

Tula – The Revolt

Jeroen Leinders

Translated by Brian Doyle-Du Breuil



HopeRoad: London

Foreword

The world at the end of the 18th century is one of enormous unrest with a longing for freedom and self-determination. America tears itself free of England in 1776, and the French Revolution rocks Europe less than two decades later in 1792. The Republic of the Seven United Netherlands has just concluded its final war with England, but the Republic is deeply divided and mired in an internal conflict between the Patriots and the Royalists. The conflict is settled in 1795 in favour of the Patriots. The French occupy Utrecht, the last bastion of the Royalists. The Batavian Republic under French administration is now a fact and Willem V flees to England. France declares war on his country of refuge.

But the unravelling of the established order is not only a feature of European life. In South America and the Caribbean, resistance against colonial domination is rapidly gaining ground. The most significant revolt takes place in Haiti – in those days a French colony – where the slaves take control after a violent and bloody conflict.

Curacao is a small island in the Caribbean, roughly fifty nautical miles off the coast of Venezuela. In the 18th century it is an important port of transit for slaves destined mainly for Spanish colonies. As a trading post of the Dutch West India Company later to fall under the authority of the Dutch Republic, the island

is thus a central pivot in the transatlantic slave trade. In total, the Netherlands of the day was responsible for the transportation of close to 550,000 slaves, with more than 100,000 reaching their final destination via Curacao. The ships of the Dutch West India Company transported slaves from Africa across the Atlantic Ocean. The slaves disembarked on the island of Curacao where they were inspected, divided up according to their capacity to work and then sold on to traders. Those who were too weak to continue the journey remained on the island to regain their strength, while the remainder were transported to their final destinations and put to work on the major coffee, sugar and cotton plantations.

Curacao also had its own plantations in those days, but they were not large commercial enterprises. The soil on the island was not particularly fertile, and the dry climate meant that local production was barely enough to provide for the needs of the local population.

In the turbulent years towards the end of the 18th century, trade in the region has almost ground to a standstill. The last ship with African slaves on board sails into the harbour in 1778. As a trading post and international transit station, the negative effects of increasing global tension at the end of the 18th century are particularly tangible on Curacao.

It is against this background that the following events take place.

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As evening falls, a downcast Jorboe stares in the half-light at the smouldering fire in front of his cabin. 'The whites are in charge in this world, Tula, that's just the way it is. There's no point in fighting it.' Tula winces as Rosita dabs his back with a mixture of healing herbs. But the searing pain isn't enough to dispel his unabated indignation.

'It's their own law, Papi. All I did was remind them about it.'

Jorboe squats in front of his son and fixes his eyes on him.

'So who do you think their laws are for, boy? To protect us, or to give the masters the right to treat us however they please? Forget it, Tula. If the masters' laws get in the way they just change them. That's the way it's always been and that's the way it's always going to be.'

Tula turns away. How can his father be so resigned? Has he no pride? He's the senior elder in the village. How can he let this pass? The injustice they have to face, day in day out. He lashes back, his voice choked with rage.

'Do we have to just take it all, just put up with it? Look at what they're doing to us, how they treat us. God made us all equal, but here on earth the whites think they're in charge, in control.'

'But they are in control, Tula. It's time you got that into your head!' Rosita intervenes.

‘And be careful what you say and who you say it to. Me and your father don’t want to lose you, boy.’

‘All I said was that they should stick to their own laws, laws that say we have a right to food, clothing and a roof over our heads. And we have a right to one day off in a week. One single day of rest after all the work they expect of us. Then they just decide to take it from us, and make us pay for what they owe us by right. Where’s the justice in that? No one’s allowed to make his own laws, not even the master.’ Tula gets to his feet, angry. ‘I’m going to bed. Bon nochi.’

The maze of paths makes it difficult to find your way in the dark as the village sleeps. The cabins are scattered everywhere and there seems to be little logic to the way they’re arranged. An outsider would probably think that the simple cabins of clay and palm leaves all look the same, but a cabin’s location in the village defines the standing of whoever lives in it. The closer a cabin is to the master’s house, the better the location. First come the house slaves, then the laundry women and the horse drivers. The field slaves live on the outer ring and that explains why their cabins seem to be built without any plan. A new housekeeping position means a new location, a place closer to the master. The senior elder’s cabin is the only exception. It occupies a central position next to the gathering space, the only place where fire can be lit at night without danger of setting the arid surrounding landscape ablaze, or worse, the other cabins.

A dim figure approaches and as he gets closer Tula recognises the unmistakable silhouette. Louis

cautiously rests his hand on his friend's shoulder and looks at him pityingly. Tula manages to force a smile and nods. They continue on their way in silence and as they turn the corner they see Speranza waiting by her cabin. She sees them approaching and runs to meet them. Speranza. Every time Tula sees her he can't help thinking how incredible she looks. And he's not the only one. Her looks managed to secure her a position as a house slave with the master and his family. She's even been allowed to serve meals at the table, something set aside for the privileged few who also have access to the kitchen and get to share the leftovers with their own families.

'What's wrong, Tula?' Speranza can see the injured look in Tula's eyes. 'Why are you so late? I was worried about you.' Tula turns and shows her his back. Speranza's eyes fill with tears.

'What did they do to you? Why? Let me help you. Come inside, dushi, quickly.'

Louis tells her what happened that afternoon. He thought Tula was brave but didn't see the point in what he did. Whites don't listen to field slaves. They never do. The only language they speak is violence. Louis suddenly pulls out a knife.

'Put that away, Louis! Where did you get a knife? Have you lost your mind?' Speranza glares at Louis with fear in her eyes and grabs him by the arm. 'Not in my house, understand me? Not in my house.' Louis tugs himself free.

'Hey Tula.' He positions himself inches from Tula's face and stares his friend in the eye. 'Let me know when you're ready.' He presses the point of the

knife under Tula's chin, just enough to hurt. 'Ami ta kla awor!'

When Louis is gone Tula stretches out on his belly on the floor.

'I'm feeling better. Rosita helped me. The pain will pass.' Tula tells her what happened that afternoon down to the last detail.

'You're right, Tula, it's unjust, but what can you do?' Speranza responds.

'I don't know, not yet. But this can't go on. It was already bad and now it's getting worse. If we put up with it, it'll be the end of us. We can't let that happen. They have to listen to us.'

'Try having a word with the priest. Maybe he can think of something. He's white after all, and I'm sure he'll talk to you.'

'The priest is here on Sundays,' Tula responds sullenly. 'I have to work.' But pride still glistens in his eyes and he's secretly happy that he managed to catch such a warm intelligent woman as Speranza for himself. The priest. Of course. Why hadn't he thought of that before? If anyone's willing to listen it's the priest. As long as Tula can remember, the priest has visited the plantation every Sunday without fail and all the people in the village were baptised by him. He's a kind man, and he helped them all to understand that they would be rewarded in paradise in the hereafter. He told them they may not have been able to choose their life on earth, but its trials and tribulations wouldn't be for nothing. Hadn't the Lord Jesus died for their sins? Didn't he

live a life of affliction to open the doors of paradise for them too, the poor souls of this plantation?

The priest's wise words are etched in Tula's memory. With all his heart he had wanted the man of God to unite him and Speranza in holy matrimony. 'Alas, it's forbidden,' the priest replied when Tula asked. 'But don't worry. In my prayers I'll ask God for his blessing.' Tula wanted to know why such a marriage was forbidden, but decided not to embarrass the priest with more questions. Speranza was his wife. That's what mattered. She murmurs gently. He kisses her between her shoulder blades.

End of sampler.