



by Olaudah Equiano, 1789

When Europeans arrived in Africa in the late 1400s, they greatly expanded the slave trade that Arab merchants had been carrying on for hundreds of years. They also began to forcibly transport Africans overseas to the Americas. In 1756 Olaudah Equiano (AHL uh duh ih kwee AH nah, 1745–1797) was an 11-year-old boy living in the village of Benin in what is today Nigeria. One day slave traders came to his village and changed his life forever. In his autobiography Equiano described this fateful day and what happened afterward. As you read the following excerpt from his autobiography, think of the experiences he describes. How does he manage to endure?

One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both; and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they **stopped** our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands, and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for refreshment, and spent the night. We were then unbound; but were unable to take any food; and, being quite overpowered by fatigue and grief, our only relief was some sleep, which **allayed** our misfortune for a short time.

stopped: stuffed something into

allayed: eased

The next morning we left the house, and continued travelling all the day. For a long time we had kept [to] the woods, but at last we came into a road which I believed I knew. I had now some hopes of being **delivered**; for we had advanced but a little way before I discovered some people at a distance, [and] I began to cry out for their assistance; but my cries had no other effect than to make them tie me [tighter] and stop my mouth, and then they put me into a large sack. They also stopped my sister's mouth, and tied her hands; and in this manner we proceeded till we were out of the sight of these people.

delivered: rescued

When we went to rest the following night they offered us some **victuals**; but we refused them; and the only comfort we had was in being in one another's arms all that night, and bathing each other with our tears. But alas! We were soon deprived of even the smallest comfort of weeping together. The next day proved a day of greater sorrow than I had yet experienced; for my sister and I were then separated, while we lay clasped in each other's arms: it was in vain that we **besought** them not to part us: she was torn from me, and immediately carried away, while I was left in a state of **distraction** not to be described. I cried and grieved continually; and for several days did not eat any thing but what they forced into my mouth. . . .

victuals: food

besought: begged

distraction: worry

From the time I left my own nation I always found somebody that understood me till I came to the sea coast. The languages of different nations did not totally differ, nor were they so **copious** as those of the Europeans, particularly the English. They were therefore easily learned; and, while I was journeying thus through Africa, I **acquired** two or three different **tongues**.

copious: full of words

acquired: learned

tongues: languages

In this manner I had been travelling for a considerable time, when one evening, to my great surprise, whom should I see brought to the house where I was but my dear sister? As soon as she saw me she gave a loud shriek, and ran into my arms—I was quite overpowered: neither of us could speak, but, for a considerable time, clung to each other in mutual embraces, unable to do any thing but weep. Our meeting affected all who saw us; and indeed I must acknowledge, in honour of those **sable** destroyers of human rights, that I never met with any ill treatment, or saw any offered to their slaves, except tying them, when necessary, to keep them from running away. When these people knew we were brother and sister, they **indulged** us to be together; . . . and thus for a while we forgot our misfortunes in the joy of being together; but even this small comfort was soon to have an end; for scarcely had the **fatal** morning appeared, when she was again torn from me forever! I was now more miserable, if possible, than before. . . .

sable: dark

indulged: allowed

fatal: dreaded

I continued to travel, sometimes by land, sometimes by water, through different countries, and various nations, till, at the end of six or seven months after I had been kidnapped I arrived at the sea coast.

After arriving on the west coast of Africa, Olaudah Equiano was sold to European slave traders. They transported him overseas to Barbados. Equiano was one of more than 14 million Africans captured and carried by force to the Americas from the late 1400s to the 1800s. Equiano, however, was more fortunate than most. A British sea captain later bought him and made him a sailor. Although enslaved, Equiano managed to earn money and bought his freedom in 1766. As a free man, he traveled the world and explored the northern Arctic. Years later he settled in England and wrote his autobiography. The book was widely read in the 1790s and helped the growth of the antislavery movement.

Source: Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*. London: W. Durell, 1791.