

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

escape from slavery

ON THE PLANTATION: LIFE AS SLAVE

My name is Walter, and I was born a slave, in Virginia.

I've been working these tobacco fields since I was a boy. Planting . . . harvesting . . . binding and stacking. Backbreaking work, sunup to sundown. I sleep in a small wooden cabin with another family, an old hay mattress on the floor for a bed, no privacy. Still, I wouldn't be a house slave here for nothing. The mistress won't even get up to go across the room to get a drink of water. A Negro has to bring it to her.

I was sold to this plantation in Kentucky when I was barely old enough to walk. I can still remember my mother running out of the big house, begging the master not to sell her baby. I was on the back of a wagon . . . the horses had started to pull away. The wagon wheels kicked up a great cloud of dust, her cries faded, and that was the last time I ever saw my mother.

Some time ago, I showed a God-given talent for woodwork. The master let me try my hand at carpentry and building, and I began to dream of using my skills to buy my freedom, like I heard of some slaves doing.

But then the master died. The son who inherited me has no interest in farming and told me that a skilled slave is worth a lot of money in the Deep South.

I cannot bear the thought of picking cotton for the rest of my life in Mississippi. By my reckoning, I am almost 20 years old. I was born a slave. But I do not intend to die one.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

escape from slavery

ESCAPE! THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

It is dark, and I am on the edge of a forest.

After the lights went out in the big house, I slipped out of my bed, pretending to use the necessary. Years ago an old field hand told me about a place called Canada, where Negro men can live free. All I know for sure about Canada is that it's north, so I find the North Star and start running.

The old man told me there are folks above the Ohio River who can help me, if I can just make it out of Kentucky. I know my chances are slim. Anybody spots a black man on his own will know he's a runaway. I've seen captured slaves put over the barrel and beat till the blood runs down. But so what? I've got the scars on my back to prove you don't have to try escaping in order to get beat bloody.

As day breaks, I can see the birds flying north after the winter. They will show me the way. But in the distance I hear dogs barking. Can they have discovered me missing already? Or is it just a hunter? I have no idea how far I've come during the night, but I can't take the chance — I run through a stream to cover my scent and make a place to hide until the dogs pass me by or go the other way.

This is how I live for I don't know how long. Running at night, hiding during the day, taking food where I can find it, fearing the sound of every dog. I've been tired and hungry for so many days I lost count. Finally a great river lies before me. I know it must be the Ohio, the border between North and South. Slaves states and free states.

It is too big to swim, and I am too tired to keep going now. So I hide myself under leaves and sleep. When I crawl out, my breath catches in my throat — a black man is standing twenty paces in front of me, staring at me. "Come with me," he says.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

escape from slavery

REACHING SAFETY: HEROES FOR THE CAUSE

As dawn breaks I see a brick house high up on a hill. Lindsay — the man in the woods — told me about it, when he took me to the boat we have used to cross the river. He said the house belongs to a man who has helped many black folks to freedom.

Lindsay brings the boat to the far bank of the river. He tells me to knock at the house and say I am “a friend of a friend.” I do as he says, and an old white man cracks the door and looks me over, sending a chill down my spine. But then he extends his hand and says, “My name is John.”

He invites me in and sits me down at a table, where his wife gives me the finest meal I can remember. John’s children gather round me like I’m a curiosity. “Haven’t you ever had rhubarb pie?” a little girl asks me. I tell her slaves don’t eat so good. We were allowed less than half a bushel of cornmeal per week for every four of us, and almost no meat and vegetables, save for some fatback. The word “fatback” makes her screw her face up in disgust.

After dinner John tells me about Ohio. It is a free state, he says, but that doesn’t mean I’m safe. I am what he calls a “fugitive,” and there are laws against me being here. Even folks who don’t approve of slavery might turn me in, because they can be punished for helping me. It’s not even safe for me to sleep in the main part of the house — he takes me instead to a cellar in his barn, where I rest until evening.

That night John gives me a rough map of places I can stay, and tells me I should travel through Cleveland. From there, he says, I can cross Lake Erie into Canada. His wife packs me food for my journey, and I set out again, wondering how I will make it across the whole state of Ohio, and if there will ever be a time when I don’t have to hide or fear the sound of dogs barking.