space Traders suspended our vital functions for the long journey back to their home star?

After unimaginable, immeasurable time, the light flashed a second time, and again the hidden voice spoke.

“Attention, African Americans! It is now two months since we took off from your United States of America. Ahead of us lies still a long journey, but circumstances have made it necessary for us to share with you immediately our motivations and our plans.

“We have been studying Earth and its peoples for a long time, particularly the experiment with democracy in your United States of America, and even more particularly the blot upon that experiment: the refusal to grant you full human rights along with its white citizens. We have watched your long travail, from the first slaves kidnapped into the country in your year 1619, to its crass and despicable acceptance of our offer to trade you for gold and other gifts. That proved the truth of our observations: that white people consider you—as they considered you from the beginning—no more than their property, to be sold to the highest bidder.

“Ours is, as you have guessed, a society technologically advanced beyond yours. Yet astute as we have been, we have somehow lacked an element that you might call ‘human.’

“Although we have been able to make analogues of your voices and expressions, we find we cannot re-create your robust warmth and humor or the emotional and spiritual strength whereby you have sustained that humanity through all your travails. We cannot, that is, re-create your ability to transcend suffering—to sing through it, as you yourselves might say.

“For despite our advanced technology, our people suffer, and we have lacked the means to relieve them. Or, we lacked them until, again after observing America, we thought that perhaps if we offered it enough of the wealth it seems to treasure beyond all else, it might be persuaded to part with the human treasure you and your people constitute.

“We hoped to bring you back to our home star, to be settlers there, to mingle with our citizens as equals and full partners in our development and growth.

“And so we devised ships to carry us through space to Earth and to America. When your country accepted our offer, we were amazed. We now have another reason for amazement.

“We have been, in these two months, monitoring the thoughts of each of you for any sign of illness or serious distress. And we find that many of you are inexplicably longing to return to the land that you call home,

even though it practices the most pernicious racism anywhere in the universe—and even though it easily banished you against your will, sent you off to an unknown fate.

“It is perhaps indicative of our emotional ignorance that we assumed you would be glad of the opportunity to leave America, to make a new start in our world. But since it is imperative to our plan that you enter our society voluntarily, we are going to ask you to vote on whether you wish to do so or return to the land that has sheltered you so ambiguously these hundreds of years. If you decide on the latter, we will try to negotiate for your return.

“Before you vote, we must tell you what has been going on there in these two months. America traded you for resources that should, with prudent management, have solved its problems and ensured its prosperity for at least a century to come. Even in this brief time, however, these resources have been almost completely dissipated in a series of fraudulent corporate and government transactions. Now the economy is in shambles, the stock market has all but collapsed, and more than half the population is unemployed. The politicians, grown accustomed to using race to divert attention from their incompetence and corruption, are hard-pressed to create a scapegoat to replace you.

“Furthermore, America’s acceptance of the Trade has evoked the scorn and enmity of the other nations of the world. Having listened for so long to America’s self-righteous preaching of rights and liberties for all, and then witnessed its willingness to trade away one tenth of its people for what they call ‘blood money,’ they are now hooting at it for its hypocrisy and moral corruption. The United Nations are moving to oust it from the Security Council, and many countries have severed all ties.

“We wonder whether, knowing all this, you will wish to return to such a home. But before we ask you to vote, we understand that two of you wish to speak. First, Gleason Golightly, once an adviser to your president. We know that many of you have condemned Golightly for his espousal of conservative causes and even more when, prior to the American vote on the Space Trade, he urged you to try to trick whites into voting against it by telling them that you, having learned that our star was an idyllic land, wanted to come with us. Golightly, applying his long study of white behavior, was convinced that whites would do anything to keep black people from gaining a benefit barred to them. Many of you, seeing his strategy as betrayal, rejected it; but, in fact, he was sincere, and his was the only policy that might have worked. Mr. Golightly!”

"Despite our past differences," Golightly began, "we now find ourselves literally in the same boat. Because we are black, our history in America has been one of suffering and sacrifice, persecution and exploitation. Yet is it not precisely that history that draws us back to our homes and the homes of our forebears? To continue on with the Space Traders would be to abandon a civilization we have helped create, and for what? For a strange world in which we can never be more than outsiders, inferior by any measure to beings who control technology beyond even the wildest imaginings of our science fiction writers?"

"Yes, life in America was hard for African Americans. But as we all also know, my friends, America, whether whites liked it or not, is our land, too. For better or worse, it is our home. Our roots are there. Our work is there. There we have lived our lives, and there we have engaged in the struggle for our dignity, a struggle that—win or lose—is our true destiny. I dare to say what you are thinking: 'Space Traders, we appreciate all that you want to do, but *we* want to go home!'"

A murmuring broke out in the darkness of a multitude of voices: some approving, some uncertain.

"And now," said the hidden voice, "you will hear from one who is among you by circumstances strange beyond even our knowledge. After you have heard her, we will ask you to vote. Geneva Crenshaw!"

"Mr. Golightly," said Geneva, "urges us to return home—but home, I ask you, to what? Given the turmoil there, as reported by the Space Traders, the nation's leaders might well accept us back as a diversion from their current crisis. They might even promise the racial justice so long denied us and those who came before us. Whatever those promises, we will have heard them all before. Whatever the words, they will be as empty as all the other pledges of equality made to us since the Emancipation Proclamation.

"At each previous promise, at each new commitment to full equality, we hailed a new day—only to find that the change was cosmetic, not serious; more show than real reform. All of these pledges have come to be one means or another to keep us enslaved without chains.

"No, four hundred years is enough to convince me that America will never change—indeed, is incapable of change. Think of all the times we have bailed out white America. As slaves, our forebears provided the labor for the wealth that funded the Revolutionary War. In the Civil War, black soldiers, many of them only months away from slavery, made the difference between victory and defeat. In war and in peace, we have stood

faithful, we have been patriots. But we have never understood that the essence of racism was the hope that we who were black would not exist. . . .

"Now, thanks to the Space Traders, they have their wish. Mark my words, if we succumb to Mr. Golightly's entreaty to return, we will find—likely before the welcome parties are over—that the nation will heap on our shoulders the troubles it has created for itself during our absence. Again, four hundred years of subordinate status is enough! Let us continue with the Space Traders!"

A stirring in the darkness was quickly stilled by Golightly's voice.

"I wish," he said, his voice breaking, "I wish I could guarantee that if we return, life will be different, that racism will be but a memory, and that we will, in the words of our anthem, '[I]ft every voice and sing,' till earth and heaven 'ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty.' But I cannot make such a promise. Nor would I have us vote to return on the fragile hope that America has learned anything from its double squandering: not only of the treasure the Space Traders brought them but of the human treasure of ourselves.

"I see our eviction from America as a cruel repetition of the abduction of our African ancestors. Let us not forget that those forebears suffered slavery and segregation but survived. . . . Do we not owe it to our forebears, to our children, to ourselves to return to America, not as a further gift to an uncaring nation, but as a proof that we can—by the example our ancestors set us—wring out of present danger a life of commitment and service to one another and our brother and sister Americans of any color?"

I had to give it to him, Golightly was eloquent. Geneva, too, must have felt the power of his speech, as was evident in her response.

"Mr. Golightly speaks eloquently as the representative of a compassionate, humane people ever ready to forget and forgive. But we must be honest here. We are also a people whom trials and tribulations have rendered averse to risks, all too willing to accept the devil we know rather than take on the unknown, perhaps worse danger. It is this aversion that confounds the Space Traders and confuses us in this moment of decision.

"Mr. Golightly speaks of roots. Well, let us go back to roots. We, as a people, have always identified with the children of Israel, their bondage in Egypt, their emancipation by Moses with God's help. Well, we are not walking on the hot sands of the Egyptian desert. We are hurtling through the heavens in vehicles from another world, having been set free from the

bondage of our American Egypt by the intervention of outside forces. Even as the Egyptians, realizing their loss, tried to recapture the Israelites by force, so if whites in America do permit us to return, they will be doing so not for our sake but out of greed.

"Did not the Lord promise the Israelites a home, a land of their own? Is He not now, at long last, offering us a home beyond the corrupting influence of capitalism, colonialism, and racism? The slave singers, bowed down and heavy burdened, sang of a City called Heaven, one they had started to make their home. . . . Let us go on with the Space Traders to a home free of oppression, where each of us has the same opportunity as everyone else to fulfill himself or herself." . . .

As she finished speaking, a light flashed.

"It is time to vote," said the hidden voice. "We will monitor your votes as we monitor your thoughts. When the light flashes again, whisper the words 'Going on' or 'Going home' over and over like a mantra. Stop when the light flashes again."

Between the two flashes of light, I heard a sound, as faint but distinct as the rustling of leaves in a forest in a quiet breeze. Thus, the millions of people in my ship and in all the others cast their votes.

After the second flash of light, the voice announced the poll's result. "Of those who wish to continue with us, seventy percent. Of those who wish to return to America, thirty percent."

"This vote is not as decisive as it seems," the voice went on. "In monitoring your thoughts when you were listening to Mr. Golightly and Ms. Crenshaw, we found that a considerable proportion of you favored whomever was speaking at a particular moment. Thus, we must assume that if Mr. Golightly had spoken last, you would have voted to return home rather than continue with us."

"Such ambivalence disturbs us. . . . We are deeply disappointed."

"And now we have just learned that we do not have with us all African Americans. At the time of the roundup of blacks in the United States two months ago, some hundreds of thousands either escaped to other countries or were successfully hidden by friendly whites. Some of those who had fair complexions passed themselves off as whites. These black people have actually been permitted to return to their communities, and we understand that most of them long for the return of their relatives and friends we have carried away with us."

At that point, someone began singing the André Crouch gospel song "Soon and Very Soon." Other voices picked it up,

Soon and very soon,
We are going to see the King.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
We're going to see the King.

By the second verse, whole hosts of people had joined in exuberantly, even joyfully—but had changed the refrain to “We’re going to see our home.”

The next announcement expressed a familiar exasperation—my own when, in the past, I had tried with little obvious success to get an important point through the heads of obstinate students. “Seventy percent of you are now ready to return. With every second that passes, more of you are veering around to that view. Indeed, your heads are filled with thoughts of home. . . . But do you really suppose that America’s leaders will invite or welcome you back?

“So far as we are concerned, whether America wants you back is irrelevant. It is a sign perhaps of our emotional unenlightenment, but we cannot risk disrupting our more advanced world with immigrants who could not accept it wholeheartedly, without regret.”

A pause ensued, during which I thought I heard a faint sigh. Then a tremendous roar filled the space overhead and echoed through all our bodies. Somewhere huge mechanisms were shifting.

“We will circle your galaxy,” the voice resumed, “until we decide what to do with you.”

The ship settled into its new course. The only sound was Geneva singing the old hymn “Amazing Grace.” Written in the eighteenth century by John Newton, a former slave-ship captain, it seems more than speculation that that melody may have emanated from the sounds of sorrow and strength rising from the holds of Newton’s ship. As darkness fell, another voice joined Geneva, then another and another—all swelling into a great chorus as they reached the verse:

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come;
'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.