

## Eyes Wide Open

The Caribbean, 1819.

Yamma is exhausted. Physically, mentally ... every way. The susurration of gentle waves tries to coax him to slumber, but all he can do is sit with arms wrapped around skinny legs and his head braced between knobby knees. Finally, he looks up and stifles a weak cry of joy, realizing his recent loss of sight might be temporary. Through blurry eyes the scene ahead is bright and beautiful. Turquoise water blends in the distance with a sky that appears almost gray in contrast. Sunlight sparkles from waves hustling to shore a few feet away. This vision of paradise, however, contrasts starkly with events over the past several weeks.

The spears and machetes of enemy tribesmen had forced Yamma away from a screaming wife and sobbing children and onto a ship that was called the La Rodeur by white crewmen uttering these and other strange words. Yamma endured unending days crammed back-to-chest in a filthy hold with dozens of other black men that were kept barely alive on gruel and brackish water. Sickness followed swiftly. Vomit, urine, and watery stool spattered into the hold below, with the resultant stench rising like a starving beast to encourage more offal.

Shortly thereafter, a curse of blindness arrived, afflicting even the white men. After days of unremitting darkness, Yamma and some shipmates were herded from the fetid hold to the deck. Clinking of chains, screams from his countrymen, and large splashes convinced Yamma they were being thrown overboard. He murmured a prayer as he was yanked into the water. Well acquainted with the ocean from diving for sealife in west Africa, he immediately flipped on his back and began to float.

Sometime later, a large object bumped his arm, so he latched onto it. The detritus was slick and spongy. Suddenly, he realized it was a dead body and almost released his grasp. Fortunately, sounder thinking prevailed, and he inched himself up on the corpse, using it as a life preserver, which indeed it became. Thirst ominously leached the soul from Yamma as he drifted aimlessly for what seemed like a lifetime. Then, a miracle. He washed up on a beach.

As he crouches on that beach in the warm sun, Yamma's attention shifts to a quick movement nearby. He is able to discern the shadow of a person approaching quietly from behind. A large, round object in the shadowed hand resembles a weapon he is familiar with. Resigned, Yamma bows his head and weeps. Then a gentle touch encourages him to glance at the small brown fingers on his shoulder. Yamma turns to view the smiling face of a native boy holding a coconut. The boy hands it to Yamma, then giggles and scampers away.

(While Yamma is a fictional character, the ill-fated voyage of the French slaveship La Rodeur is very real. Conjunctivitis blinded everyone on board except one crewman, and 39 slaves who were considered livestock were thrown overboard to drown for insurance compensation.)