

Eliza: A Generational Journey

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Self published by Crystal Bradshaw
2015

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First Printing: 2015

Summary: Through years of extensive genealogical research and writing, Crystal Bradshaw pieces together the life of her x5 great grandmother, Eliza Bradshaw. Eliza, strong willed and brave, must use her strength and faith to face her life as a slave and push through the challenges that she must overcome.

[1. History—Fiction. 2. African American—History. 3. Slavery—History. 4. Narrative—History.]

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A Change is A'comin'

I's in the kitchen when I's hear it. The cry. My back go all straight and my eyes bug out as I go on ovah and stand in the doorway. I's imagine that I's look like a momma hen wid her feathers all ruffled up. But I's ain't thinkin' 'bout me bein' no chicken when I sees Joe standin' ovah my babies. John clutchin' on ta Granville, boff cryin', callin' me.

"Momma! Momma!"

"You better get quick boy before I give ya something to cry about."

"Watcha think ya be doin'?"

Joe turn 'round so quick it take a moment fo' the rest of his body catch up wid his nasty self.

"Get back in that kitchen 'fore I whip ya good," he snarl, curlin' his pink lip. I's don't see em' tho'. My eyes be lookin' at my babies on the ground.

"Them be my chillen," I say.

"Nigger, you hear me? I say to get on back in that kitchen!"

"I hear ya allright. It's ya that can't hear. I says those be my chillen."

He charge at me, the long ol' whip flashin' in his hand. I sees him, years agos, on top of me, reachin'... reachin'. Lily there ta stop him then. But I's know it only the Lord and me on this one. Next thing I know, I in the kitchen, grabbin' that kettle ovah the fire and water be flyin' everywhere.

"Get outta here! Ya gonna 'member me when ya think 'bout hur-tin' my babies 'gain!!" I's scream, throwin' water.

He scream, runnin' outta there like he on fire. I right on his heels tho', flingin' water, chasin' him like David afta the Gentiles. He run off down the hill, screamin' and hollerin' up a storm and I's stand watchin' him. My hand be numb but I yank John and Granville up and swat 'em a good one.

Their lil' faces look on up at me from 'hind tearful eyes.

"Naw ya'll bettah git on home and stay wid Granma Nancy! I catch you here 'gain I gonna tear yo' backs up, ya hear me?"

Theys nod all quick like starin' up at me wid them big ol' eyes 'fore John pick up Granville and carry him down the hill ta our

cabin. I's watch him wobble on down the hill, jus' barely able ta carry Granville, and go in the cabin 'fore realizin' my hand feel like it on fire.

"You knows what, Ruth?" I says, leanin' on my knees, pantin' 'way and glancin' up at the sky.

"What that be, 'Liza?"

"If I could write, I'd have a whole lotta stories ta put on papah 'bout my chillen! Theys gonna git whooped like no othah tonight." Fo' a moment, it sound like I hear Ruth's laff but then it only be silent 'cept the sound of aftanoon locusts and my pantin'.

I go on in the kitchen, grab me a bucket, and pump me some water. It ain't cold but it might as well be as scorchin' hot my hand feel rights naw. I barely makes it back in the kitchen when I knows I needs ta sit fo' a moment. The Misses be 'specially ugly today and give me a whole lotta work ta do. She know I be wid chile. My belly nearly poppin' wid this one! And wid... wid Ruth gone on up ta the Lord, I can't git everythin' done quick nuff. She know that. That snake woman know that.

"Liza,"

I's look up quick like, a cold shiver goin' down even my hand.

"What do you think you are doing?"

Lord, Lord if you hear me naws I needs ya. I needs ya, Lord. Please help me.

"Nuthin', ma'am."

"I see that, girl. You getting smart with me?"

"No'm."

"Well, is your work done then?"

Lord, Lord please help me. Please help me.

"No'm."

Crack!

I's hear's it but it ain't connectin' wid my head what happenin'.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

I's scream, blood runnin' down ovah my eyes, blindin' me. Stingin' me. Then my head be on fire and I's scream tryin' ta throw the salt offa my head as I hear that woman axin', "Why (Crack!) isn't (Crack) your (Crack) work (Crack) done!!!"

CRACK!

I's screamin' holdin' ta my head, blood and tears streamin' down. Please Lord! Please Lord! Please Lord! Please! Please! PLEASE!

The broom clatter ta the floor and I's hears her footsteps leavin'.
"My husband is going to be made known of your disobedience,"
was the last thing I heard her say 'fore she leave.
Rockin' back and forth, I helds my belly, weepin', sobbin', sayin'
ovah and ovah, "Lord please. Lord please. Lord please.
Lord....please."

"Alright, I'll whip her after dinner."

Massa be home. Supper been served. I in the kitchen, listenin'
'bout what he gonna do. That same fire that rolled on thro' me
when I's protected my chillen early today, roll thro' me 'gain. A
voice tell me ta git that kitchen fire stirred up real blazin' hot. And
I know that that voice belong ta nuthin' othah than the Lord. I's
make that fire so hot that it put the shame ta Nebudchaznazer's
furnace.

"C'mon and let'm try, Lord," I says.

My fingahs be swolt but I's smile when I's put that there big ol'
kettle of water ovah that fire. I set my lil' chair and bucket by that
fire, waitin'. I done had my last beaten evah.

I ain't sho' how many moments latah it be but I's finally hear foot-
steps and Massa comes on in the kitchen. The Misses be right
'hind him, grinnin' like the snake she be as he start takin' down
the rawhide whip, hangin' ovah on the kitchen wall. I's grin back.
Well, she done come along fo' the show. Well I's got a show fo' 'em
allright.

"Get up, 'Liza." Massa say, steppin' toward me.

In the name of Jesus, I's ain't gonna be beats no mo's afta today.

He be in the middle of 'nother step, sayin', "'Liza, get up," when in
go my lil' bucket and it sho' nuff begin rainin' hot water. Massa
yell, jumpin' on his toes as I's throw 'nother good ol' bucket full of
that scorchin' water on his feet. The Misses be standin' in dumb
shock, not believin' what she be seein'. I's look up at her and ours
eyes meet. I's sees my reflection in her big ol' wide eyes as I dip
my bucket in 'gain. Wid Massa, it be his feet. But wid her... I gonna
make sho' she nevah forget.

A scream tear thro' the air and she grab her face wid her hands,
wailin'.

Massa stand there lookin' at me, eyes big. He look from his wife ta
me ta the water, ta me, and back on ta his wife screamin' on that

dirt floor. I's wait fo' his decision, my lil' bucket ready in my hands.

"Crazy! Crazy!" he yell, reachin' fo' his wife.

"Get this place cleaned up and get on out of here!" he say but I's don't move none till he drag hissself and his wife on outta my kitchen. Only then does I move.

My name be Crazy Eliza naw. Massa give me that name afta he got a taste of that water. I ain't crazy. I's knows I ain't. But I's rather done be seent as crazy if it gonna keep me from evah bein' whopped 'gain.

I done had my last beatin'.

But I's made sho' I whooped John and Granville good fo' comin' up ta that house. Theys ain't gonna do that evah 'gain, I's made sho' of that.

Lewis 'bout fall out when I's tell him what done happen.

"Watcha goin' and doin' that fo', 'Liza?" Lewis axe, cuttin' me off. I nod at the chillens, who I jus' done put ta bed. We's step on outside and I's close the cabin door. I's feels a hand whirl me 'round and when I's stop Lewis's face be right in mine.

"Watcha goin' and doin' that fo'?"

His hand still be on my arm but I's look him straight in the eye.

"Watcha' sayin', Lewis?"

"Fightin' the massa! Ya tryin' ta git us kilt?"

"Lewis, I..."

He cut me off, leanin' fo'wards spittin'. "That fine if ya wanna git kilt. But don't be takin' the rest of us down wid ya. I ain't gonna have it. This my family."

My jaw twitch but I's keep on lookin' him on in the eye. He breathin' hards as a horse and he's leanin' so close his breff hit me like hot puffs of air. Don't see none of his face, it jus' be a black 'round piece of the night wid dark parts where his eyes and moff be.

My arm real stiff. Slow like I's fold my hand on ovah my belly and look down at his hands and back on up ta where his face be at. His fingahs do a lil' twitch 'fore theys leggo.

"You knows... you knows I ain't mean that."

My moff don't move none, not even ta breathe. But I's keep lookin' on in his eyes.

"Liza, you knows I ain't mean that. You scairt me bad when ya tol' me."

My moff still ain't movin' none. But I's keep on lookin'.

“Don’t ya git it? Massa could go and lynch us. Sell our chillen. Go and kill all of us wid nuthin’ but a snap of his fingah.”

He try and snap his fingahs but no snap come. He grab me by the arms, his voice pleadin’, beggin’.

“That overseer could git back tonight. Or the ‘morrow when I’s out in the fields. He ain’t gonna let no slave woman burn him and gits ‘way wid it!”

I don’t say nuthins’ jus’ keep lookin’. Lewis stand there pantin’, clutchin’ me, waitin’.

“Ain’t ya gonna say somethin’? Ain’t ya got nuthin’ ta say?”

Quiet.

“Say somethin’, ‘Liza!”

I’s look him straight in the eye as can be.

“I ain’t gonna gits beats no mo’, Lewis. And I sho’ ain’t gonna let ‘em beat my chillen. Not if I’s can helps it.”

Then I take his hands on offa me and go into the cabin.

1865...When It Done Happen

It done happen on December 18th, 1865... that I found out that I be *free*. I had done woke on up feelin' somethin' different not sho' what it be. I 'members watchin' the light slippin' in 'tween the ol' roof, shiftin' real slow like from a dark gray ta a light kinda color and jus' layin' in my cot thinkin'. Lewis had done already gone ta them fields. He'd git on up early in them mornins, 'fore the rooster even come outta the coop ta croon, and John¹ would help him git Granville² and Junior³ up.

That be the real hard part. Junior git up jus' fine but Granville like his sleep naw. That be till Lewis axe him one day if he like mean ol' Joe's whip bettah. He done popped up quickah than a spooked rattler and got his clothes on likety split. I's don't hafta tell ya that we's didn't have no troubles gittin' that boy up anymo's.

That day, I's had clost my eyes fo' a moment, gittin' mahself ready fo' the work of the day, and got on out of the straw pallet. I's grunted as I tried ta dress.

Charles⁴, my sweet lil' son, bless his heart, woke and scrambled outta that small pallet he done shared wid his brothahs.

"Mamma, you allright?" he axed me, his eyes big.

I nodded. "Chile, help me put my apron and shoes on."

He nodded, steppin' fo'ward ta help. Afta he step on back, his deep dark brown eyes watchin' me.

"Git Elex⁵ and George⁶ up so we's can be on our way."

He gave 'nother nod 'gain and careful like woke his youngah brothahs. While he doin' that, I's help git Momma Nancy⁷ up and movin'. George got ta cryin' and gentle like I's took him in my arms and soothed him. His lil' hand curled 'round my fingah and he stared at me wid the brightest brown eyes I done evah seen. I's

¹ Age 15

² Age 13

³ Age 9

⁴ Age 7

⁵ Age 4

⁶ Age 3

⁷ Age 72

'member smilin' and brushin' the dark black hair from his face. He was my baby then. Almos' 4 years old durin' the time. Softl like, I's started hummin' and rockin' back and forths on my heels, starin' down into my baby's eyes. He yawned, driftin' on back ta sleep.

I turned 'rounds and Charles handed me the cloth sling. I's putted Elex in ta the sling and Charles help me ta put George in 'nother. I's fretted wid the sling knots 'til I was done sho' theys were tied good and tight 'fore turnin' ta my boy, Charles. Unlike his youngah brothahs he had dark brown eyes and long thick lashes.

I's leaned close and hugged him wid one arm.

"Take care while yo' brothahs and I be gone. 'Member if you evah need anythin' you axe Granma Nancy, allright? And don't forget ta do yo' chores. Bettah hurry up and git that water ready fo' the fieldhands." He nodded and afta kissin' his lil' fo'head and checkin' one mo' time on Momma Nancy, I's left the cabin. I's couldn't help thinkin' 'bout Poppa Walter as I's carried my babies past the ol' cemetery. He be dead fo' years⁸ naw. I's walked mighty quick 'long the worn path, my skirts swishin' 'gainst my legs. Bunches of slaves done walked this same exact path, years 'fore I was even born. Maybe even mo'.

My back got ta hurtin' and I pulled George's lil' sleepin' self closah 'gainst me, tyin' the sling knot mo' tightah. Some days it almos' too much ta take boff Elex and George up ta the Big House wid me. Theys so heavy. But wid Momma Nancy gittin' oldah, I's don't wanna make her hafta watch 'em and take care of 'em by herself. 'Sides Genaveve⁹ like ta play wid 'em, runnin' 'round the kitchen, squealin' wid 'citement. I's shifted George 'gain and looked up, seein' the Big House roof ovah the hill.

We's gonna be at the Big House real soon. I's stopped fo' a moment, jus' inside the path. I's clost my eyes and sayed a quick prayer. Copyin' what my momma would do 'fore she head out to the fields years ago. Then I's took a deep breff, fixed my eyes on that ol' house, takin' a step fo'ward.

"Liza!"

I whirled 'round at the callin' of my name.

It be ol' Barb.

⁸ Walter Bradshaw, Lewis' father, passed away before 1870. Year and cause of death are unknown.

⁹ Mr. and Mrs. Christian's daughter

“Liza!” Barb wheezed ‘gain, stumblin’ on towards me.

“Thank goodness I found ya fore’ ya reached the house!”

“What wrong, Barb?” I axed, my mind already flashin’ ta my chillen.

“My babies alright?”

She nodded, bobbin’ her head like a turkey, bendin’ ovah her knees.

“Some Northern Soldiers... jus’ came on in the plantation... sayin’—sayin’ we free.”

I’s froze, starin’ at the oldah woman and barely lets her catch her breff ‘fore axin’, “Ya sho’ theys be Northern soldiers? Theys could jus’ be waitin’ ta see if we’s gonna run out on massa.”

Ol’ Barb wheezed and shook her head firm like.

“If they ain’t North soldiers than my foot ain’t real!” she ‘bout scream all excited like. I’s jus’ stand there fo’ a moment lookin’ down inta her beamin’ face. “Allrights,” I sayed slow like.

“Take me ta em’.”



Eliza Bradshaw, my x5 great grandmother



Mattie Bradshaw, Eliza's granddaughter, and author of "Eliza: An Exoduster Grandmother"



The remains of Rev. Thomas Moore's house in Jetmore



**Front row: John Bradshaw
and Bettie Bradshaw; Back row:
Will, Lisa, and Grant**

Myself reading a manuscript excerpt of *Eliza: A Generational Journey* for a 2015 Juneteenth Celebration. Photo taken by Will Cunningham

