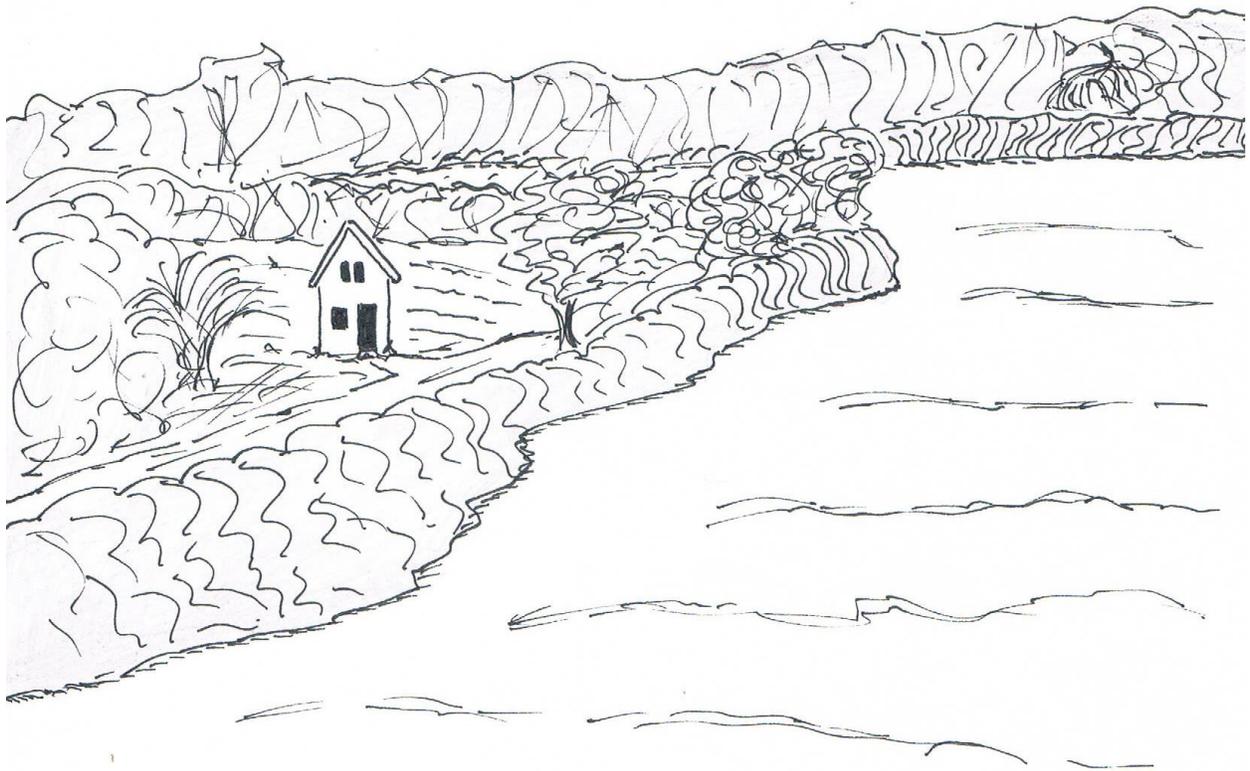


The River Canard Trilogy



Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

The Essence of the River Canard Trilogy

This is a three part work comprised of connected novellas, inspired in part by the Salterton and Deptford trilogies of Robertson Davies. They are centered around the rhythms of an 1850s tobacco farm in North Carolina, where enslaved people were exploited to carry out the work in the fields and in the household. For the purposes of this fictional writing, the term 'slave' will be used instead of 'enslaved person'. This is not meant to diminish the humanity of each and every one of these enslaved people, but rather is used to reflect the language of the time.

The dynamic between the black slaves and the white landowner is complex and flawed, spurring a young male slave to seek his freedom through the help of the Underground Railroad. Over time a young female slave also bravely seeks her own freedom, and her grit and tenacity define her as the central character of this story. The work is fiction, but incorporates a number of individuals and locales that were part of the actual Underground Railway movement. The first novella is set in 1856, and the second and third novellas are set in 1857 (with the exception of the last chapter of the third novella, which is set in late 1864).

This trilogy is named for the River Canard, which flows westward into the Detroit River, north of Amherstburg, Ontario which became a key terminus of the Underground Railroad. The Amherstburg Freedom Museum is situated in Amherstburg, and was a great inspiration for this work. The illustrations at the frontispiece of each chapter were put in to break up the sea of text, to provide some greater sense of a subset of the characters, and because they were simply fun to create.

The author and illustrator is a white Canadian. The idea of telling a story about the Underground Railroad kept coming back to him, again and again. Perhaps this was from his three years lived in North Carolina, or a single year lived in New Orleans. Both of these experiences gave him ample opportunities as an outsider to observe the lingering downstream effects of slavery and the continued oppression of black people on the day-to-day lives of all Americans. So the telling of a story around this very important period in the history of America felt important, to celebrate the bravery of those individuals who put their lives at risk by seeking their freedom from systemic oppression. They were aided by principled and engaged individuals, both black and white and Indigenous, to reach their goal of a new life in Canada. And that seemed like a piece of the collective story that needed recounting.

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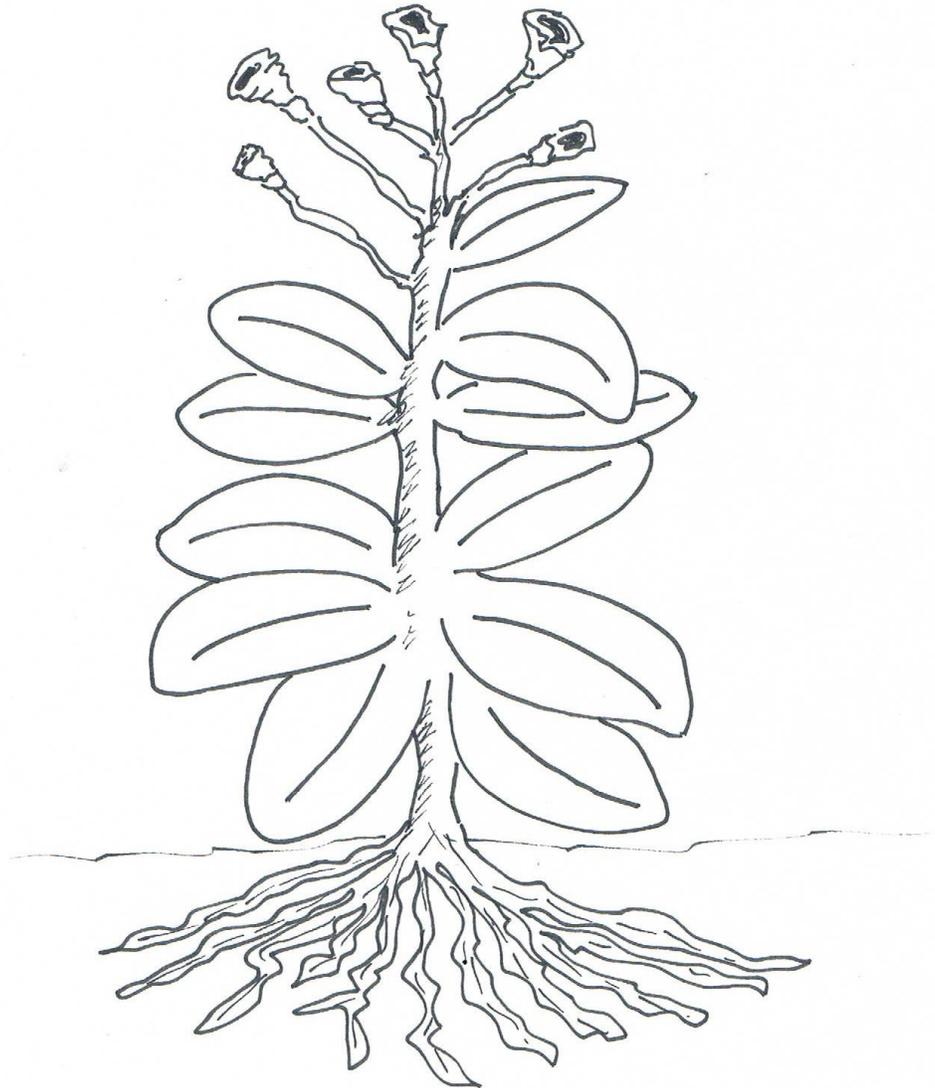
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A Question of Principle



Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

A Sense of Place



It would be too grand a statement to call it a plantation. It was a farm, a good-sized farm, where tobacco was grown. The land was blessed with fertile silty clay loam soil, and was tucked up into the northern reaches of Chatham County, North Carolina, where the county line flirts uneasily with the uncertain path of the Haw River. Cleared fields dominated the farm's acreage, but healthy stands of forest stood near its rear border onto the river, and the Mount Olive Church Road allowed relatively easy access for worship and fellowship on Sundays just across the line into Alamance County. Commerce and other services were located a bit further away in the county seat of Pittsboro. Travel to the 'Circle City' was only done infrequently and when necessary as the farm kept all of its occupants plenty busy.

During the Antebellum period, when lavish mansions were built as 'great houses' on plantations in Virginia, Georgia and Louisiana, the farm homes in North Carolina were decidedly more modest and

unassuming. But the land here was tended and cultivated by permanently indentured servants. No seven year window would yield their freedom, these workers had been brought to the shores of America by boat from their home countries in Africa. Hauled off the ships in emaciated and sickly condition, they were auctioned off to plantation and farm owners as human chattel. For this particular tobacco farm in Chatham County, the current farmer's father had posted bonds and paid head taxes at the slave auction in Wilmington, North Carolina, when a windfall inheritance had allowed him to expand his acreage and get into the lucrative tobacco market. A dozen frightened souls were chained to a flat skiff and transported up the Cape Fear River, and in turn the Haw River, to the rear of the farm acreage. Their first few nights in the huts down by the curing barns were filled with fitful sleeps and dreams of free life back home. The mornings brought the dismal realization that life would now mean working in the hot sun under the sharp eye of a field overseer, with rations of maize and salted fish being their meagre reward after a full day of forced labour.

The old man and his wife had died in quick succession a decade back, leaving the farm and all of its holdings to their only son. Their burial in a family plot by a stand of Loblolly pines flanking the edge of Dry Creek as it slowly tumbled its way toward some islands in the middle of the languid Haw River, meant that they would always be able to keep an eye on the tobacco fields which they had nurtured with the help of their forced labour ranks. With births and deaths accounted for, in 1856 there were twenty field workers living in an expanded warren of huts and lean-tos in and around the curing barn complex, along with three house workers who took care of the cooking, serving, cleaning and laundry tasks that never seemed to end. The field workers were a hardy mix of men and women, the older ones remembering freedom in Africa and the younger offspring knowing only this farm in Chatham County and all of its associated labour. The house workers were all women, of varying ages, who lived in small rooms off of the large country kitchen.

Tobacco was the main crop of the farm, and its only cash crop. The cultivation and harvesting of the golden leaves kept the field workers busy for over nine months a year in this mild climate, with stacks of dried leaves being loaded onto draw wagons at the end of the season for transport to the American Tobacco Company mill in Durham. The farm owner planned and coordinated every step of the operation, ably assisted by a field overseer who had worked for his father. Any required discipline of the field workers was handled solely by the overseer, who preferred coercion and an arsenal of passive-aggressive psychological techniques to keep his folks working hard and cooperating as a production unit. But a strong whip was always kept in a swinging holder tied to his belt, to be meted out sparingly only when conditions required it. The older slaves knew the psychological contours of the master's and overseer's minds, and how much it would take to have the lash raised as a threat or applied with varying degrees of intensity. The younger men tested the line more often, and quickly learned how to stay away from provoking a lash strike that would yield a week or more of intense pain and another month of discomfort as it healed.

And if a return to freedom ever motivated a slave to strike out across the fields in the direction of the river, a snarling quartet of strong-limbed tracking dogs were kept beside the farm's vegetable garden and right beside the lean-to that housed the pen for a dozen or more pigs. These dogs were walked together on a joined leash around the full perimeter of the farm once a day by the overseer. They were

fully obedient to even the slightest of his gestures, but the way they would glower and viciously bark whenever they came within ten feet of any field worker caused a stab of fear in the guts of them all. And the overseer would go to great pains to remind anyone within earshot that the four beasts were descendants of wolves, with a great capacity to track down prey by scent and would always attack as a pack. The fear of the dangling lash kept the workers in line for their daily chores, but it was the threat of the lunging and snapping dogs that minimized any thoughts of escape. Beyond all of that, the farm emitted the air of a bucolic, working landscape. But this was not enough to fully disguise the rot that lay underneath, festering in the minds of its owners and managers.

The Master



Truth be told, he really didn't feel like a master of the farm. Perhaps his parents hadn't been gone long enough, or perhaps they hadn't groomed him sufficiently for proper succession, but he felt like something less than omnipotent over all that he owned. And he envied the easy way of handling the workers that Henry the overseer exhibited. There would be lots of guffawing and back-slapping in the fields, that seemed to stop abruptly when he came upon the overseer standing around with a bunch of the men. He would smile in a brittle way, silently willing continuation of the camaraderie, but the folks would shuffle off to their tasks and Henry would cock his head and emit a toothless grin that ran below

his hard, sharp eyes. In fact, he felt judged by Henry. He was a good twenty years his junior, and was considerably less experienced in the subtle details of running a tobacco farm. His father had known the processes forwards and backwards, and had passed along every nitty-gritty detail to his apprentice overseer. There had been no real reason to do this with the brooding lad who seemed to prefer books to shovels and hoes, so the boy had hung around the house and wide veranda, reading the classics that his mother had loved so much and largely staying away from the dust of the fields.

But his father's untimely heart attack had changed everything. It had come on the heels of an escape attempt by a handsome and muscular young buck, who had waited for a moonless night to run off across the planted fields in the direction of Alamance County to the north. The dogs had sensed something and commenced a volley of loud barking that had woken the household. A check of the huts and a head count had verified the escape, and the dogs were set loose immediately, followed by the overseer and the master on horseback. A scant two miles north yielded the sight of the young man halfway up a tall sassafras tree, with the four canine brutes snapping their jaws at its base. The aspirant to freedom couldn't be rationally talked down, stating loudly that he would rather die than continue to live and work in captivity. The master raised his voice repeatedly, to no avail, and instructed Henry to lasso the young man and pull him down to the ground. While doing this, the dogs were instructed to sit off to one side, their tracking task having been completed. The youngest dog became agitated when the slave reached the ground, and broke away from the pack and took a diving lunge towards the throat of the fugitive. Within seconds, all four dogs were upon him, gnashing their teeth and scoring blows that would have instantly killed a smaller man. Despite Henry calling them off and using his whip on them repeatedly, blood lust fueled the pack and propelled it to a murderous finish.

The master had a heart attack the next morning, before rising. The stress of the events of the previous evening caused it to be short in duration but significant in impact. Three months after his body had laid at rest in the parlor, his wife slipped away in her sleep, either to meet her husband waiting at the Pearly Gates or to avoid the burdens of running a busy tobacco farm.

As events unfolded, the son and heir stepped up tentatively to shoulder the responsibilities left by his parents. He was still single at this time, and the well-meaning folks at the Baptist Church were quick to advise that nuptials would give him someone he could count on to run the domestic affairs while he turned his attention to the rigours of the tobacco fields. He had no real idea of how to court and attract a prospective spouse, and the slate of young ladies at Mount Olive were neither appealing nor particularly attracted to his brooding and introspective personality.

But as the fates would have it, a young woman suddenly appeared in church one fine Sunday morning. She had come from Virginia to visit family, and to take care of an aged great-aunt that was in poor health. The young woman was pleasing to the eye, and was introduced to the young farmer at a church picnic just a week later. Their initial conversations were polite and marginally dispassionate, but every now and then the young man would utter a witty remark that caused a titter of laughter to be emitted from her pursed lips. At the funeral of her great-aunt he gave her a modest hug of condolence, and he overheard at the luncheon following the burial that she would be soon returning to Virginia to rejoin her original family.

He had a dream that night following the funeral, a fitful assemblage of visions that saw him at the front of a church waiting for a bride to be walked down the aisle. When her veil was lifted, a fluttering of birds emanated upwards to the church rafters. The wedding dress fell to the floor in a crumpled heap, and he found himself standing in a field of mature tobacco plants. He was now wearing the white dress, picking tobacco leaves in a broiling sun and getting periodically lashed by a whip yielded by a muscular black overseer. He woke in a deep sweat, and felt he had reached a conclusion. The next Sunday at church, her last service before returning home, he asked the young lady to stroll with him afterwards. They were married a month later, with Henry the overseer and the parson's wife standing up for the young couple.

So life then entered into a rhythmic pattern of farm work and domestic life. He would go to Pittsboro once a week to buy supplies from the general store, and once a week to church to save his soul. The rest of the time was spent on the farm, making plans for the necessary work to be done with Henry, and conversing with his wife and reading books in the evenings. He had a strong connection with Henry, but didn't engage in a meaningful way with the field workers. They frightened him deep down, and part of him felt a strange mix of pity and disgust for their plight.

But things were very different for the house workers. Ever since he was a little boy, he was deeply connected to the two black women who kept the household running. He had been fed by them, played with by them, and learned to share affection with them. His voice changed in tone when he interacted with the house ladies. Even as the master he would hug them close, thanking them for their work and drawing them near to look deeply into their eyes. The house matron was a woman close to sixty, and elegant and graceful in her movements. She had bathed and fed and nuzzled the master from infancy, and knew his thoughts before he could speak them. The cook was a gregarious and feisty woman in her forties, skilled at her craft and unfailingly upbeat. Her husband had been a trusted field worker, helping Henry almost as a manager of the other field workers, until he fell at an altogether too early age. The couple had a child, a girl, who had grown up in the house ten years younger than the master and had assumed the tasks for cleaning and laundry. All good and admirable, but she had turned into a twenty year old beauty with dancing eyes, lustrous hair, and a lovely and lithe figure. And this had not escaped the attention of the young master.

The Mistress



Sometimes, on a fine sunny day in April, with birdsong and a light breeze blowing through the Loblolly pines, life seemed sublime. But then a pig would snort, or she would hear a shout coming from Henry, or the clatter of dishes and murmured voices from the kitchen, and life quickly returned to its marginally unbearable state.

Things might have worked out differently if her Huguenot father had gone to law school and perhaps decided to raise his family in downtown Richmond. Theatre, concerts and restaurant banquets would have been theirs in a civilized life more resonant with their French heritage. But circumstances caused him to stay on the small farm near the James River, and over time they expanded the number of slaves working the land from two to four poor souls. She remembered going at a young age with her father to Shockoe Bottom, the center of the slave trade in Virginia's capital. The deplorable conditions, the

manacled of obviously proud people and their agonized cries and screams, all still haunted her dreams. And even with the increased labour force, the economic returns from the farm were modest, which limited the family's social life and the opportunities for the daughter of the household.

'We are French, and people of God. We should not have slaves, they need to be set free'. Her mother would repeat this over and over to an exasperated family patriarch. 'We are now in a new country. And we need to follow its customs. We would be in the poorhouse if we did not have the four workers.' The response was always said in a defeated way, with a lowering of the father's head.

The young lady tried to rise above it all, devouring books in French and English and learning how to play the viola. She was endowed with a porcelain complexion and had stunning eyes, dark emerald in colour and lively in character. As she matured, inexplicably no suitors were evident from her church or its surrounding area. When a letter came asking for help for an ailing aunt of her father's, a woman who had married into a farming family from Carolina, she jumped at the chance to *changez l'air* and enjoy some new adventures.

Her prompt engagement and quick nuptials had left no time for contemplation or introspection, and she soon enough found herself as the new wife and titular household head of a marginally successful tobacco farm. But it was unclear to her what her purpose would be, moving forward. The field and garden work were capably handled by her husband and the overseer and the crew of field workers. The household chores were all quickly and efficiently handled by the three female house workers. The household had been running some time without a mistress, and there appeared to be no real need for the new transplant into its midst. She relaxed a bit after the rigours of the wedding, thinking to herself that she would use this as a period of adjustment and that some tasks would naturally fall her way. But when she tried to set silverware for dinner or to collect the eggs for breakfast, she was sweetly but firmly displaced from the effort by the house worker responsible for the task.

She took to playing the viola for hours on end, reading from a set of classic French novels sent by her mother as a belated wedding gift, or taking long walks along the banks of Dry Creek. But after three months of this she realized she may have landed in a velvet prison, a place of bountiful food and plentiful sunshine but with no real purpose.

An offhand comment from an older woman at the Baptist Church about the arrival of babies certainly got her thinking. She and her husband had reasonably consummated their new relationship, but no changes occurred in her monthly rhythms. The science of ovulation was not well understood by the young woman, but she intuitively knew that she needed to increase the frequency of her relations with her new husband. This would be her purpose, to bear lots of children and to mother these offspring to be healthy and mature adults. No one could take these tasks away from her, and she would be happy and fulfilled in this nurturing role.

But life is mysterious, and The Fates control the destiny of us all. Many months of frequent matrimonial relations, while appreciated by both participants, yielded no results of a substantive kind. Frustrations set in, and satisfaction of carnal desires morphed into obligations and the fulfillment of what began to seem like another domestic chore. The master started to question his potency, and the fertility of his

new wife. These fears were not expressed in real and intimate conversation, but through undercurrents of negative thoughts and veiled verbal comments.

And then one month it happened. Her regular bleeding did not appear and she felt mild nausea in the mornings. She knew instinctively that she was pregnant, and felt the associated rush of joy and panic and excitement. But most of all she felt satisfied that she would now have a purpose in her life, with the nurturing of new life. The budding young woman continued to play the viola, and walk along the banks of the creek, but also took care to get more rest and eat more vegetables from the garden at every meal. The next eight months went by in a flurry of anticipation and nervous attention to detail.

Just after supper one evening, something seemed to shift in her body. The baby had been strangely quiet for the last week, apparently resting up before it made its way into the world. Her contractions started, then stopped, then started again. The matron was called in, and she took charge immediately, ordering the boiling of water and the furnishing of clean linens. The labour went on for hours, with the mother evolving into a hot lather of sweat and the three house workers encouraging her to stay strong. The husband loitered in the hallway, pacing slowly and reflectively. A few shouts were heard through the door, followed by low murmurings for a considerable period of time. Eventually the door was opened, with the matron standing there, biting her lip.

“Poor little thing came out as cold as winter. Didn’t have a chance. Stillborn they call it, Master John. Me and the other girls are dreadfully sorry. Miss Marie will be alright, in time.”

A few months of recuperation and prayer brought the young woman back to full physical health, but she had been emotionally affected by the loss of her child. This would take more time to heal, and it was over a year before she would allow herself to be touched by her husband. And then she made up for lost time, approaching him for lovemaking almost every evening, with a renewed desire to have a child. Six months later their efforts were rewarded, with the cessation again of her monthly rhythms. This pregnancy she essentially took to her bed, resting incessantly and asking for extra food at every meal. Her weight went up more than for her first pregnancy, but she was determined to have a healthy baby.

The night her contractions started was at the end of a hot and humid day. The three house workers mounted the stairs again, equipped with the tools of midwifery. The contractions started sharp and fierce, and the screams emanating from the bedroom caused the hair to stand up on the back of the master’s neck. Again, a significant peal of excitement was heard, with low murmurings from the birth helpers. The door opened abruptly, with the matron’s eyes looking frightened.

“Master John, we have another stillborn. As sorry as I am about that, we’ve got other problems. The missus is bleeding bad, real bad. You better get Henry to ride out quick fast for the doctor. Go, I’m telling ‘ya, we’re wasting time we don’t have.”

The mistress would survive, largely because of some heroic measures enacted by the backcountry doctor. But another stillborn baby and her near death had sapped the will of the young woman to have children, and the extinguishing of her life purpose. Life can be cruel, almost as cruel as the threatened lash of a whip.

Field Slave



He was in his early twenties, having been born on the farm to two hard-working field workers who had come upriver after a long and arduous voyage across the ocean. The parents had come from the same village in Africa, and vividly remembered growing up there and playing with each other as children. At the Wilmington slave auction they had been assembled into the same group of frightened folks ultimately purchased by the farmer from Chatham County, and had looked out for one another during the transition into life on the tobacco farm. Childhood connections developed into deeper feelings, and soon enough they were living in the same hut and acting as much like a married couple as the difficult

conditions allowed. The farm owner looked the other way on liaisons such as this, knowing that his slaves would hold no legal rights with respect to a marriage union and figuring that any offspring produced would only increase the number of field hands at no additional cost to his burgeoning enterprise.

An infant boy arrived, full of health and vigour, and providing solace and inspiration to the two parents as the rigour and repetition of their situation became firmly entrenched. They were both field workers, and were actively involved in all of the steps necessary to cultivate and harvest tobacco. They had the patience and work ethic to efficiently prepare seedbeds for planting, the staking of the fields and the gentle nudging of a pack of mules during the re-planting process. Long, hot Summer days saw them bent over in the fields doing the meticulous work of weeding and cleaning of insects from the growing leaves. The lustrous plants would follow nature's rhythms and produce a profusion of flowers, which would be removed through a topping or suckering process to allow the energy of the earth to be directed more towards leaf growth. They and the other field workers were shown how to do all of this work by the master and Henry the overseer, and carried out in a broiling Carolina sun and heavy humidity.

Everything went well if the work flowed smoothly. If a worker lagged a bit or protested, an elevated voice or a raised lash typically brought the desired result. A few of the slaves may have done the mental calculation that there were many more of them than the master and overseer, but the four snarling dogs more than equalized the equation. Taking the strike of a lash or the bite of a dog would mean pain and injury, which would have to be dealt with while continuing on with the work. So over time, the field workers reconciled themselves uneasily to their precarious situation.

Through all of this, the young couple would work with their newborn infant in a sling on their backs. As he grew, he became an obliging and endearing help to them as they carried out their tasks. He became particularly skilled at the tasks relating to the harvesting of the mature leaves from the bottom of the stalk with his small but dexterous hands, the stacking of leaves onto small mule-drawn wagons, and the packing of the leaves into the curing huts. He and his father became the farm's experts on using mud and mortar to fill chinks and crevices in the exteriors of the curing barns so that heat would not readily escape, and the fanning of any smoldering fires to keep the curing process on track. The growing young man became a favourite of the observant overseer, who saw the accrued benefits of his hard work and the seeming lack of correction needed to keep him on track.

So now at twenty-two, he stood tall and erect in the fields, keeping an eye on his mother and father while they went about their work in the fields, and becoming a leader of the newer generation of slaves that were born on the farm. In another time and place and system he would have been identified as having great potential, but here he was viewed only as an admirable asset and a worker who could be counted on.

"Lucius, you're a strong and handsome young man. You've got a good head on your shoulders. It may be time for you to think about having a wife." The overseer said this gently to the younger fellow as they mixed a batch of mortar for filling in some gaps in one of the curing houses.

“Oh, Master Henry, you must be pulling my leg! I’ve got so much work to do on any given day that by the time night falls, I’m dead tired. No energy to keep a wife happy, and I’d be told what to do and when to do it, by somebody other than me and you.” The young man smiled broadly and pushed back his shoulders.

“That all may be true. But it’s worth keeping one’s eye out for possibilities. I was in Pittsboro last week and got talking to the overseer on one of the farms downriver a bit. He told me they have two or three fillies that are real beauties, coming in to their full fruits. I could arrange a pass for you to walk over there from time to time, just to do a little bit of initial courting. Y’know, to have a wee perusal of possibilities. What do you think?” The overseer raised his eyebrows and grinned.

“Thank you kindly, Master Henry, but I’m real happy right here. And real happy as I am. But I do appreciate it sir, I really do.” The young man went back to his work, deep in thought.

His parents were slowing down a bit after more than twenty years of hard labour in the field. He helped them and the overseer keep things moving, if only to avoid having contact with the master, who seemed increasingly distant and preoccupied over the last few months. The young black man had never felt a kinship with the young master, even if they had both grown up together on the farm, albeit more than a few years apart. The field worker was skilled in the hard work of the farm and seemed to relish it, while the young master was not a natural with respect to tobacco cultivation and appeared to resent the farm and its constraints. One young man who had no privileges but who seemed to enjoy life, and another young man who was privileged in the eyes of society but who seemed to wear some kind of mental shackling. Little did they know that life would not necessarily unfold in the way that either of them might have predicted.

House Slave



She had grown up in this kitchen. Her Mama had always been cooking, and bringing in the bounty of the garden for washing and chopping and its transformation into tasty and healthy meals for the household. The infant girl had been held in a sling for the first year or two, then tottered around her Mama's legs while meat or fish was being fried or vegetables were being smothered in a big black cast iron pan. She had been a willing and able assistant to her hard-working mother since the age of three or four, doing kitchen tasks with a big smile and a touch of whimsy to everything she set her hand to. Her Papa had been a field worker, a tall raw-boned man who worked hard and lived in one of the field shanties. The year after the baby was born, he took sick in one of those January cold snaps that makes Carolina appear to be more like Canada for a day or two. Pneumonia set into his lungs, and he got progressively

sicker as his wife brought steaming pots of soup down to where he lay agonizing in his wind-chilled shelter. The master had even let him come in to the kitchen and lay on a warm cot beside the stove, but to no avail. He was buried a few weeks later in the slave plots near the river, once the ground had thawed enough for a decent burial.

The little girl grew up under the watchful eye of her mother, getting the odd bit of paternal advice from the master and the overseer and a bevy of field workers her Mama called 'the uncles'. Sometimes, on one of the farm's festival days, her Mama might confer with one of these uncles in her room behind the kitchen, while the little girl would sit by the stove and play with her dolly. The overseer often had things he needed to consult Mama on, every couple of weeks or so in the privacy of his room, and the little girl might be asked to go outside and play on these occasions. And once, when the older master's wife was over near Charlotte for a family wedding at the height of harvest season, the overworked Master had issues to discuss with Mama in his quarters on the second floor, and the little girl had been allowed to take her dolly into the drawing room off of the main foyer.

Through it all, the growing girl had very little to do with the white boy growing up around her, a full decade her senior. He was kind enough, but always had his nose in a book and seemed not to be aware of her as she swept the veranda or dropped a few pairs of darned socks onto his bed as he rummaged around in a chest of drawers. Cleaning and sewing tasks had been taught to her by the house matron, a woman whose broad and lined face suggested that she had seen a lot in her life and had the grace and substance to bear just about anything. The sudden deaths of the farm's patriarch and matriarch had significantly impacted the house workers, and for several months following this they were the people who kept the house afloat as the young master largely stayed in his room.

The impending arrival a few years later of the young woman from Virginia had energized the house to a large degree. But when she arrived, her sharp, suspicious eyes cooled the affections of the three house women almost immediately. It soon became akin to a subtle psychological war, with privilege and entitlement on one side and servitude and human dignity on the other. Food was still prepared lovingly, floors were swept and curtains were dusted, laundry was washed and hung outside, mending and sewing tasks were performed efficiently and meticulously--but it appeared that this war would have many battles.

The loss of the first child from the new wife was a significant milestone in this unfolding drama. The house workers were large-hearted enough to feel her pain and offer as much support as was accepted, but they could feel the absence of heart in the bereaved young woman. Her second pregnancy was a call to action, and the three house women leaned in to coddle her through the nine months in an attempt to mend fences and help with the arrival of new life to the household. But the dashed hopes that followed the second stillborn arrival, and the near loss of the birthing mother, shook them all and created an emotional vacuum on the farm that was palpable.

And through this, the young black woman emerged from late adolescence as a stunning beauty. Her curly hair was other-worldly, and she brushed it every night to a lustrous sheen. Her figure had also ripened in an admirable manner, and seemed to catch the eye of every male on the farm.

“Lordy, girl, why do you look so fine?” A few of the field hands gushed and guffawed while they cleaned their hoes off to the side of the garden, where the young lady was picking snap beans.

“Mama told me not to talk to folks like you!” The young woman flashed a smile while she carried on with her work.

“Tell your Mama to start practicing what she be preaching! That Mama of yours is plenty fine, but tell her that her daughter is even finer!” One of the field hands smirked while his two compatriots cackled loudly.

“Get those hoes cleaned and then feed the pigs. Lots of work to do around here, no time to stand around jawboning.” The master had come around the corner of one of the curing barns, his jaw set in a stern line.

“Yessir, yessir, we were just giving Miss Ophelia here a compliment. We’ll get on those pigs.” The three men slouched off sheepishly.

The young master looked longingly at the young black woman as she bent over the row of bean plants. She gave him a sideways look, and he pursed his lips before walking away quickly.

A Budding Interest



The fields had their rhythms, and the house had its own but different rhythms. The house workers looked after the needs of the master and mistress and overseer, and quietly shared the benefits of a good roof and solid walls and the better food that was prepared in the country kitchen at the rear of the house. The field workers lived in makeshift dwellings that were porous during a Carolina rain storm and chilly and drafty during Winter's cold spells. A small crew of field workers had food cooking duties, carried out in an open air lean-to with cooking pots suspended over open fires. The majority of food they cooked was directed to them by Henry's orders, with fish caught in the Haw River and the less-desirable bits of a butchered pig being the main sources of protein for the field workers. The one common source of food for both the house and the field was the large, sprawling vegetable garden directly outside the back steps of the house kitchen. There were certainly selective forces at work in terms of ensuring the best vegetables and root crops made their way into the house, but the vegetative bounty of the rich soil was shared by all.

So on a fine day when weeding of the tobacco plants was well in hand, the overseer had directed Lucius to join the field worker head cook to do some hoeing and early bean picking in the vegetable garden. The sun was bright and the breeze was lovely, and the two workers went steadily from task to task.

"Please, just the ripest beans, young man. If there's a hint of green in that yellow, leave them for another day. I'm fixing to make up a big stew with some hog pieces that Master Henry got for us from the latest kill. Not the choicest bits, mind you, but if I simmer it long enough and have plenty of ripe beans in there it should all work out just right. And maybe a few of the early peas, y'hear?" The cook was a short woman with broad hips and shoulders, and had her long hair bundled up on her head and secured with a bright red sash.

"Yes'm. Anything you say. I'm just happy to take a break from the weeding and do something a bit different. Give my mind a bit of a break, 'cause I've been doing a lot of thinking of late." Lucius squatted down beside some rows of beans and kept his head down.

"What have you been worrying that pretty little head about? We're into good weather, you're ahead on your field work, and lots of good food these days. What's concerning you, boy?" The woman stood up and put her hands on her hips.

"Uh, just things. Things about life. I'm not a boy anymore, I'm a man. So thinking about what a man needs to do. That kind of stuff, rolling over and over in my head." The young man rocked back on his heels, pulling the root of a weed out of the garden's soil.

"Would this have anything to do about women?" The cook's eyes turned mischievous.

"Uh, no, uh, not at all. Trying to stay away from women." Lucius' voice took on a nervous register.

"Just 'cause you're trying to stay away from them doesn't mean you're not thinking about them! A good looking boy like you, strong and healthy, might just be thinking about women all the time. It's hard to really know what goes on between a man's ears!" The cook reached up and gave both of his ears a long tug.

“Well, maybe so, if the truth be told. I get along pretty well with Master Henry, and he suggested that he knows there are some pretty little things on other farms not so far down the road. I would have to ask him again, but he said he could arrange for a pass to go visit a few prospects. Some early courting, just to see how things might go. Not saying I want a wife right now, but to explore possibilities.” Lucius kept picking yellow beans, and placing them in a big metal tub.

“Well, there was a time when I had a few fellows from other farms come by to pay me a visit. Wouldn’t call it courting, but just to have a little look-see. That pass is important, otherwise a person will get in trouble with the sheriff, and Lord knows where that could end up. A big heap of trouble. But some of these explorin’ fellows would tell us stories about how bad it can be on other farms. Not enough food, or overseers who are just plain evil. Some of the masters too, ‘specially the ones who like the mash whiskey.” The woman sat on the ground, warming to her story.

“We do have it pretty good here. We all know we are not free, but things could be a lot worse. So maybe courting a wife on another farm might not be the best idea. So more thinking to be done...” The young man smiled ruefully and stood up to stretch.

“Don’t think too hard, especially when there’s a pretty little thing right under your nose!” The cook waggled her eyebrows and cocked her head in the direction of the back porch.

Ophelia had brought a basket of wet laundry outside and was hanging it on the drying line that had one end hooked to a column of the porch structure. Her trademark tresses were held back by a purple band, and she wore a billowy grey dress that was buffeted by the wind but still offered subtle evidence of the lovely figure underneath it.

“That little one? I still think of her as a kid, hanging on to her Mama’s leg!” Lucius rolled his eyes and whispered this hoarsely to his compatriot.

“Well, think again, silly bones! That lil’ girl has grown into quite the young woman, and she’s finer by a country mile than anybody you’d see on any other farm in Chatham County!” The cook said this softly enough, but some snippets may have reached the ears of the young lady through gaps in the wind.

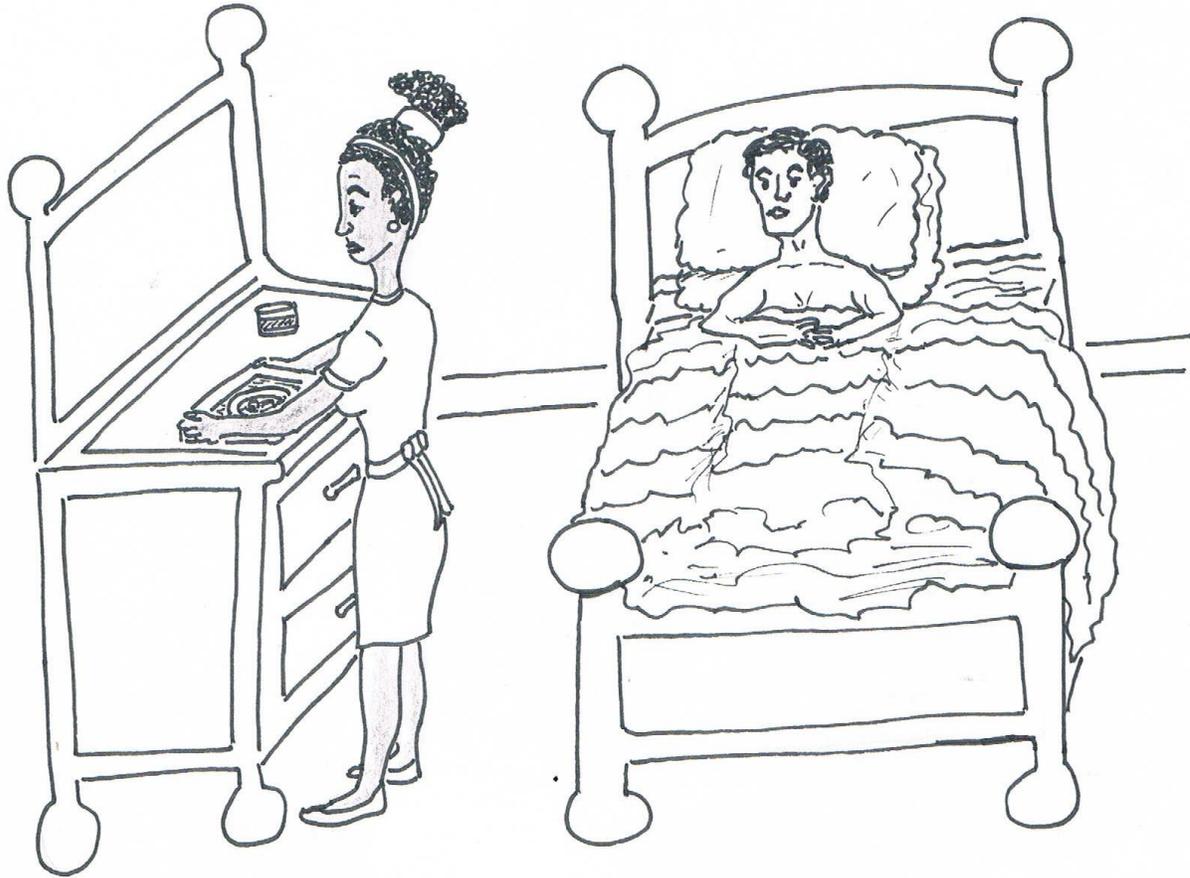
“Ha, that’s a good one! Ophelia, mmm,mmm, somehow I feel that you might be exaggerating things a bit...” The young man kept his head down and laughed, plucking beans quickly.

“Lucius, what’s so almighty funny? Can you let me in on the joke?” Ophelia had completed her laundry hanging and now stood over the young man, the laundry basket wedged between her arm and hip.

“Oh, just some silly thing, Miss Ophelia, to while away the time while us two are out here picking beans. Nope, nothing at all.” A few beads of nervous perspiration crept out on the young man’s brow.

“Oh, just wondering. I could swear I had heard my name.” The young woman turned and walked back towards the house with a modicum of haughtiness. The muscular bean picker found himself following the sway of her buttocks under her grey shift dress as she sashayed along.

Recognizing Power



He had begun to wonder if he should have stayed a single man. He could have still been the lord and master of his acreage, working with Henry and the field workers on bringing in the crop every year, and focusing on his beloved books to pass the time and understand the world beyond Chatham County. He could ride up to Durham or over to Raleigh once a month to break up the monotony of the rural landscape, have a meal in a hotel or go to a dance hall to take in a show. He could go down to Pittsboro more often and talk to the lads jawboning outside the general store, maybe even think about what he would need to do to take a run at politics somewhere down the road. Or he could sell the farm and its slaves and its contents and pack all the proceeds into a carpet bag and head over to Memphis or St. Louis and take up work on a steamboat going up and down the mighty Mississippi. All of these things would have been possible as a single man, but he had listened to the folks at church and made a decision to marry and hopefully start a family. The path all of the other bachelor farmers seemed to take up without thinking twice. He had mulled it over a thousand times, but now in his quiet moments he questioned his decision. In fact, all or most of the things he envisioned doing if he had stayed single could also be done as a newly married husband. They might not conform to what the good folks at church would expect, but they would still be possible. But the real chain holding him back was what his new wife would think or say if he stepped beyond the lines of convention or the bounds of normality.

The bearing to term of two stillborn children and her own scrape with the sharp teeth of an early death had changed the rules of engagement of their marriage. She had been cool and diffident to him at times before all of the challenges, but now this became the norm. She spent her days going for long, solitary walks down by the Haw, or playing the viola for hours at a time in the drawing room. She dropped the pretense of trying to find her niche in the web of household work activities, and now accepted the fact that she would be fed and waited upon by one of the three house workers. She would sit at dinner and listen to Henry's stories and her husband's interjections with a frozen half-smile on her visage, never offering up an opinion or an alternative avenue of conversation. It was as if part of her had died that night when the country doctor had worked feverishly to stanch the bleeding. Perhaps part of her had lifted up and out of her body temporarily, being offered a glimpse of a realm where tobacco wasn't a cash crop and coloured slaves weren't in bondage for its efficient harvesting. A part of her may have stayed in that realm, and she now lived on in a halfway existence between two worlds, not fully engaged in either.

One significant change had arisen from these challenges, where she no longer slipped off her nightshirt right before bed, to lounge sensuously on top of the covers as her husband undressed by candlelight. That pleasure was now gone, without direct communication between the two participants. The master's bedroom had a small anteroom off to one side, with a door that could be closed, and with the windowless anteroom also having a door opening onto the adjoining central hallway. The young wife had a small, low cot installed in the anteroom, and this is where she slept alone from the time of her challenges onward. She would retire early and rise early, stepping softly into the hallway and moving towards the water closet and her morning ablutions before the first of her long walks along the river.

This new pattern of living carried on for weeks and flowed into multiples of months. This caused the master to regurgitate his thinking on his life and its shortcomings, on things as they were and might have been. He turned to his library for solace, reading the classics late into the night and often sleeping until high onto mid-morning. He started to ask for breakfast to be delivered to his room, so he could read while eating and prepare for consultations with Henry around the time the overseer would be coming in to the house for his noon meal.

The matron would usually bear up a tray containing grits, bacon and eggs, along with a small pot of hot coffee, and would spend a moment or two fluffing the pillows and sharing a joke or two with the young master. She had in essence been his nanny while he was growing up, and there was a strong bond between them. But on a hot morning in July, a tentative knock came on the master bedroom door just before ten o'clock.

"Come in, Eliza, you know it's open." He looked up from his book and lazily stretched his upper body.

"Matron's feeling a bit poorly today, Master John. Taken to her bed for rest, I suspect the lingering humidity has got to her. I'm just filling in, bringing your breakfast up to you." Ophelia stuck her head through the door with a nervous smile, pushing with her shoulder to protect the tray of food in her hand.

“Ophelia...now this is a pleasant surprise. How are you, miss?” His tone was syrupy, with just a modicum of nervousness ingrained in his voice.

“Oh, I’m doing just fine. Thank you for asking, sir.” The young woman smiled broadly, and stood there uncertainly with the tray.

“Just set it over there on the dresser. I’ll eat it momentarily.” The master gestured and offered up a tight smile.

The young woman stepped lithely to the dresser and softly set down the tray of steaming food. She was wearing a white shift dress, with very little on underneath it due to the anticipated high heat of the day. As she fussed with the tray, she could feel the eyes of the master upon her.

“Ophelia, come over here and stand by the bed.” The master’s voice was low in tone, but with a hard edge.

“Yessir, what can I do to help?” The young woman stood by the bed, nervously sliding a strand of her curly hair behind one ear.

“Take off your dress and come lie down here with me.” The master’s voice took on a thicker lustre, as he pulled back the sheets to show Ophelia that he slept in the summer without night clothing.

“Oh, my, Master John. I’m thinking that wouldn’t be a good idea. You see, my Mama has got plenty of chores for me now that the matron is laying low. So you’ll have to excuse me.” Her eyes shifted nervously towards the door.

“Oh, your Mama won’t mind if you’re tardy for a few minutes. She’s been mighty obliging to men on this farm over the years, if you know what I mean. Now that you’ve grown into such a beautiful plum, it’s time you should become just as obliging.” He reached out and grabbed her by her slender wrist.

“Now that’s mighty tempting, Master John, and mighty flattering as well. But you see, sir, you are a married man! And I do believe I just saw Miss Marie coming back across the fields from her morning perambulation. Oh my, I do believe I hear her step now on the stair treads! We’ll both be in a heap of trouble if I don’t excuse myself right away.” The young woman slipped quietly out of the room, leaving a frustrated master and his tray of rapidly cooling eggs and bacon.

A Mercantile Traveler



He had been born just north of Rochester, in a small village that lay on the edge of Lake Ontario, as the third son of a devout Quaker family. Early life was elemental, with farm work going on around him six days a week and Sunday service with other Friends on the Lord's Day. The farm was small in acreage but fertile, and a steady stream of guests enjoyed its hospitality throughout his formative years. The white guests were entertained in the country kitchen on normal Sundays and in the formal dining room on special holidays. Black guests would often come in the night, and would be nourished well on an old plank table at the rear of the barn. They would typically lay low for a few days in the hay mow, and would be given an early morning ride in a wagon outfitted with a false bottom to a loosely constructed jetty along Oak Orchard Creek. The boy would stand and wave to the departing visitors, picking their way through marshy reeds to a cigar boat that would take them to a pier in Toronto or Oakville. The grizzled boat captain, a long-time member of the Rochester Friends, would wave back while keeping a wary eye on the horizon.

Daniel was sixteen when his father received a letter from his half-brother down in the Carolinas. The relative's family situation had changed recently with the loss of his wife, and he was enquiring if his northern nephew might be interested in relocating and coming south to be his right-hand man in his general store in Pittsboro, the seat of Chatham County. A long family conference ensued, and given the size of the farm and that the two older boys would soon be settling down, it was decided that the offer to Daniel was Heaven-sent. So with a few tears and many deep embraces, Daniel set off a month later with his worldly possessions in a battered grey rucksack. Three months later, having walked many miles and been given carriage lifts by countless Quaker hosts along the way, he stood outside the General Store on the Circle in downtown Pittsboro.

He eased into his duties over the first half year, learning the rhythms of local commerce and tuning his ear to the Southern accents of the store's customers. These good folks were largely white, except for

the odd trusted slave who would drive a wagon into town for essential goods and then back again to their farm. Daniel would look at these slaves knowingly, aware that some of their brethren had slipped away and ultimately gained their freedom after a few days' rest in his Daddy's barn. He spoke softly to them, and they smiled back appreciatively, and a blurry plan started to take shape in his head.

"Uncle, I've noticed business has dropped off considerably, now that we're into hotter weather." The young man stopped sweeping the floor, looking over to his relative counting coins behind the cash register.

"T'is true, regrettably. Happens every year. The farmers have more work to do in the Summer, so less time to come into town. And their wives don't fancy a hot, dusty ride in for shopping. They'd rather sit out on the porch, being served by their kitchen workers, hoping for a bit of a breeze." The store owner smiled grimly.

"Hey, Uncle, I have an idea! I'm young and healthy, and have gotten used to the humidity down here. Why don't I load up one of our wagons with all manner of dry goods, bolts of cloth, thread, penny candy, you name it. Drive out to the farms and roll right up to the ladies on their porches. I'll sell them a whole bunch of goods right off the wagon, then have some tea and roll on to the next farm. Kind of like a travelling store. What do you think?" The young man gave out a goofy, lop-sided grin.

"Hmmm, never heard of that kind of thing. But then I wouldn't have you here for helping out?" The older man scratched his chin.

"There's got to be a first time for everything. And I could do it every other day, so I could get caught up on chores I missed while I was out travelling. And we have gone real quiet these days, so you will be more than alright on your own." Daniel cocked his head sideways.

"You are a bright young man, with good ideas. Go out four days each week, in a different direction each day, so people can count on you showing up the same day each week. Let's get started on painting a sign we can mount on the wagon, as it pays to advertise, especially for something new." The uncle's eyes took on a bit of a sparkle as he dug around for a can of poster paint.

A few days later, Daniel and his store wagon trundled up to a tobacco farm north of Pittsboro. The young man was still getting used to his balky draw horse, an old grey stallion by the name of Prince. Mistress Marie sat on one end of the porch doing embroidery, while Master John sat on the other end with his nose deep into a book. Ophelia sat on the steps in between them, mending a pair of Henry's trousers.

"Fine folks, good afternoon! My name is Daniel, and I am a travelling emissary of the Pittsboro General Store. No need to go into town on a sweltering day, I am happy to bring our goods to your doorstep. If you will allow, I will be delighted to unpack my display for your thorough perusal." The young man stood at his wagon seat, and doffed his wide-brimmed hat. Ophelia shot an enquiring look toward Master John, who shrugged his acceptance. The mistress looked on with diffident, cool eyes.

“Alrighty, young fellow, show me your wares.” Ophelia set down her mending and advanced to the wagon.

“Happily, m’lady! Daniel is my name, please grace me with yours.” He stuck out his hand.

“Ophelia, and my pleasure, sir.” The young black woman curtsied.

“My name is Marie. Do you have any silk?” The mistress of the house set down her embroidery and advanced purposefully to the wagon.

“This is our first week for the travelling store, Ma’am. I did not bring a bolt of silk today due to its delicate nature. But I can deliver as much as you would like for next Thursday, in addition to anything else you would like or need.” Daniel bowed formally.

“Two yards of silk. Two spools of white thread. A tin of horehound candy. And anything else this wench or her mother deem necessary for the household. All to be charged to my husband’s account, which he will settle up for when he gets to town next.” This was all said in icy tones, which caused an exchange of nervous glances between Daniel and Ophelia.

Tasting Freedom



“Alright, Lucius, tomorrow’s the day. Here’s your pass, all signed and official. It took me some time to convince Master John that you deserved a full day off from the fields, but he eventually came around in the end. Stick to the edge of the roads so you don’t conflict with any passing traffic, and be sure to hold your head high. If a sheriff or anyone of substance asks you your business, simply show them your signed pass, and be polite and friendly. Sounds easy enough, right?” Henry sat with the young black man on a rough-hewn bench beside one of the curing barns.

“Yessir, I do believe so. But what if I hand over the slip of paper and they don’t hand it back? Or they doubt if the signature is genuine?” The young man winced a bit and cocked his head sideways.

“Now don’t go imagining things! The sheriff in these parts is a reasonable man. And this kind of thing happens all the time. A worker needs to go and pick up a horse or some tools from a neighboring farm, or do a little bit of courting like you will be, and they get a pass to allow them to move freely on their business. Don’t fret a bit, son.” Henry laid his hand gently on the young fellow’s broad shoulder.

“And what do I do when I get to another farm? Ask for a parade of their loveliest young women to occur?” Lucius grinned broadly and raised his eyebrows.

“That’s one approach, but it’ll likely get you run off any farm. No, just ask for the overseer. Show him your pass, and tell him Henry sent you. Ask him if there are any young ladies within the ranks of his workers, field or house, who are presently unattached. Ask him to introduce them to you. Say how do y’do to them, smile a lot, tell them they’re real purty. For your first visit, just make a good impression. If you think someone’s promising, tell them you’ll come back in a spell. Get Ophelia to make you a little travelling lunch, and you’ll do just fine.” Henry nodded knowingly and went towards the house for his supper.

The next day dawned bright and sunny, and Lucius took himself off down the road after a quick breakfast. He had picked up his lunch sack from the kitchen, Ophelia giving him a strange look accompanied by a narrowing of her eyes. He sauntered down the farm’s laneway with a strange mix of elation and dread flowing through his veins. He realized then that he had never been off the farm before, had never seen anything but its house, garden, barns and fields in all of his twenty-two years. He walked along, marveling at trees and streams and curves in the road, all of which he was seeing for the first time. He looked around with child-like eyes, and took in the copious birdsong. He started to sing back, skipped a bit, and began to chuckle in a slow and inexplicable way. He spun around and around, looking up at the brilliant sky and its adorning cumulus clouds, and felt a rush of freedom that made him feel giddy.

The approaching sound of a rider on horseback gave him barely sufficient time to revert back to the plodding gait of a field slave out on a day pass. The rider was a short but powerfully built man, wearing a floppy black hat to shield his face from the sun.

“Boy, what’s your business out on the open road?” The county sheriff rode up to him and stopped abruptly, leaving a cloud of red dust in his wake.

"Name's Lucius, sir. I work for Overseer Henry and Master John at the tobacco farm just up the road. Heading over to some neighboring farms to do a little visiting. Here's my pass, sir." The young man lowered his head while he extended his arm out to the rider.

"Let's see, signed and dated. A one day pass, for today. All looks good. Make sure you're back home well before dark. We have deputies riding at night to make sure everybody's accounted for. Keep your nose clean and everything will be alright, y'hear?" The sheriff passed down the paperwork and hitched up his trousers authoritatively before riding off around a curve in the road.

Half an hour later, Lucius came to a farm gate, the first neighbor to his own farm in the direction of Pittsboro. As far as he could tell, his farm had no name, but this farm had an attractive sign at its gate which said 'BelleVue'. He didn't know what that meant, but the fencing was in very good condition and the road leading up to the house was also well maintained. There were workers in the fields as he walked along, and he called out and smiled to several of them, but they all kept their heads down and didn't say a word to the unexpected visitor. As he walked up the front lawn to the house, a tall and slender man sat rocking on the front porch. The yard and house were eerily quiet, save for the sound of the rocking chair.

"State your business, young man." The farmer's eyes were fiercely penetrating.

"My name's Lucius, sir. I'm from the next farm up. My overseer, Henry, has given me paperwork to be out and about for some visiting. He asked me to speak to the overseer, sir." Lucius was polite to a fault.

"My overseer died last year. Too much trouble to replace him, so I now do my own overseeing. Field and house. So you're looking at the master and the overseer. What can I do for you?" The older man pursed his lips.

"Uh, well, the suggestion was made by Henry that you might have some fine young ladies who are close to marrying age. I'm here to say howdy to them, sir, to see if there might be any spark between us." The young man blushed a bit, and lowered his head.

"Let's see if this makes any sense. You're a strapping young man, and good-looking. One of my workers might be to your liking, you lay with her, and she has a healthy, strong baby. In a dozen years I get an extra hand in the field. But the father works from dawn to dusk up the road, and the Momma and child pine for him all the time and don't get their work done due to all the moping. So a good deal doesn't turn out well, for anyone. So my suggestion is to turn around and get the hell off my farm. Find a suitable wife up on your own spread. Everyone will be the happier for it. Now git..."

Lucius turned and walked in a silent trance back to the road. He turned left in the direction of home, figuring he could eat his travelling lunch and then nap in a windrow of trees, and get back to the farm at a respectable hour just before dinner.

Truth is Better Than Candy



The next Thursday, true to his word and his planned weekly schedule, Daniel came up to the farm house in a billow of red dust and the creaking of wagon wheels. He tied up the draw horse to the modest hitching post in front of the porch, and immediately set to unloading the materials for Mistress Marie and the kitchen folks.

Ophelia slipped out of the front door quietly, carrying a broom that she had been using to sweep the front foyer. Her hair was swept up over her head, with a few errant ringlets cascading down to her left ear, and she wore a white cotton dress with a red sash at its waist. She watched the young man proceeding with his unloading activities without speaking, a mischievous smile playing at her lips.

“Is all of that for me, kind sir?” She broke her silence when he turned towards her, his arms laden with goods.

“Well, I believe most of it is, young miss. The silk and thread are for the mistress of the house, and oh yes, the tin of candy as well. But everything else is for you and your Mama back in the kitchen.” Daniel smiled broadly and nodded nervously as he struggled to keep his load balanced.

“Well, I am the seamstress of the house, so I’ll be cutting up that silk for many pairs of knickers for the mistress. She be a fancy one alright, and needs silk drawers when the rest of use burlap or nothing at all!” Ophelia chuckled at her own joke, and beckoned the delivery steward to come up onto the porch.

"I would like Madame Marie to inspect the silk, to ensure it is of her liking. Ophelia, could you be so kind as to summon her out?" The young man requested this in a quiet voice.

"Fraid to say she is out on one of her long sashays back to the river. But don't worry, we can set the cloth and thread down in the foyer and she'll see it on her return. The rest of the stuff we can just walk back to the kitchen." The young lady turned and opened the front door.

"Uh, I usually take deliveries through the rear door. Wouldn't want to disturb the Master, or upset your Mama..." Daniel hesitated before stepping over the threshold.

"No one's home. The master and overseer are fixing something down in one of the barns. Mama's out for an extended pick in the garden. If any mud falls off your boots going down the hallway, I'll sweep it up later. C'mon in, kind sir. For the time being, this is my house, and you can walk through any door I say so." Ophelia turned and shot the store clerk a look that was equal parts defiance and playfulness.

"Okay, I'll set the cloth and thread right down here, and will carry these tins of spices back to the kitchen. I still have a bag of rice and a bag of flour on the wagon that are a bit heavy and dusty, so will set them on the back stoop later. My, it's blessedly cool in here with the cross-flow through the windows." Daniel walked behind his hostess as she headed directly towards the kitchen.

"Just set everything on the table, Mama will sort through it when she gets back to prepare food. Would you like a drink of cool water to slake your thirst?" The young lady gestured towards a ladle and a porcelain jug.

"Yes'm. Much obliged." Beads of sweat had popped out on his brow.

"Here you go. Drink it slowly." Ophelia held out a clay mug and placed it in Daniel's hands, which she touched and held for more than a few seconds.

"Thank you, miss." The tension in the room was palpable.

"Do you like what you see, Mr. Daniel?" The young woman's eyes pillowed up, and she yielded a muted smile.

"You are a very pretty girl, Miss Ophelia. More than I can say. But I feel uncomfortable being alone here with a lovely young woman, as an agent of my uncle's store. I am a Quaker, and have been taught to avoid or resist such temptations." Daniel stammered this out, his eyes bulging.

"Oh, might your resistance be because of my skin colour? Or the fact that I am a slave?" The young woman's eyes burned with an intense fire.

"No, no, not at all. The beauty I see in you goes far deeper than the pigment of your skin. And if truth be told, I believe you and all your people should be as free as I am!" The young man grabbed Ophelia's hands and held them firmly.

“Ha, now that’s a good one! You roll in here with your spices and silk and tell me that Mama and I should be free? So I suppose I can tell the Master that after his dinner, and won’t face ten strokes of Henry’s whip before nightfall? Or if I made a run for it, I wouldn’t have four rabid dogs on my back before I hit the Alamance County line? Free? Yeah, I’m free alright! Free to make silk drawers for the uppity mistress, and free to lie with the master anytime I deliver breakfast to his room? Take your thoughts of freedom and shove them up your nose, it might put some sense into your head!” The young woman tore her hands free, and bit her lip crying.

“Ophelia, listen to me, I told you my truth. I don’t know how I will do it, but I will certainly try to help you. I’ve come from the North, and my family helped many black folks to get to their freedom. It was never easy, and it can be dangerous. Deadly dangerous. But it’s worth it, as we’re all equal in God’s eyes, and we all deserve to be free.” The young man felt for her hands.

“I dream of that, but sometimes it’s real hard to keep hold of that. Real hard.” The young woman’s eyes glistened.

“I can imagine how you feel. But we have some time now together, and I want to read to you some key pieces from a pamphlet written by a fellow by the name of David Walker. A black man, originally from Wilmington, but who got away to Boston. He was free, and makes his appeal to all coloured people that they need to seize their freedom. I would be in a heap of trouble with the sheriff if he found out I even had a copy of Walker’s Appeal, let alone reading it out to anyone. But I will read the choice bits to you when I make my deliveries and we can figure out some time to be alone just like today. And over time, even without being able to read or write, you will commit these ideas to memory. And you can secretly share them with your Mama or any of the other workers. Over time, the ideas will spread, and more people will get inspired to seek their freedom. Now, are you willing to learn what Mr. Walker had to say?” The young man’s face beamed.

“Heck, yes! And over time you’re going to teach this girl how to read and write. And those abilities will help me get free even quicker! Now let’s get started, before we see Miss Marie coming across the fields.” The young woman put her hand through Daniel’s arm, and led him to the kitchen table.

A Wee Drop



A number of weeks rolled by, with the arrival of the deepest heat and humidity that is experienced on that coastal plain of North Carolina, spilling across from the coolness of the Blue Ridge Mountains to the refreshing crash of ocean waves on the state's Outer Banks. But in the middle, temperatures climbed over one hundred degrees and the humidity locked itself in with the tortuously slow flow of the meandering Haw River. The tending of the tobacco plants in the fields of the farm was hot and back-breaking work, and Henry trundled extra water out to the fields and encouraged regular breaks in the tree shade along the field edges. He often forgot to carry his side whip these days as he rarely had to raise his voice let alone his hand to keep the workers on task and cooperative. Henry's family had been yeoman farmers on a small plot of land north of Chapel Hill in Orange County, where a wide range of crops were cultivated by his father and three brothers. No slaves were used in that operation, and the farm provided a reasonable living for the growing family. But its small size meant that Henry would have to leave to make his living as a young adult, and he soon found himself as overseer on the tobacco farm with its complement of slaves recently purchased at the Wilmington auction market. Henry had grown into a middle-aged man with these workers and their offspring, and in his quiet moments he found himself mentally caught between the moral codes of the Southern planters and his shared humanity with the black slaves.

Henry observed a lot of things on the farm. Not just the condition of the growing plants, the moisture content of the hosting soil, or the fatigue levels of his workers. But he also saw a wide range of human interaction, things that seemed straightforward and other things that seemed a bit veiled and mysterious. He would see Mistress Marie come out on the kitchen's back stoop, adjusting her sun bonnet before heading out for one of her interminably long walks. Henry noticed that she stopped momentarily and said a word or two to every one of the field workers she crossed paths with or came within hailing distance, keeping her head low and her voice soft but never failing to elicit a hearty laugh from the encountered worker.

He also noticed that Ophelia would be a blur of activity on Thursday mornings, hanging laundry or sweeping the porches with a verve and purpose that she may not hold on other days of the week. Or the fact that her Mama would always go to the garden with several picking bins just before the general store wagon pulled up promptly at nine o'clock, with that friendly store clerk Daniel jumping off his wagon and taking his deliveries in through the back door. It seemed to Henry that Daniel stayed inside the house considerably longer than a delivery dropoff would require, but he noticed the wagon always pulled away a few minutes before a tousle-headed Master John stuck his head out the back door to tardily greet the day. All of this Henry took in, mulled around and around in his mind, but shared none of it with anyone but himself.

"Special day coming up soon, I believe." Henry looked sideways at Master John as they sat out on the front porch after dinner, hoping for a light breeze to appear.

"What's that? Not sure what you mean?" John had been reading a heavily bound book of poetry.

"C'mon now, don't be coy! You know you've got a birthday coming up, and if I'm doing my arithmetic correctly, it's a special one." Henry smacked his lips theatrically.

"Uh, yeah, I guess. A fellow turns thirty. Life unfolds itself in all of its misery, building each year upon a weak foundation. With all of that in hand, why worry about a birthday?" The master narrowed his eyes and turned back to his volume.

"You've been reading too much of that laconic poetry. Life is good on our farm—good food, clean air, clean water, a bunch of hard-working folks to raise and harvest our crop. Trips to town, church on Sundays. What more could we ask for?" Henry grinned broadly.

"I suppose I thought life would be different. And it's been rough the past few years. I hear what you are saying, but pardon me for tempering my excitement." The younger man scrunched his nose and looked away.

"All the more reason to have a big bash and let our hair down a bit. Leave it all to me, I'll work with Mama and Ophelia on a big spread of food to eat. And I've been making good progress on my fermentation skills, and will serve my best homemade wine. I'll arrange with Daniel for a few bottles of bourbon to be delivered next Thursday for a wee drop for toasting the birthday boy, and I'll get the best musicians in the huts to tune up their fiddles and banjos for some dancing after the dinner and toasts. Oh, it'll just be grand!" Henry's eyes danced.

"You mean to include the workers?" This was said icily.

"Well, yessir. The indoor gals will be cooking everything, so they have to be in on the party. And the field workers have been busting their backs through this heat wave. A right fine party will build morale in the best of ways. Leave everything to me, Master John, you'll be cheered up by this big celebration!" Henry's eyes shifted nervously as the master returned to his poems, begrudgingly signaling his assent.

The next ten days were a blur of excited preparations for the big event. A large hog was slaughtered and prepared for slow roasting as the main feature of an old fashioned pig pickin', along with a mountain of hush puppies, a score of yam souffles and a wide range of greens and summer salads. Henry fussed with his wine serving, and secured a batch of tin cups that would do well for both the wine and the bourbon for the birthday toasting. And his call out for talented musicians yielded a half-dozen players and pickers who knew a wide range of tunes to delight the crowd.

The big day came, the food was laid out expertly by Mama and Ophelia, and all the workers crowded around the master and mistress, everyone dressed in varying degrees of finery and wearing broad smiles. Copious food was enjoyed by all, and Henry elicited a round of applause for the kitchen folks before proposing a spirited toast to the health of Master John. The bourbon bottles were quickly drained and then the music started up. All of the slaves immediately started to dance with one another, moving to the rhythm of the music and its primordial influences. Partners were swapped back and forth, with curtsies and large grins accompanying each exchange. But for the mildly intoxicated master and his brooding mistress, sitting taciturnly on the front porch observing the dancing, it seemed that the strikingly handsome Lucius and glowingly beautiful Ophelia never sought a change in their dancing partner. They spun and twirled, fully enjoying the moment and the fun of the celebration. But the actual birthday celebrant seemed to turn increasingly gloomier over the course of the evening, and this was exacerbated by his regular retreats to the drawing room for access to his private supply of bourbon.

Romance Interrupted



“Lord, I’ve never had so much fun! I could dance until dawn, and just keep on going!” Ophelia mopped her brow with a dainty white handkerchief, and took a sip of her lemonade while leaning in close to her dancing partner.

“I do believe not much field work is going to get done tomorrow. We’re all a little tipsy from our drinking, or maybe more likely from this fine dancing. In any case, I feel downright spinny! I do hope the Master celebrates every birthday like this from now on...” Lucius drew Ophelia close to him by her waist, and she threw her head back in mock indignation.

“Well, young man, if you’re going to get fresh like that, Miss Ophelia’s going to have to teach you some manners! Why don’t we go for a little stroll down by the river? The air’s cooling off real nice and I think we could use a break from dancing.” The young lady grabbed Lucius by his broad hand and drew him away from the party.

X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X

He had fallen asleep in the drawing room, with the decanter of bourbon beside him on a silver tray. He awoke with a start, realizing he still had his clothes and shoes on, his mouth thick with residues from the party. He wasn’t sure how long he had slept, as he had fallen into a fitful dream state that had left him off-kilter. His dreamscape wife had come to him without a stitch of clothing on, but when he tried to reach out to her she ran away through a maze of doors. He fell back onto his bed, disconsolate, until four black wenches came in bearing his breakfast on serving trays. They had set down the trays on a sideboard and went in turn to the four corners of the bed. As if on cue, they pulled their white cotton dresses over their heads, and then started to advance on their master from four directions unconstrained by any clothing or inhibition.

The anticipation of what would come next had jolted him awake, and he lay on the settee groaning in a tumescent misery. But then a salacious thought came to his mind, and he quietly stole down the hallway towards the back of the house.

He tapped gently three times on the door of Ophelia’s small room that was situated off the kitchen pantry. No answer came from within, so he knocked again, this time putting his head plaintively on the rough wooden exterior.

“She’s not here.” A woman’s body pressed itself into his back, her arms encircling the master.

“Where is she?” He sounded like a sulking child, and wriggled in vain to get free of the woman’s firm hold.

“She’s still enjoying the party. Do you need the feel of a woman, Johnnie, is that why you’re here?” The soft voice came in close, whispering into his ear.

“Yes, I dreamt....I need to touch Ophelia.” He stopped resisting for a moment.

“She’s not here. But I can take care of you, just like I used to when you were a young man, and how we used to do it before you brought that wife of yours into this house. A man has his needs, and I know how to take care of them.” The voice went even softer, and the hands went lower.

“No Mama, now that she’s grown up, I need to have Ophelia!” The master twisted his body harshly and he strode into the kitchen and out onto the back stoop.

A large group of field workers were still dancing, with others standing around in knots, all enjoying the music. They looked at him with a mixture of surprise and fright, and he stammered out something incomprehensible.

He felt uneasy on his feet, but then an idea formed in his head. Scanning the crowd, he couldn’t see Ophelia in their midst, nor Lucius.

His eyes grew wild, and he walked with purpose towards the hut where Lucius slept. A few workers called out to him, but he ignored their words and picked up his pace. He raced up to the hut and without knocking, turned the handle and roughly opened the door.

In the absence of light, he had to squint hard to make out the two intertwined bodies that lay horizontal on the feather tick in the corner. He hesitated for a second, enraged, and then stamped the floor so hard that one of its planks cracked.

“You both are disgusting. Vile and disgusting. And know that I will deal harshly with both of you in the morning.” He turned on his heel, with a pounding head and heart, and made his way to the house and his bed with a considerable loss of dignity from the quietly observing crowd.

A Cold-Hearted Act



The dawn came with its warming rays, but nothing seemed normal the following morning. Most people had slept poorly due to the excesses of food and drink from the party, and a few of these had not slept at all. The master came down to breakfast with a strange cast to his eyes, and sat at the breakfast table with Henry while the house matron fussed off to the side with the frying of eggs and ham. No sign of Ophelia or Mama was evident, and this aberration to the morning routine was noticed more by the overseer than the normally late-sleeping master.

“Some corrections will be required this morning, Henry, and the sooner the better. Came across a situation late last night that needs to be nipped in the bud.” The master said this tersely, and took a draw from his hot coffee.

“Oh, I thought your birthday party was a wonderful event, and everything went off without a hitch.” Henry nodded his thanks to the matron as she set down his plate of steaming food.

“Something happened after the party was over, or near over. Something I won’t tolerate on my farm.” The master sniffed imperiously.

“What was it?” The overseer struggled to keep a light tone to his voice.

“Something I’d rather not talk about in the presence of the matron.” The younger man cast a nervous sideways glance in the direction of the stove.

“Eliza, now that breakfast is served, could I ask you to tidy my room?” Henry smiled and nodded to the matron, who quickly and nervously took her leave.

“Now let’s cut to the chase. Spill what’s on your mind.” The overseer sawed away at his food.

“Alright, unvarnished as it may sound, I had occasion to go into Lucius’ hut late last night. I found him in there, with Ophelia, in the act of fornication. I turned away in horror, and told them they would be disciplined in the morning.” The master said all of this with arched eyebrows and bulging eyes.

“Is that so? And what’s so wrong with a good-looking young man being attracted to a beautiful young woman? It would appear to me that nature is just taking its course, and that they are a logical couple.” Henry took a bit of his eggs and chewed reflectively.

“But that’s just the point. They are not a couple, as they are not married. Fornication without marriage is a sin in God’s eyes, Henry, you certainly know that.” The master let his voice rise ever so slightly.

“Oh come on, John, don’t be so proper. We all know things go on here and there that are sins in the eyes of the preacher man, but we’re all sinners from time to time. And what were you after, stepping into the hut of Lucius? You know I try to keep the workers’ spaces as their private domains, so they at least have some dignity.” Henry’s tone signaled a modest turning of the tables.

“I was looking for someone, that I couldn’t find at the party. But that’s not the point, these two workers need to be disciplined so that it doesn’t happen again, and that they don’t set a poor example for the others.” The master shook his head firmly from side to side.

“The threat of discipline is sometimes more powerful than the actual act. This I know, from many years of experience. Let’s just leave well enough alone, and we’ll all hold positive memories of your thirtieth birthday celebration.” Henry emitted this at a whisper level.

“No. I want Lucius to feel the lash. Ten times on his bare, black back. Hard and swift. And I want you to carry this out within the hour.” The master looked at his overseer with eyes as narrow as pin pricks.

“With respect, sir, I won’t carry out this order. I have a rapport with all of my workers, and Lucius is one of the best. I will give him a harsh talking to, as a middle ground solution. But no, sir, I won’t hit the young man.” Henry set down his knife and fork, his appetite having quickly drained away.

“Then I shall do it. I will not have sinners on my farm, that need punishing, while we look the other way. I would become a laughingstock amongst my workers. If you won’t do it, I will, if only to keep this farm on the straight and narrow.” The master puffed up his chest haughtily.

“And you’ll also whip Miss Ophelia? Across her bare, black back? In broad daylight, so all can see her punishment and learn from it?” Henry turned his eyes into hooded slits.

“I will punish the young lady later today behind closed doors. I am a traditionalist, and believe the fairer sex needs to be treated more gently than a man.” The master took on an imperious air.

With a heavy heart, Henry walked slowly towards the huts of the field workers. He knocked softly on Lucius’ door, and when it opened he stood there and spoke to the young man with gentle murmurings. Lucius went back inside for a moment and re-emerged with his shirt off, his broad musculature glistening in the morning sunlight. He and Henry walked up to the house’s back stoop, where Master John stood with Henry’s lash in his right hand.

“Everyone, gather ‘round.” The master called out to the field workers in the garden, and those standing around their huts getting prepared for another day in the fields.

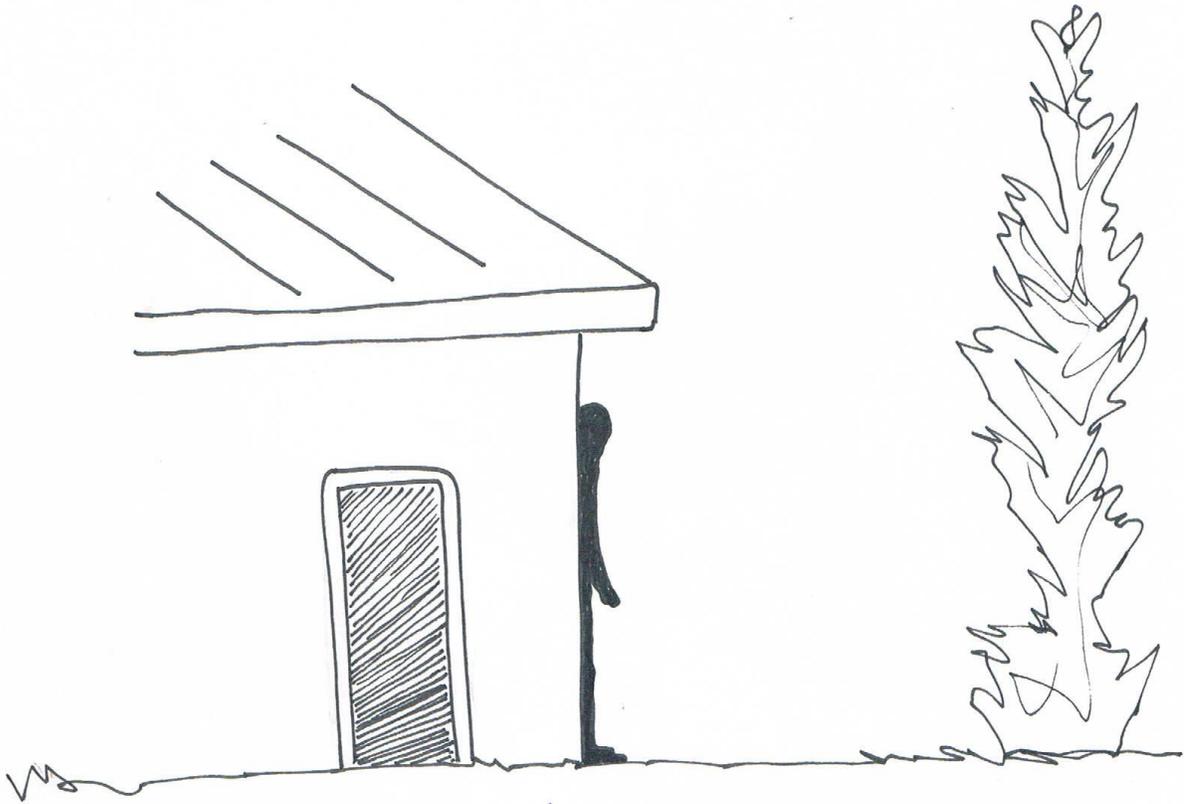
“Lucius here was caught sinning last night. The sin of fornication, with someone he is not joined to in marriage. So he will have to have his sins cleansed, by physical punishment. Ten lashes of the whip, administered by the master of this farm. This will set a deterrent for any thoughts of future sinning, by this young man, or any other.” The master glared at the crowd. “On your knees, boy, facing away from me.”

“Now Master John, please sir, this hardly seems right. I take your point, and I’ve learned from the experience. Won’t repeat it, no sir. But please, no need for the lash. I have a lot of work to do today, and need to get to it. Please, master, I’m begging you.” The eyes of Lucius were wide and frightened.

“The begging of a sinner falls on the deaf ears of the righteous. On your knees, now, or I’ll administer twenty strokes!” The young master fidgeted with the whip.

Within seconds of kneeling, the first lash strike pounded into Lucius’ broad back. The intensity seemed to pick up with each stroke, as the master seemed to be goaded on by the agonizing cries of the young man and the sight of blood welling up from the welts produced by the whip. The lash grip broke the skin on the master’s hand as he so ferociously wielded it, with drops of his red blood joining with the red blood streaming from the back of Lucius. Henry turned his head away from the image of a white man unfairly hitting a black man, but with both having the same colour of blood running through their interiors.

Flight



The aftermath of the lashing had draped a somber pall over the farm and all of its people. The workers went about their tasks with no smiles on their faces or spring in their step. The house workers were even more affected, as they served as the interface between the master and the rest of the farm. Henry went inward, working along quietly with the field workers and keeping his thoughts to himself. He assigned minimal garden duties to Lucius after a few days of recuperation, so that he could take his shirt off and get some sun on his wounds to accelerate their healing. Mama came out to the garden twice a day, to apply a homemade slurry of herbs and salt from home country knowledge to help with scab formation and the drawing out of any remaining infection.

“Lord, that mixture still stings more than a bit!” Lucius scrunched his cheeks in pain, squatting down beside a row of beans. “How are those things looking?”

“Coming along just fine. Scabbing up real nice. I think in a few more days you should even be able to sleep on your back again.” Mama slowly worked the material into the edges of the wounds.

“They hurt mightily for the first few days. But now it’s more of a drawing feeling, itchy even. My body’s healing but other things in me are off. I dream most nights of the master standing over me, holding that lash, waiting to strike.” Lucius’ voice quavered slightly.

"I am so sorry you went through all that. Not fair, no sir. But you may be faring better than Master John." Mama's voice trailed off.

"How do you mean?" Lucius turned slightly towards his nurse.

"The lash cut his hand quite badly, and the wound has become infected. He's now got proud flesh on that hand, swollen red and sore. Like a grumpy old bear, he is. I do a little to heal it up, but not too much. And that's between you and me, son." Mama cast a glance over her shoulder towards the house.

"Mama, tell me, how's Ophelia?" Lucius touched Mama on her arm.

"Oh, she's coming along. Everything came as a real shock to her. Took to her bed for a few days. Still laying low, largely. She'll be alright in the end." Mama's voice dipped even lower.

"Tell her I was asking about her. And tell her that I'll let her know." Lucius clammed up tight.

"Know about what?" Mama sputtered this out.

"She'll know what I'm talking about. And she can explain later." Lucius nodded his head reassuringly. "Oh, and Mama, I'm fixing to go back to field work in a few more days. So could you start breakfast a little later for these days, maybe talk real nice to Henry for some time after his bacon and eggs, so that us field workers can get a bit more time before the day starts?" Lucius reached out and grabbed both of Mama's hands.

"Sure, boy, sure...I'll do what I can." The woman looked at the young man with a slightly quizzical look, and got up to go back to the kitchen.

x-----x-----x-----x-----x

Thirty six hours later, just before midnight, a solitary figure stepped out of a hut and left its door slightly ajar. A simple bag was slung over one shoulder, containing a knife and food for perhaps a day or two. Walking softly on the side of the huts furthest from the dog pen, the figure moved in the direction of the Haw River. The watercourse angled northwards, and its low Summer flow would provide sufficient depth to erase the trail of scent for an inevitable posse of four dogs the next morning, but who now were sleeping soundly in their enclosure.

x-----x-----x-----x-----x

"Thanks for breakfast, Mama, and for the chinwag. But now I've got to get down to the fields. Busy day ahead of us, and Lucius will be back with us full throttle. Thank God that boy healed up so well from that very unfortunate incident." Henry put on his hat and strode onto the back stoop.

"Lucius, where are you lad? We've got a bunch of things to catch you up on before we all plunge into our day." The overseer trilled this out over the garden in the direction of the workers' huts. Dead silence came back ominously.

“Lucius, the day is getting away on us. Anybody seen Lucius?” Henry called this out to a pod of workers in the garden.

“Uh, no sir. No sign of that boy yet today. He might still be lying in, healing up and all.” A grizzled man bleated this out uncertainly.

The overseer walked quickly to the hut of Lucius, and found the door ajar. He pivoted quickly, and looked down the edges of the huts in the direction of the river.

“Oh, no! I could have predicted this.....damn!!” Henry pounded the edge of one of the huts with his fist.

A flurry of activity ensued, with the master being called from his bed and the unleashing of the four dogs, who were now baying ferociously. The master and overseer allowed the beasts to sniff heavily around Lucius’ hut, and the foam-flecked entourage quickly took itself off towards the Haw in a roil of sound and emotion.

X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X

Three hours later they returned, frustrated and livid. They had criss-crossed the muddy Haw River several times chasing the scent of the fleeing young man, but the trail had gone cold a mile or so north of the farm. The dogs were frustrated, snapping at each other, reflecting the moods of their human handlers.

“Alright, I want all field workers standing at attention beside the garden.” Master John was wild-eyed with anger, and held his aggravated right hand gingerly by his side. “Lucius has run away, and one or more of you either helped him or know where he’s gone.” An uncomfortable silence ensued while the workers quickly and obediently congregated.

“No sir, we don’t know nothing about this until now.” A tall slender worker said this calmly and coolly.

“I doubt that very much. Fine, there will be a sizable reward for anybody who has information. No work in the fields for a week for anyone who can tell me who helped Lucius.” A pregnant silence commenced.

“Alright, you bastards! Henry, three lashes for them all, until someone talks. On their bare backs, men and women.” The master’s voice rose precipitously, and was followed by a loud protest.

“Quiet, or I’ll get Henry to dole out five lashes each! Bare your backs!” The master shook his fist, and the assembled workers started to remove their shirts and blouses. The women covered their breasts with their arms, while Henry stood off to one side, rubbing his head.

“Henry, start with the men. We’ll see if three lashes improves any of their memories before we move on to the women.” The master nodded roughly towards Henry.

“I don’t think I can do this, sir. I’m afraid I disagree with this punishment.” Henry spoke slowly and resolutely.

“Well, I can’t do it with this bloody bugged hand of mine. So you will do it, if you want to stay as overseer of this enterprise.” The master’s lips set themselves in a hard line.

“If you’re lashing the field workers, then you’ll have to lash us house workers as well.” Mama, Ophelia and Eliza stepped down from the back stoop. They swiftly pulled off their blouses, and quickly turned their backs in the direction of Henry.

“Sir, I...” The overseer’s voice drifted off as he saw the master look in the direction of Ophelia. His eyes ravished the smoothness of her bare back, and ogled the side swell of her breasts as she stood there calmly and unashamed.

“To hell with all of you!” Master John turned in defeat and trudged back towards the house, holding his right hand awkwardly and with considerable pain and discomfort.

Finding the Way



He knew the first twelve hours would be critical. He needed to run and put as much distance as possible between himself and the pack of dogs that would be sniffing out his trail and trying to bear down on him with gnashing of teeth and foaming of mouth. He figured with some luck he might have eight hours or so before his absence would be detected, and he knew that was not a lot of gap time for a scared young man who had only once been off the farm. And he knew if he was caught and resisted capture, it could mean death. But he wasn’t quite prepared to die, so this realization spurred him on to run and keep running.

As soon as he got to the river's edge he instinctively knew he had to cross it to throw the canine brutes off his trail. And not a slow crossing across a series of stepping stones, but an immersive wading that would send his scent downstream. So he took off his rough leather field boots and threw them in his pack, and started the process of wading the river in the very limited light. He almost fell several times due to rock hazards and sediment depressions, but he kept himself upright and eventually made it to the opposite bank of the slowly moving river. He scrambled up from the riverbank and found the outline of a rough trail running alongside the river, perhaps fifty feet into the woods.

Ophelia had told him the nuggets of wisdom passed along by the store clerk from Pittsboro. The goal was to get to Canada, way up north, where slavery didn't exist. So one had to follow the North Star, which he knew well from years of looking up at it on warm Summer nights from the edges of the tobacco fields. And if you were in a forest or if it was a cloudy night, you could always look for mushrooms growing on the sides of a tree, as they always grew on the north side. Generally travel at night, and stay off main roads to avoid detection by sheriffs or slavecatchers. Lay low in the forest during the day, getting some rest and foraging for any food that might cross your path. Drink out of fast-flowing streams, where the water would be its purest. And listen to your inner voice to find if someone offering help could be trusted.

For five hours he ran pretty much steady, not so much running but a loping jog that allowed him to keep an eye out for any large roots or boulders on the trail path that would provide tripping hazards. Lucius kept an ear cocked for the sounds of a following passel of dogs, but nothing materialized. He did hear the odd barking of a lone dog from a farmstead as he moved along, but nothing more than that. The trail was rougher in some patches than others, but he slowed down and navigated the obstacles and then picked up speed when the going became smoother. Towns along the river were non-existent in this section of the state, and all farms kept their back forty adjoining the river as a woodlot so he in essence was navigating a ribbon of green forest as he proceeded northwards.

As dawn brought light to the sky he felt a pang of indecision. He was getting tired and needed to rest. But he also knew that every mile he put between himself and the master and his dogs would be of great value. Deciding to stop for a bit and think things over, he pulled out his sack and ate a heel of bread that Mama had left for him the previous afternoon. Lucius lay down on a soft bed of pine needles and felt himself being drawn into a deep sleep. One hour later, with more light in the sky filtering through the forest trees, he was nudged awake by a tall, older man standing over him with a spear. Lucius woke with a start and put out his hands in a defensive posture.

"I bear no ill will to you, young man. I have simply come to the river to do some fishing, and have crossed your path. I am Blackfeather, of the Saponi Nation. What is your name?" The native man dropped his spear, and stood erect with his shoulders back.

"Lucius...Lucius." The young black man looked on warily. "Are you a slave, or a free man?"

"I am what the white man calls an Indian, and I am most definitely free. My people were here well before the white man came in with their farms and their crops and their slaves." The fisherman picked up his spear and looked down calmly at Lucius.

"I am a slave. I was a slave. But I desire to be like you, a free man. And to have my children be free, as well. And so I have run away, just one day ago. I need to go north to Canada, but I'm not exactly sure how to get there. And my owner will be coming after me." Lucius felt his hands trembling.

"Then I need to help you. My people came down from the north many moons ago. We have been beaten down by the white man, but some of us still remain, living at the edge of the forest and hunting and fishing in the old ways. And we are a people who moves with the seasons, in tune with Mother Earth. So we know the old trails, where they go and how to follow them. Come, we will run this trail together in the old way. When we are hungry, we will stop and spear fish. I will show you how to make a fire to cook the fish. And then we will run some more. Follow me." Blackfeather turned and ran northwards.

At the end of sunlight that day, they came to a well-worn trail near the headwaters of the Haw River. The native man stood erect, with one hand on Lucius' shoulder.

"I need to return to my squaw and children. This is the Ocone Path, an old trail that goes west near the big mountains. You will see another river after a while, the Yadkin. Where it runs out, there will soon be another native trail that runs north. Many hunters of the Catawba Nation will be in that area. Tell them Blackfeather of the Saponi Nation has sent you, and that you seek freedom by way of the New River and Southern Trail. They will help you, Lucius. And may you be safe, and free." The elder raised his hand in salute, and ran off to the east.

The Beauty of Darkness



Not long after Blackfeather had disappeared to the east, and not long after Lucius had eaten the last morsel of fish caught from the headwaters of the Haw River, a feeling of complete fatigue and exhaustion enveloped the young man. His lash wounds, largely healed, started to draw a bit and he realized he needed to find a place to lie down and sleep. Rest would be important for physical healing and recuperation, but also to help him stay mentally sharp so he could anticipate danger and avoid detection.

After a mile he came to a high ridge, overlooking the river. A few Carolina hemlocks graced the high point, echoing their brothers in the large mountains to the west. The trees had bequeathed a bed of soft needles to the forest floor beneath over a number of years, and this is where Lucius laid down his weary head. He rolled once or twice, getting accustomed to the ground's surface, and then promptly fell sound asleep.

His dream consciousness entered a softly rolling field, full of fledgling tobacco plants where he worked a hoe amongst its rows. The sun was shining but a sweet breeze was blowing, and he looked around without a care in the world. His head turned in the direction of the house, and he saw the nubile figure of a young woman come out on the back stoop. She was preoccupied momentarily with some task, but it then appeared that she saw the young man out in the field. It appeared to be Ophelia, with her trademark mane of striking hair and her willowy figure under a white cotton shift dress. The woman walked towards him but kept her head turned away. He leaned on his hoe, grinning broadly and waiting for her to come within arm's reach. When she did, Lucius reached out and pulled her in, chortling a bit at his forwardness. The young woman looked up and smiled, and he felt his body tense up. It wasn't Ophelia, but someone who looked reasonably similar to her. Attractive without a doubt, but with a distinctly different energy. Less feral, less saucy. The dreaming Lucius felt a deep sense of loss as he relaxed his grip, and the shift of energy created by this caused him to quickly rise up to the waking state.

He rolled agonizingly over to one side, and rubbed his hands over his face. It was the middle of the night, and the forest was beautifully quiet. Hours before the birds would rise and start delivering their gifts of birdsong, he could only hear the muted scurrying of a few nocturnal scavengers. Lucius looked up through the hemlock tree canopy, and could see hundreds of stars twinkling their light down upon him. This cheered him, and he took himself down to the river's edge and scooped up handful after handful of fresh water for drinking and for washing of his face and neck. He looked into the river, seeing the play of shadow and leaned in to hear the sounds associated with it passing by him. He picked up his bag, straightened his back, and walked upriver. For the next few days, this would be his routine as he walked the remaining stretch of the Haw. Sleeping during the day in a heavily treed area, foraging for food at dusk, and then walking the trail through the night. When he traversed the area north of Greensboro he started to hear wagon traffic during the days and had to cross a number of roads by night. He always ran these segments, and then walked at a moderate pace when he was back safely in the dark woods. He realized he was probably well beyond the range of his farm's dog pack, but he had no doubts the master would be trying to track him down in a number of other ways. But for the time being, he set these worries aside, and simply walked. In that area between the Haw River and the Yadkin River he lost the protection of the forest adjoining the water course. So he took to finding shelter in the green bands of vegetation surrounding the tributary creeks of the farming areas, and then

walked stealthily westward on the edges of the rural roadways, using an inner compass to stay within striking distance of the Indian trail that ran intermittently through the settled area. More noise and traffic alerted him to be extra cautious in the area above Winston-Salem, and he picked his steps skillfully westward to the protective presence of the Yadkin. Each step propelled him an incremental bit deeper into a belief that he would soon be fully free.

A Contested Trail



After a few more days of nighttime walking and running, Lucius came upon the Yadkin River as it bent westward towards the great mountains. The native trail effortlessly resumed its embrace with the supporting watercourse, rising and falling on the undulations of forest that bordered both sides of the river. He knew he would be getting close to the intersecting trail that would take him northward to freedom. The young man kept returning to the worry that he might overshoot this trail junction, and

keep heading westward into uncertain and potentially dangerous territory. The trail and surrounding land had been very quiet for the past several days, with no sounds reaching him from adjoining fields and no individuals crossing his path. So he moved on, his eyes nervously looking ahead for the anticipated trail and for any possible dangers or obstacles in his way.

At one point the river wove around some rocky shoals, and an eddy current created a backflow of water on the north side of the river. From his position on the bank he could see that several large fish had been trapped in the eddy zone where the water depth was quite shallow. Feeling a rumbling in his stomach, he looked around for a fallen tree branch that he could commandeer as a makeshift tool for trapping one or more of these specimens. Lucius set his bag down on the bank and slowly waded into the knee-deep water, his eyes fixated on the largest fish. He jabbed at it with his branch spear, nicking the side of the fish and causing it to thrash violently in the oscillating water. Lucius reached in with both hands and was able to get a slimy grasp of its scaly flesh, enabling him to hoist it up onto the riverbank. The fish flopped wildly on the ground, threatening to edge closer to the beckoning water and its entrained oxygen. The young man gave a focused thrust of his reclaimed branch into the gill area of the fish, and its destiny with an open fire was assured.

An hour later, after a heartily consumed meal of charred fish flesh, a satisfied Lucius reclined at the edge of the trail. His eyelids were heavy, and the consumption of the large and impromptu supper was leading to the inevitability of sleep. But right before he drifted off into full slumber, a small stone hit him in the side of his left shoulder. He rolled in a modest level of agony, and a larger rock hit the ground beside him and bounced into his back. Coming quickly to waking consciousness, Lucius jumped up and hid behind a loblolly pine. A few more stones sailed through the air, hitting the trunk of the pine and its low-hanging branches, and then the volley stopped abruptly. Heart pounding, the young man peered out from behind his sylvan shield. He saw three shadowy figures lurking in the underbrush on the other side of the river. He wasn't sure who they were, but he quickly concluded they were more than a minor threat to his progress along the trail. A few more rounds of stones were hurled in the direction of his shelter, but he kept his head low and only snuck a peek when it was dead quiet. At one point he saw a tall brown man stand and wind up what looked like some kind of leather slingshot, and then a stone plonked into the flesh of the tree just above his head. After a half hour of this intermittent stone slinging, the air went quiet. Lucius saw the three figures mysteriously slip away to the east, walking in the forest as if it was their home.

He sat on his haunches behind the loblolly pine for another half hour. He had seen them go downriver, and he knew he was going upriver. So he quickly scrambled down the bank for his bag, and hightailed it westward, running hard for the better part of the next fifteen minutes. His heart was racing, and he knew he needed to slow up to pace himself, as it seemed that imminent danger had passed him by. Lucius came up to a bit of a clearing, and a short yet powerfully built native man stepped out onto the trail from behind a pile of large rocks.

"Please, I mean you no harm!" The young man could see two leather slings hanging from the stranger's waist.

“What is your purpose on the trail?” This was said softly but firmly.

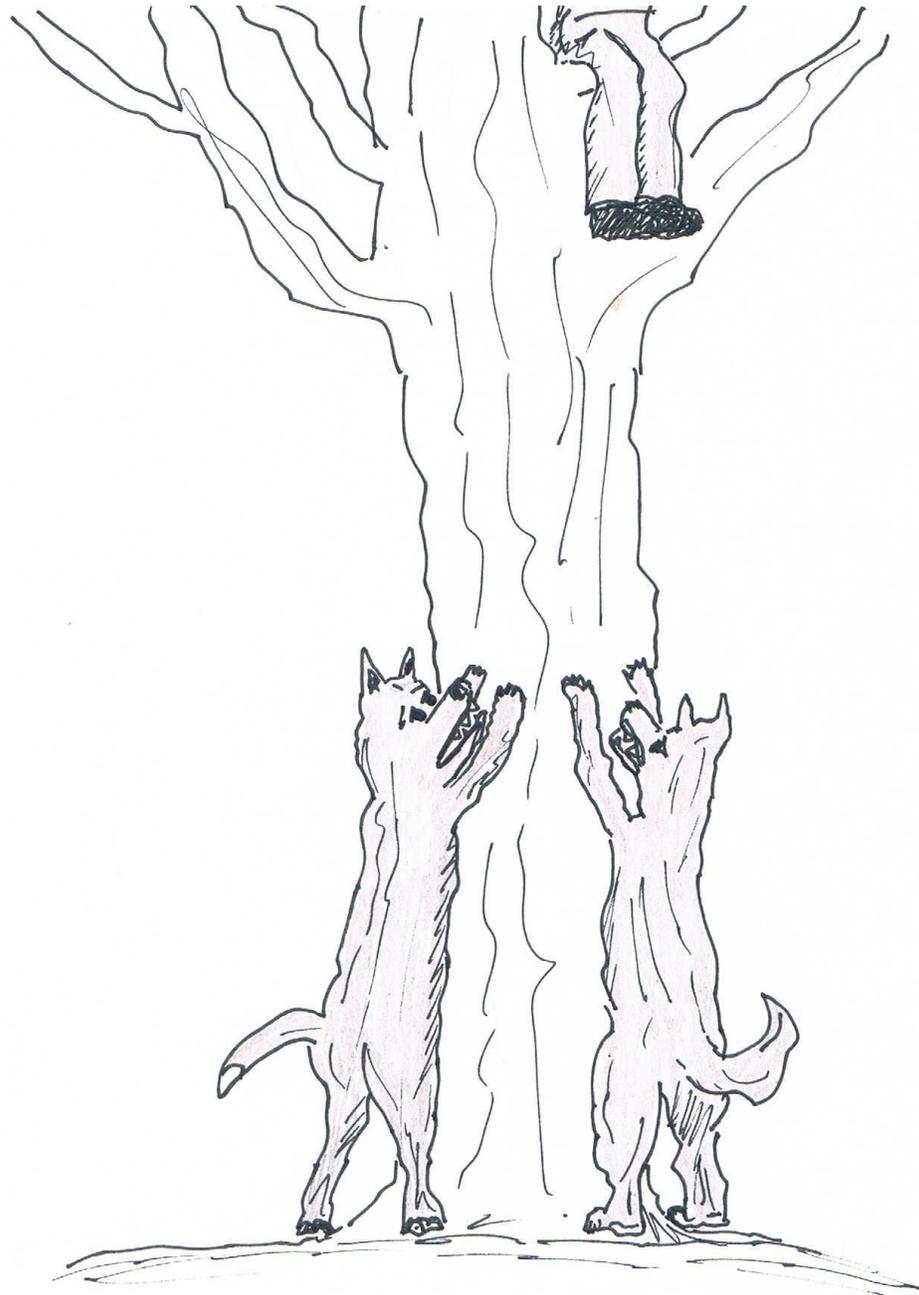
“I am a slave, or I was a slave, now running away to freedom. I’m looking for the trail to take me north. Blackfeather of the Saponi Nation told me I would find his brothers from the Catawba Nation, and they would be able to direct me. But not far back, I had three men try to attack me with their slingshots.” The runaway expressed this in a quavering voice, not sure if he was addressing a friend or foe.

“I am Orion of the Catawba Nation. Those three renegades are Cherokee, slipping east to penetrate into the lands of the Catawba. I will deal with them later. But I hold no malice towards you. Blackfeather is a noble warrior, and any friend of his is a friend of mine. This pile of rocks is the marker for the New River trail, and I stand here as a guard of this trail. Turn right and go north, my friend. Several days journey on foot will take you to the territory of the Shawnee nation. They are honorable people and will be sympathetic to your plight. It will not be the first time they have guided a black man along the waters, along the *nepi*, of the New River. Through the narrows, with the big mountains on all sides. A special and sacred place.” The brave set his jaw.

“Thank you, sir. Thank you, much obliged.” Tears came to Lucius’ eyes.

“But getting past the mountains is only half of your journey. You will not be safe on the other side. Keep your eyes sharp and be fleet of foot. But know that the Great Spirit will guide your steps.” A gentle nod of the head and an outstretched hand guided the runaway to the next leg of his journey.

Running From the Pack



A few days of additional journeying had taken the young man over the state line into Virginia, but nothing much changed in terms of the nature surrounding the trail and that fact that slaves were also used here as the unpaid lubricant to the state's rural operations. Every now and then he would hear voices drifting in from adjoining fields and the odd dog barking, but generally things seemed quiet and bucolic.

But a day later, as the sun was setting and Lucius was starting out on another overnight of trail walking, a loud commotion emanated up ahead from the forested corridor hugging the trail's edge. Another

young black man was running pell-mell through the bush, dodging trees and looking anxiously over his shoulder. Fifty yards behind him was a duo of snarling and angry dogs, barking loudly and gnashing their teeth as they closed in on their prey. The young man looked behind once again, and saw that the feral canines would soon be on his back. Mere yards from where Lucius stood immobilized in fear, the pursued fugitive leapt up and grabbed a branch of a tree, pulling himself even higher with several pulses of his muscular arms. Collecting himself, Lucius reciprocated these actions and pulled himself up into a safe position in a tree not so far away from the swirling action.

“Hey friend, what have you done to attract the attention of these beasts?” Lucius called this out over the dogs’ barking, as they circled the tree of their target, lunging upwards on their back legs.

“Oh, my girl and I ran away from our farm this evening. A bad, mean master had us planning this for months. We didn’t get much lead time, before the overseer found us out and released these damn dogs! We’re a couple of miles away from the farm, but they tracked us down good. I got separated a while back from my girl. She tripped and fell when we heard the dogs getting close. Hope she got up into a tree and is safe for now.” The young man shook his head sideways, and let out a hopeful grin.

“My name’s Lucius. I’m on the run as well. So what do you reckon we do now?” Lucius’ eyes bulged out a bit.

“Clay’s my name. Pleased to meet you, Lucius. Well, we can’t just hang here all night. The overseer has a bad leg, but he’ll follow the sounds of the barking and get here soon enough, and he’ll have a gun. So he’ll talk us down and take us back to the farm. He’ll have me and the gal, and you in the bargain. It’ll be a pretty good night, in his estimation, well worth his trouble.” The young black man sighed deeply, while the dogs kept up their barking and growling.

“Then we got to act, and quickly. You got a knife?” Lucius took his knife out of his bag, and waggled it in the direction of the other tree.

“Yessir, I do. Pinched it a while back, figuring it’d be helpful if we bolted. What are you thinking?” Clay looked down nervously.

“They’re focused on you since they’ve followed your scent. Shimmy down a bit and let them think they can reach you. They’ll get all hepped up, and won’t even notice when I hit the ground. I’ll come up from behind and drive my knife into one of them before they even sense me.” Lucius steeled his gaze.

“Okay, brother, but that still will leave one nasty brute to contend with. He’ll turn on you and have his teeth in your throat before you know it. And then he’ll come back to wait for me to drop.” Clay’s voice took on a tremulous tone.

“No, I’ll start beating him on the head with that big stick laying down there beside the trail. He’ll be hurt and distracted by that, while you drop down and sneak up on him, driving your knife home. We’ll each be able to brag that we took down a mean dog with our knives!” Lucius cocked his eyebrows.

“Worth a try, man. I can feel the overseer getting closer, so here goes.” The young man edged downwards, and the dogs’ baying became even more rabid.

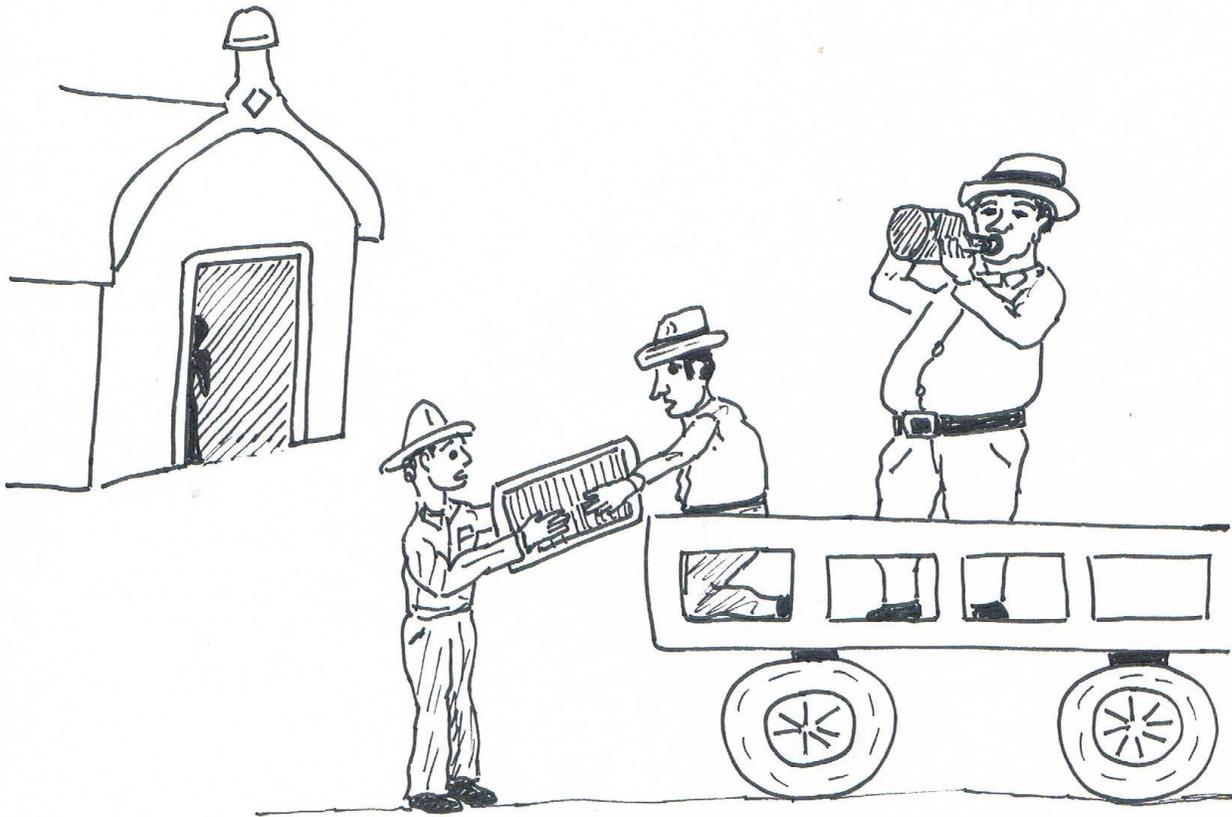
Lucius dropped to the ground silently, picking up the sturdy piece of branch in his left hand and brandishing the stout knife in his right. He crept up on the spluttering dogs, eyeing the larger one as his prey. He was a full yard behind the beast, when it sensed him and turned. Lucius quickly drove his knife into the side of the dog’s neck, twisting the blade and seeing blood spurt out under pressure. It resisted for a second, attempting to reach out and bite down on its assailant, but its body quickly went quiet and slumped forward. The other dog turned and jumped, going for the head of Lucius. He gave it a solid smack across its eyes with the gnarly branch, temporarily blinding it, but angering it even more. He repeated the slash across the canine’s face, and saw Clay drop down athletically and plunge his knife into the back of the dog’s skull. Its ending was also swift and both young men stood there, breathing hard, with two dog corpses twitching at their feet.

“Lordy, that was something. Lucius, you saved my life!” Clay came up and embraced his compatriot.

“We got to run that way on the trail. Run hard, and run now. Your overseer will be coming.” Lucius stuck his knife back in his bag.

“No, brother, I’ve got to go back for my girl. If I can find her before the overseer gets her, we’ll try hard to catch up with you. But you better hightail it, ‘cause you just never know.” Clay ran off back into the forest, leaving Lucius to move on northward.

A Tightening Trap



Weeks on the trail had toughened Lucius to an even greater degree, and he was now able to lope along in the dark at a steady clip and keep clear of any tripping hazards. His lash wounds were now fully healed, although he would have a criss-crossing network of scar tissue on his back for life as an emblem of the cruelty of Master John. But every step northward gave him an incremental boost in energy, and he felt refreshed and motivated as he moved along the New River trail.

Just south of Narrows, Virginia, he came upon a small Shawnee encampment beside the river. Instinctively, he knew he needed to stand by its edge and wait to be welcomed or signaled to circumnavigate the camp. Within minutes, a sharp-eyed Shawnee brave came and beckoned him to enter the area, where perhaps a dozen native people congregated around a small fire. Wordlessly, he was offered a piece of cooked fish and then a piece of venison. After this was ingested, two braves stood up and signaled Lucius to follow them. After several hours over steep and unmarked trails running high above rushing water pounding into large rocks along the course of the New, they came to a flat area with steep mountains on both sides. The natives pointed to the north, broad smiles creasing their weathered faces. Lucius knew he was back onto a section of the trail that he could handle on his own, and that the Shawnee had helped him immensely, so he touched his hand to his heart and watched them retreat to the south.

As he progressed northwards the mountains became less daunting, either through decreased elevation or increased familiarity with the landscape. After several nights of travel, between Fayetteville and Charleston, he crossed under several wood trestle bridges that conveyed roads connecting the towns in this mountainous part of Virginia. Roads had made him nervous when he was back in Carolina, as he knew that traffic moving along them would increase his chances of being seen and apprehended. One night, under a creaking older bridge, he heard shouts and the rise and fall of agitated voices. Lucius immediately hid behind a large boulder by the side of the river and turned his ear upwards towards the roadway. The store clerk from Pittsboro had told Ophelia that a fugitive needed to keep a wary eye out for the first signs of a slave patrol. These patrollers, or 'paddy rollers', were typically ruthless mercenaries looking to capture any black runaway and sell them at auction. If there was a bounty out for a particular runaway, they would be extra keen to capture the slave in question and return them south for a sizable reward. So Lucius wasn't sure, but the loud voices sounded to him like the members of a slave patrol. He hunkered down a little bit deeper until the posse had passed and the air became quiet once again.

Stepping quickly and noiselessly along the trail north of the bridge, he decided to run briskly for a bit to put more distance between him and the potential slave patrollers. Fifteen minutes later, he heard the rumble of a fast-advancing thunderstorm. Lucius had been lucky with weather up until now, with only mild and intermittent rains disturbing his progress over the last few weeks. But a thunderstorm had always put fear in his heart, as he remembered a revered old field hand being hit by lightning during harvest time when he was just a boy. Light filled the sky with a purplish-white arc, and the sound of the strike in the forest came just a few seconds later. Lucius saw a bit of a clearing to his right, and the silhouette of a barn perhaps half a mile across a field. He hated to give up the security of the trail and its enveloping forest, but the mental image of the field hand crumpling over in mortal pain came to him, and he struck out across the field. The thunder intensified, and Lucius thought he saw a lightning strike one field over from where he ran. He picked up his pace, and raced up to the barn, opening an old wooden door and ducking inside.

The interior was musty and quiet, with hay stored on the floor of the barn and up in a hay mow beyond a rickety ladder. Lucas looked around and thought he would just bed down in one of the corners for the night, and ride out the storm in safety. But then he heard the trundling sound of a wagon along a nearby road, along with a number of raised voices.

"Criminy, did you tie up the horse soundly? She could get spooked and take off on us after another strike of lightning, and we'd have a long walk ahead of us to get back to town!" A large-bellied young man came into the barn, shouting over his shoulder to two henchmen hot on his heels.

"Yeah, good enough, I reckon. It started to pour like blazes while I was trying to secure her and the wagon, so I didn't feel like standing around fussing with the rope and getting soaked to the skin. Did you bring in the whiskey?" A mean-faced, skinny young man shucked off his coat and flapped moisture off his hat.

“Yep, though the jug is getting close to the bottom. You boys are heavier drinkers than I thought you’d be, figured I’d have a bit more of the corn for myself.” The largest of the trio popped the cork off the whiskey jug and took a good draught.

“I’ll remind you both, we are working. And once the storm is over we’ll get back out and keep looking for runaways.” The third young man seemed to be the leader of the patrol, and nervously ran his hand through a mop of greasy hair. “These bastards travel at night, thinking they can slip by us under cover of darkness. But we’re smarter than they are, right boys?”

“Well, if we are so damn clever, we might have thought of bringing a second jug of corn mash! Give me that whisky, you fat fool!” The skinny fellow tried to wrest the porcelain container away from the overweight lad, who held his grip firmly.

“Boys, settle down! You’re a bit drunker than I like for hired hands...” The patrol manager went up to them and cuffed them both on their ears. They protested with a loud squeal, and the lean lad attempted once more to grab the whiskey jug. The near-empty container slipped out of the chunky fellow’s hands and crashed to the floor in a spray of whiskey and shards of sharp ceramic. The trio of men entered a drunken dance of half-thrown punches and incoherent profanities.

Lucius used the opportune commotion to quietly tread from a darkened corner out the door, which had blown open in the storm. He would risk a lightning strike in the open field over being trapped inside with the evil and incompetent trio. Halfway to the river trail he looked back towards the barn, and gleefully observed the hastily secured horse and its wagon trotting away jerkily towards town without the benefit of a human driver.

Down River



Lucius ran, and kept running for the next ten nights. The experience of being trapped in that musty barn with the three patrollers had rattled him, and the ambient thunderstorm had only compounded the

trauma. He had been living rough in the woods for some time now, with scant food provisions and a tremendous physical load on his body. He looked down at his core and saw a mass of ribs poking out through his skin, and when he saw his reflection in a side pool of the river one morning, he realized his face had taken on a gaunt cast. The experience of running away had changed him. He had gone inside his head for the first bit, as a protective mechanism to deny the pain in his body felt from the stresses of escaping. But now he largely floated outside his head, connecting instead to nature around him and holding a child-like belief that he would be alright in the end. The isolation of the experience, and its attendant uncertainties, had made him jumpy and alert. He knew he could outrun almost any man, and if cornered he could do a lot of damage with his knife. But he knew instinctively that the best strategy was to anticipate danger and stay well away from it. Holding that awareness front of mind, he continued to plunge northward.

The New River ran into the Kanawha River, and at some point north of Charleston the Indian trail sprouted a side branch that ran away from the river towards some rolling hills to the northwest. He pulled up in the dark, and listened to his inner voice for direction. Lucius felt a nudge towards the side trail, from an inner knowing that this path would lead him to freedom more directly. Daniel the store clerk had told Ophelia that the largest barrier to gaining your freedom was a wide and fast-flowing river. He had been told by his house worker confidante that this river separated the area of the country where slaves were held from an area where no slaves existed. But the storyteller had shared that you still needed to be on guard once you got across the big river. This was because patrollers and bounty hunters could cross the river and pull back a runaway slave. Or that people just across the river might sympathize with family or friends down south who owned slaves.

He could smell and hear the river before he saw it. There was an earthiness and a buoyancy to the air as he walked along, and he then heard the rhythmic language of moving water. And with a break in the trees, he finally saw the majestic Ohio River. His pulse quickened and he felt a frisson of fear go up his spine, as he gauged that the flow volume and speed were considerably faster than any of the rivers that had sustained him on his journey north. Lucius quickly resolved that this fear could turn into a form of paralysis, preventing him from making the attempt to cross the river and get safely to the other side. And he reckoned the general area would have some lurking dangers, as the patrollers would correctly surmise that runaways would be crossing the watercourse.

He went down to the edge of the river and looked out at its fast-moving currents. Taking a deep breath, he contemplated removing his clothes and storing them in his bag, and wading in to swim across its considerable width. But he knew he wasn't a strong swimmer and concluded that he had come a long way to flounder and drown in this turbid watercourse. Lucius spied a number of large branches on the water's edge, and a weeping willow tree grew nearby with a proliferation of sinewy branches gracefully reaching down to the earth. Brandishing his knife, and using some basic construction knowledge taught to him by Henry the overseer, he started to cut the flexible branches to act as ropes to lash the branches to form a makeshift raft. An hour later he had a reasonable assemblage formed, and put his bag onto it and waded into the shallows, easing himself onto its flat surface.

The river caught the makeshift wood structure and after a few wobbles, Lucius found himself coursing downstream. He soon realized he would have to paddle sideways, if only intermittently, to get to the far bank. Lucius leaned over and did a sideways swipe with his strong arms every minute or so, and the combined action caused him to incrementally move from the southern side of the river to the northern side. The current was very swift at the river's mid-point, and he lost his nerve momentarily. The wee raft started to tip and take on some degree of water. Lucius stopped paddling and gripped both sides of his craft, gradually righting himself and floating to the upper swells of the current. Moments later he resumed his paddling motions, and half an hour later he felt the raft come adrift on a small sandbar a mere ten feet offshore of the northern bank. He grabbed his bag and the edge of the raft, and hauled both to the safety of the riverbank.

"Welcome to Ohio, brother." An older black man sat nearby on the ground, leaning back into a broad tree trunk.

"Thank you, sir. That was quite the experience getting across that big ol' river." Lucius wiped beads of sweat from his brow.

"Now don't get too relaxed, y'hear. Patrols are in the area, and they are mean bastards. They don't bother me no more, as I'm too old for auction and I have my freeman papers. But I can still help a brother on the run. So take my raft, the one tied up over there, and float down the river towards Portsmouth. This here be South Point, the southernmost point in Ohio. That's why these paddy rollers are thicker than fleas on a dog. Get down past Portsmouth, and then paddle up the current of the Scioto River a bit. People up that way will help you. Black and white. But be careful around Portsmouth itself, too many of its genteel white citizenry think slavery is a fine institution." The older gentleman puffed on a corn cob pie, warming to his subject.

"But that's a sizable raft. And I have no money to buy it from you." Lucius frowned, his eyes tearful.

"Jump in, it's my gift to you, brother. My grandson and I will lash up another good raft in under a day of work. But it'll be work that we want to do, not work that someone is telling us to do. That little water bug barely got you across the river, and it'll sink before you get a quarter of the way to Portsmouth. Now get going young sir, as I hear some horses a'coming. And throw that little raft into the current, so I can say I haven't seen anybody cross the river tonight. And that's the truth, y'hear?" The old man gave a broad wink to Lucius, as the runaway unleashed the sturdy raft and jumped in it, the currents of the Ohio River quickly whisking him away from danger.

A Railroad with No Rails



“Brother, don’t be stopping here? A few patrollers are slaking their thirst in that tavern up on the corner. They’re unkempt and unruly bastards, and plenty mean as well. They’ll pick you off in three seconds flat, and then sell you back across the river. Saw it happen with my own eyes to three po’ folks, just yesterday afternoon.” A black man in his forties, turning prematurely grey, shooed Lucius away from a rough-and-tumble dock just upstream of the confluence of the Scioto and the Ohio.

“This be Portsmouth?” Lucius steadied his raft while holding onto one of the dock’s piers.

“Yessir, and a decent town it is, with the exception of the slave catchers and bounty hunters and the people who think they’re doing a good job. But it also has some free blacks here and there, watching out for one another. But you’ll be safer a bit upriver, say Lucasville or even a bit further. Those folks up there will take good care of you, and put you on the railroad without rails. When you land at Lucasville, ask for Tyler. Tell him that Henry down in Portsmouth sent you.” The man stole a nervous glance over his shoulder towards the tavern.

“Much obliged, Henry. But I’ve only been on the Scioto for all of ten minutes, and I’m having a devil of a time fighting the current. At this rate, I’ll never get up to Lucasville.” Lucius staggered a bit as his craft bobbed up and down.

“Just so happen to have a few old paddles around for this very purpose. Old, but solid. Carved by a Shawnee who lives outside of town in the woods. Leave it with Tyler and he’ll make sure it gets back to me. But go now, y’hear?” Henry offered over a sturdy wooden paddle and nodded his head upriver.

Lucius kneeled in his raft, being careful to distribute his weight somewhat evenly to avoid a tipping incident. He liked the way the paddle felt in his hands, with its smooth grip and considerable heft. He stayed near the edge of the Scioto, avoiding the faster currents in the middle of the river. But every now and then he would come upon a protruding dock and he would circumnavigate around these carefully and then keep on paddling upstream.

It was early morning, and some of the docks were quiet and some had the odd person working on or around them. After a few moments he came upon a young woman, dressed in a beautiful taffeta gown and carrying a parasol. She looked at Lucius quizzically, and appeared as if she was about to address him. The young man admired her beauty and poise but kept silent, only offering up a broad smile. Around a bend he came to another dock, where a short, stout man was stacking wooden barrels on top of each other. Lucius anticipated some kind of danger immediately, and picked up his paddling pace and gave the dock a wider berth.

“Hey boy, you look hungry! Come ashore and I’ll fix you some breakfast.” The man’s tone was syrupy, but his eyes were flinty-eyed and he had a cruel set to his face.

“Thank you, sir, but I’m plenty fine as is.” Lucius offered up a tight smile, but kept paddling swiftly.

“A strong young buck like you can always eat a second breakfast. Some eggs and bacon, all fried up real nice. C’mon, sit a spell.” This was called out loudly to a rapidly disappearing Lucius.

The next few hours were quiet and uneventful, working upstream against the current, with heavy trees on all sides. A few clearings in the bush started to appear, and then he came up to a series of well-maintained docks that each had three or four young black men working on them.

“Looking for a Mr. Tyler?” Lucius called this out expectantly.

“Tyler’s on the third and last dock. Big guy.” One of the young men smiled and pointed upriver.

“Would you be Mr. Tyler?” Lucius had paddled up to the third dock, and spied a tall, muscular man pouring some kind of grain into a weathered barrel.

“Young sir, that would indeed be me. Who are you, and where do you hail from?” The large man came over to the edge of the dock.

“I’m Lucius, from down near Pittsboro, North Carolina. I’m on the run, sir. Henry down in Portsmouth told me to ask you for help. And I really need help, to get up to Canada. To be free.” The young man unloaded all of this in a nervous torrent of words.

“Well, I live here in Lucasville, and I’m free. But I hear what you’re saying. Only up in Canada will you be truly free. The slave owners down south seem to be getting more desperate, hiring even more patrollers and bounty hunters. And cracking down hard on their workers so they don’t even think about running. But it don’t seem to be working much, ‘cause we’ve been helping more and more brothers and sisters get further north. Folks just like you, Lucius.” Tyler leaned down and offered his hand.

“This was a good raft, and this was an even better paddle. Got it from Henry.” Lucius hesitated, standing wobbily on the raft.

“Just leave it where it is, the boys will lash it up and it’ll all be transported downriver for use by the next poor soul. C’mon now, we need to get you somewhere safe.” Tyler reached down once again and pulled Lucius up on the dock as if he were made of air.

They walked along a street starting to become busier with people commencing the rhythms of their day. Most of the people were white, and they uniformly gave broad smiles and lively greetings to the two young men as they walked past.

“Taking you out to the edge of Lucasville, to the Smithers farm. Good Quaker folks, you can rest up in their barn and they’ll feed you right. Put some meat back on those bones, as you look as if you’ve been existing on berries.” Tyler grinned over at Lucius.

“That’s pretty much the truth, afraid to say.” The young man shook his head glumly.

“And they know what to do if some patrollers show up at their farm. You’ll be shown a hiding place in the barn, and you should get in there quick if you ever hear raised voices. And when the time is right they’ll give you a little wagon ride, in their wagon with a false bottom. No one will suspect you’re in there, and they’ll take you further upriver to some Friends near Chillicothe, and those folks will take you to other safe stations on the way up to Columbus. Like a railroad, but with no actual rails. And with no set schedule. But you’ll be well taken care of, Lucius, trust me.” Tyler placed a large mitt of a hand on Lucius’ shoulder as they walked along.

Running on a Real Railroad



His travels from southern Ohio to central Ohio were a far cry from his trail running through Carolina and Virginia. He spent his days on his own in some barn, resting up and digesting the hearty breakfast, lunch and dinner that were typically borne in to him by a good-natured farm kid. Only a couple of times he had heard some kind of commotion out by the farmhouse, and he had retreated deep into the hay mow and had covered himself over with a foot of loose hay as he had been instructed by the patriarch of the farm. After a couple of days rest he would be on the move to a farm five miles or more up the road, either in a wagon with a false bottom or tucked in at the base of a load of loose hay. His handlers would shake hands with him warmly, introduce him to his next set of hosts, and they would then roll off southward in a big cloud of dust.

In just under two weeks he found himself on a small farm on the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio. The owner was a tall, striking man who had three teenaged sons helping him and his wife run the operations of the mixed crop acreage. The family were prolific members of the Quaker Friends' meeting space in Columbus, and had assisted many runaways to freedom. In fact, they viewed this as their calling, their real work.

"Lucius, how are you feeling?" The patriarch came into the barn one hot late September afternoon.

"Right fine, Mr. Caleb, right fine indeed. You folks have been plenty kind to me, and your wife is a mighty fine cook." The young man grinned and patted his belly.

"It's been our pleasure. And you'll be moving on again soon, perhaps as early as tomorrow morning. The Underground Railroad has been working well through southern Ohio, moving you and other freedom seekers slowly and carefully by wagon on roadways. But we're going to try to get you on a real railroad, where a train will fly down the tracks and get you upstate in a day. Winter's coming soon enough, and staying in barns can get pretty drafty and cold." The farmer's eyes sparkled.

"A train ride? A real train ride? It'll be my first time on the rails. But how will I get myself a ticket? I'm afraid I don't have any money." Lucius' voice drifted off.

"Taken care of, I'm happy to say. The Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati Railway has a benefactor named Mr. I. Newton-Pierce. He's bought a bunch of tickets ahead of time, from Columbus on up to Sandusky. They've all got 'INP' written on them, as a bit of a code to the train conductor. If the coast is clear, and there are no patrollers getting on the train, we'll hustle you on and an INP ticket will mean you will be treated well. So get a good night's rest and we'll be in to the station for the 7:55 departure." Caleb nodded amicably and headed out into the sunlight.

The next morning came with a dawn full of buoyancy and promise. The wagon was packed as if for a run into town for supplies, and Lucius slid into its false bottom as the last addition to its contents. Before they rolled away, Caleb had given the young man his rail ticket and two silver dollars, along with some important instructions.

"Now Lucius, listen up well. I will drive slowly by the station about five minutes before the train's departure. The stationmaster, who is also a Quaker, will signal me in a certain way. If there are any patrollers on the train, we will keep rolling and simply try another day. If the coast is clear, I will turn sharp into the station and go around to the west side. We'll open your exit door on the wagon and you will step lively onto the train. It will roll away to the north, and you'll be on your way to Sandusky. When you get there, a blind man will come up to you and ask you to take his arm. Do what he says, and he will tell anybody who asks that you are his houseman. Okay, let's roll." Caleb nodded for Lucius to slide into the wagon.

Thirty minutes later, the conveyance pulled up a block from the training station. Caleb adjusted his reins and looked down the street, seeing the waiting train idling on the track, ready for its imminent departure. He also saw the stationmaster come out onto the front veranda of the station, adjusting his hat and spectacles. Caleb urged the horses on and trained his eyes sharply onto his friend's face. The wagon came abreast of the station and the portly stationmaster looked skyward and beamed a broad smile. Caleb nodded imperceptibly and signaled the horses into a sharp right turn, pulling up on the west side of the station.

"Lucius, you have your bag and your ticket, go straight to the train and board at any open door. God speed, young man." Caleb clapped him on the shoulder and pointed in the direction of the waiting train. Lucius looked around awkwardly, then made a beeline for the center of the train, where a few passengers were climbing up the steps to board.

Inside the station, two dandies were lounging near a window, sharing a flask of whiskey between them. As they saw Lucius climb aboard the train, they turned to look at each other with burning eyes. Thirty seconds later, as the train started to roll out of the Columbus depot, the two young men sprinted to the end car and clambered up its steps.

Lucius settled into a seat and looked around nervously, not exactly sure when he would have to furnish his ticket with 'INP' scrawled boldly across it in red ink. He looked down at his bag, nodded to his surrounding passengers, and leaned back into the comfortable seat. Caleb's eldest teenager had given him his Sunday jacket and it fit well enough, so he sat there looking like a well-dressed young black man on a sojourn to Sandusky.

The train reached its top speed, and the Ohio farm fields flew by as Lucius looked out to their bucolic greenery. But then he felt a dark shadow at his left shoulder.

"Boy, where are your papers?" One of the dandies, a sinewy young man with a cruel mouth, sneered this in the direction of Lucius.

"Uh, left them at home, sir. But I got a ticket to Sandusky. I'm a free man, going up to see my folks." Beads of sweat broke out on Lucius' brow.

"Well, I don't know about that, do you, Harry?" The cruel-mouthed man turned and addressed his companion.

"Nope, sounds like mealy-mouthed nonsense to me, Pete. This buck looks a lot like that sketch on the posters of the runaway from North Carolina. Believe his name was Lucius. His master must really want him back, given the size of the bounty reward. Lucius, is that your name, boy?" The second patroller had a sandy-blonde, bushy moustache that obscured most of his mouth.

"No sir, my name's Caleb. A free man who works up in Sandusky." Lucius looked up with nervous eyes.

"Hmm, I think the resemblance is uncanny to the field slave from Carolina. The illustrators these days, they can really capture the essence of a man." The first patroller reached out and roughly grabbed Lucius by the neck.

"Leave the man alone. He says he's free, so he's free. Go bugger off and drink down your flask, you drunken fools." An imposing young man with a shock of red hair, sat opposite Lucius and glowered at the two patrollers.

"Oh, a smart mouth in our midst. Well, sir, help a runaway at your peril. When this train stops in Bucyrus, I'll pull this slave off the train as well as yourself. The sheriff up there will charge you under violation of the Fugitive Slave Act. You'll do jail time for helping this poor bastard on his illegal journey."

"Shut the hell up, you two. You're in Ohio, not Virginia or Carolina. We don't take kindly to slave patrollers up in these parts, especially ones that threaten jail time!" Another young man jumped up from two rows away, his mouth set in a tight line.

“Yeah, I’ll echo that and more. In fact, I’m going to suggest you two punks need your teeth rearranged. I’m no dentist, but I’ll try my level best.” A husky young man wearing a farm cap popped up from the seat behind Lucius and grabbed the mustachioed patroller by the throat.

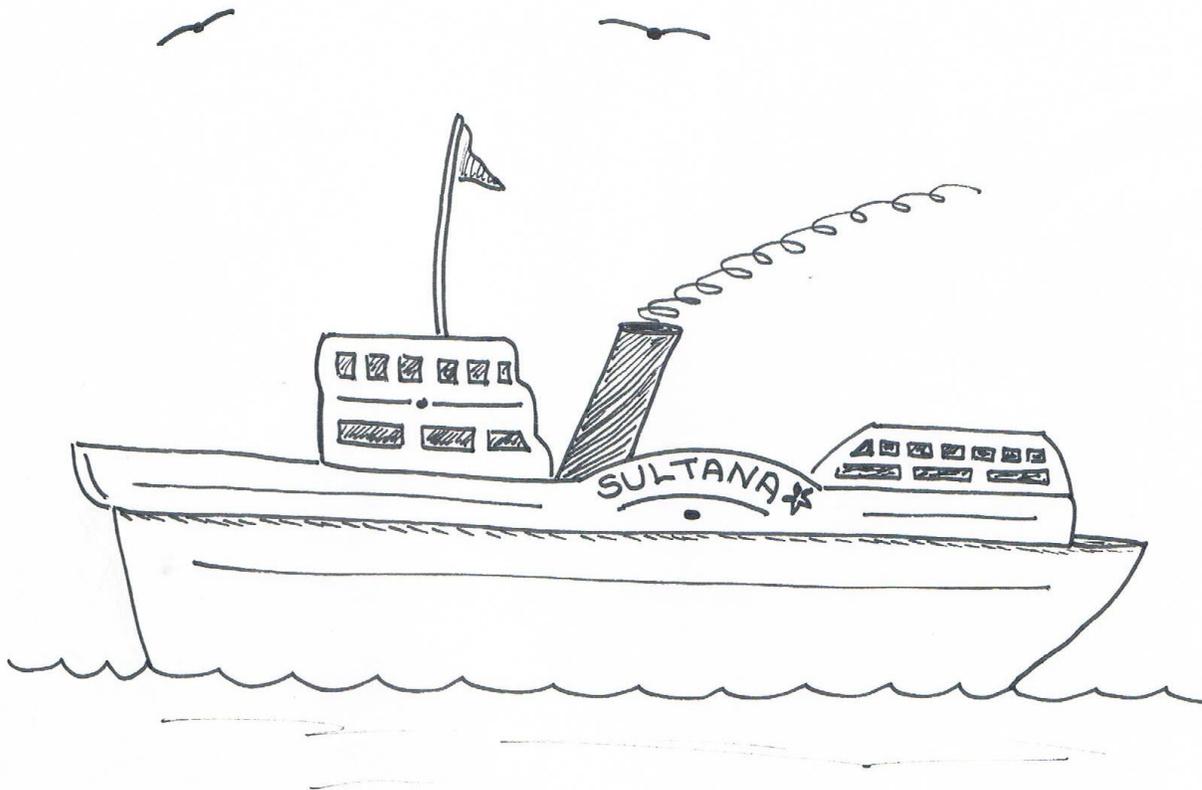
Over the next few minutes, a half dozen young men sprang up and started to pummel the two bounty hunters. Punches were thrown on both sides, but it didn’t take long before the two were on the floor, bleeding profusely and unconscious. With the momentum of their blood lust coursing through their veins, two young men dragged the patrollers’ bodies to the end of the rail car and out its exit door. They hesitated for a moment, and then decisively pushed the two bodies off the moving train onto the graveled surface of the train track siding. It would be several weeks before a local farmer would come upon their skeletons, after wondering why he had seen a preponderance of turkey vultures in the area.

The two young men returned to their train seats, their hearts still pounding. They nodded solemnly over to Lucius, and then one of them remarked to an older woman sitting primly with her travelling bag.

“Ma’am, sometimes you just gotta do what you have to do.”

“Amen, brothers. And what a fine day it is for train travel.” The woman looked out at the passing landscape, and then slowly turned and smiled in the direction of Lucius.

The Last Leg



“Caleb, take my arm please...Caleb, I’m over here young man. Caleb, where are you? We need to be getting home. Past my supper time! Caleb, come on now, get off that train. We do need to be going.” A man in his fifties, well-dressed and wearing darkened glasses, stood near the flurry of passengers getting off the train service from Columbus to Sandusky. His left arm was bent at ninety degrees and raised away from his body, and in his right hand he held a bamboo walking cane.

Lucius trundled down off the train, his bag slung over his shoulder as he buttoned up his dress jacket. He remembered Caleb’s instructions, and he looked around the platform for a greeting party with compromised vision. He then heard his assumed name, not once but four times, and was warmed by the older man’s smile.

“Here I am, sir. Sorry I’m late.” Lucius put his hand around the man’s extended left elbow.

“Not at all. These new-fangled trains might run a few minutes late, but they sure can fly. Help Mr. Andrew get back home, just a few blocks away on Shelby Street. I’m not so good on my feet anymore, so we’ll go outside and hail a hansom cab to get us there safely.” The gentleman rotated slowly in the direction of the exit and started to walk with purpose and with Lucius at his side.

At the station door, three shadowy figures lurked off to one side. Their ominous energy rattled Lucius to a high degree, given the events on the train that morning. One man stepped out of the dim light, his hand raised as an obstacle.

“Boy, where are your papers?” He addressed this to Lucius while fixing his eyes in a steely squint.

“This young man is my houseman. He’s a free man, and has been down-country to visit his folks. And now he’s taking me home for my supper.” Andrew angled towards the abrasive interrogator.

“Houseman, you say. This buck doesn’t look polished enough to be a house boy. Looks more like a tobacco field slave to me. What’s your name, boy?” The patroller came up to Lucius, splaying his hot breath over his face.

“Caleb, sir.” The young man said this without flinching.

“And what’s your master’s name?” This was said with arched eyebrows.

“Andrew, sir.” Lucius clenched his teeth and a pulse ran through his jaw.

“And where do you live?” The questioner released this with a sense of anticipation.

“Shelby Street, sir.” Lucius nodded knowingly, and looked towards Andrew.

“Now get the hell out of our way! And go back down to Portsmouth, where you can rot on the docks on the Ohio River, waiting to nab poor runaways who climb out of the water dripping wet! And for your information and edification, I am not Caleb’s master, I’m his employer and friend!” The blind man took his cane and gave the patroller a solid poke in his chest, pushing him back a bit and allowing safe passage through the exit doors.

“Ah, those bastards are getting bolder! Pushing further north, and getting more aggressive on bringing poor souls back to their farms and plantations. On one hand, it’s troubling. But on the other hand, it might suggest that the success of the Underground Railroad is making them desperate. Every man like you that we can roll to freedom means we make the system of slavery weaker and weaker. And eventually it will break, and all black folks will be free.” Andrew took off his glasses after getting comfortable in the hansom, and looked directly at Lucius.

“Thank you, Mr. Andrew. And thank you to all the people that have brought me this far.” A moistening came to Lucius’ eyes.

“Oh, my great pleasure! It’s God’s work, and we are his instruments. My grandfather was a black man. So I’m part black, even though most of these patrollers can’t figure that out. So I’m hoping my own people get free. And I’m not really blind. My eyes aren’t so strong, but they work good enough. But the ruse of being blind has been very helpful as a worker on the Railroad.” The older man smiled broadly.

“And where does the Railroad take me next?” Lucius’ eyes grew wide.

“Well, we’ll have a good supper and a night’s rest at my home. And then tomorrow morning we will go down to Water Street and put you on a Great Lakes steam packet that runs from Buffalo through to Detroit. But if there are any black folks riding the ship that are running to freedom, the captain makes an unofficial stop on the Canadian side of the Detroit River. And there you will find Canaan, the Promised Land that you have been seeking. A country with no slavery, where you will truly be a free man.” Andrew smiled, and signaled the cab driver to stop.

The next morning was grey and sullen, diametrically opposite to Lucius’ mood as he ingested eggs and fried ham and cornbread in the kitchen of Andrew’s well-appointed home. He packed his bag and met his host at the front door, and they waited for their cab to appear to take them to the docks.

“Mr. Andrew, how did you know who I was? You called out to me several times at the station yesterday, and I felt as if I was meeting up with family!” Lucius grinned at his benefactor.

“Caleb stopped at the telegraph office down in Columbus after he dropped you off at the station. Sent me a short note with your general description, telling me you would have his son’s jacket on!” Andrew opened the front door as the cab pulled up to the sidewalk.

“Now things might be equally sticky down by the docks as they were yesterday at the train station. All depends on the day. But our story is that I’m going up to Detroit to visit my ill sister, and I’m taking my houseman along as my walking guide. We will stride with purpose, and only stop if we have to. I’ll get on the ship with you, and from there you will be in good hands. The captain of the Sultana is Gilman Appleby and he is a fine man, very helpful to us in our work. Once you are on and settled, I’ll just quietly slip off the boat and make my way home. I do believe I’ll have another couple of folks coming in by train this afternoon. Good Lord willing, the work continues.”

As the cab pulled up to the dock, Andrew looked out and to his dismay he saw the same three reprobates from the railway station lurking beside the gangway to the steamer boat. The Sultana was a hundred yards offshore, slowly making its way into the Sandusky terminal docks.

“Hmm, a greeting party awaits us. Say very little and keep moving towards the gangway.” Andrew gave Lucius his arm as they stepped down from the hansom.

“Well, well, well, good morning to you gentlemen. Taking a runner on the Sultana, are we? I thought you lived in Sandusky, sir, and this was your supposed houseman?” The spokesman of the trio leered at the two men as he partially blocked their path.

“Unfortunately I found out overnight that my sister in Detroit has become gravely ill. I must go and attend to her needs, as we are very close siblings. Caleb here will join me to assist on the rough curbs and sidewalks of the City of the Straits. The Sultana will be loading us soon, so please step aside, kind sir.” Andrew waved his hand flippantly at the patroller.

“Nice story. But we know the Sultana has been known to transport stowaway slaves into Upper Canada.” He glanced over at a city policeman, standing by one of the wharf pilings. “Can you vouch for this gentleman, sir?”

“Mr. Andrew is one of Sandusky’s most upstanding citizens, sir. He is the president of a livery operation in our fair city, and resides in a lovely residence on Shelby Street.” The constable had a gravelly voice and a confident demeanour.

“And is this his houseman?” This was said antagonistically.

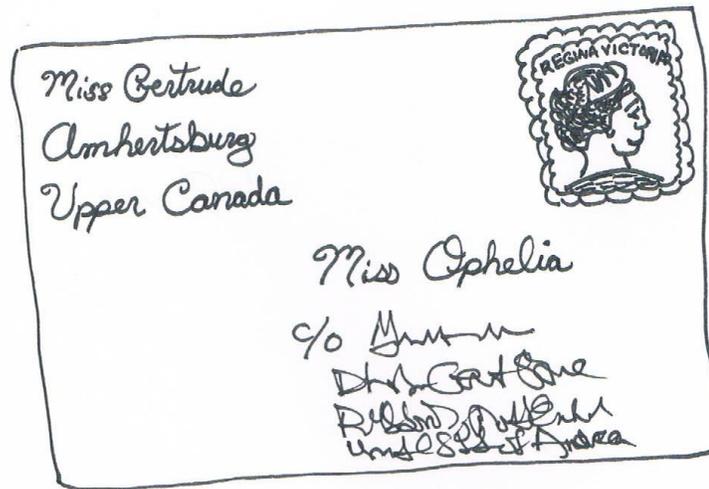
“Yes, I believe so, sir. All of the residences on Shelby Street have black housemen in their paid employ.” The constable was composed under the impromptu interrogation.

“And what is the houseman’s name, squire?” The patroller could feel the thrill of a capture.

“Caleb, sir. And a fine young man he is.” The constable lightly touched the handle of his billy-stick.

“Gentlemen, our ship awaits. Good day to you all.” Andrew, assisted by Lucius, curled around the trio while nodding his approval to the conspiring constable. The two young men were greeted at the top of the gangway by Captain Appleby. And as the ship’s whistle signaled its departure ten minutes later, Andrew quietly slipped back down the gangway and stepped into a cab waiting by the dock. This was unobserved by the slave patroller trio, who sat dejected in a tavern a block away on Water Street.

The Shores of Upper Canada



“Come up to my modest quarters, gentlemen, and I’ll brew you up a nice cup of strong tea. There are bunks there for you to get some rest, and I am sure that this will be the easiest leg of your arduous journey. We’ll be putting in to Port Clinton in a short bit, and then on to Toledo after that. From there we’re officially slated next in at the Port of Detroit, but we’ll be making a very quick pull-in to a wharf at Amherstburg where you three can clamber off without much ado. I’ll give you instructions and details closer to the time, but you can call yourselves free men truly and honestly when you step onto that soil that swears allegiance to the British crown!” Captain Appleby issued a broad smile under a reddish beard, and motioned for the three black men before him to climb up a set of metal stairs.

Lucius had had barely enough time to express his thanks to Mr. Andrew before the businessman had pivoted away and walked quickly down the gangway without the aid of his walking cane. A ship steward had come up to him and had taken him gently by the elbow off to a small waiting room where two other black men sat on a narrow wooden bench.

“Name’s Oscar, and I’ve come from a cotton plantation near Athens, Georgia. Somebody set the slave quarters on fire and about ten of us got away in all the confusion. We hid out in the woods for a bit, then some got scared when they heard the dogs a’coming. I waded a river for miles so those beasts wouldn’t be able to pick up my scent. Been on the trail for over six months, with plenty of close calls. And this fellow here be Lemrich. Not big on conversation. The most I’ve got out of him is that he used to pick cotton down near Charleston, South Carolina. What’s your name, brother?” The affable runaway extended his hand.

“Lucius, from a tobacco farm in the middle of North Carolina. Had hardly been off the farm more than once in my twenty two years, worked hard, and kinda liked the overseer. But my master turned mean, and whipped me hard. Decided then and there to make a break for it. It’s been a long and lonely journey. But I’ve been helped by a lot of big-hearted, kind people. And I feel blessed to be on the

threshold of freedom, with you two brothers.” Lucius leaned over and put a hand on each of the men’s shoulders. Lemrich stayed silent, but a quiet tear appeared at the edge of his left eye.

The journey went by swiftly and uneventfully, with the three stowaways being hosted by the captain in a quiet and discreet manner. Lake Erie seemed as large as an ocean to the three men who had always been on firm ground as they toiled away in their previous work. Perhaps somewhere in their collective memory they remembered the painful crossing of a real ocean, where their fathers or grandfathers were being meanly transported to an unenviable existence of chained servitude. But this voyage was the diametric opposite of the other ocean passing partially lost in the mists of time, and the expectancy associated with their new lives was palpable.

“Gentlemen, I do hope your short voyage on the Sultana has been restorative and enjoyable. I have the privilege of plying these waters on a daily basis, and the smell of the fresh lake air never fails to delight me. I also take great pleasure in conveying any man, woman or child who is seeking freedom from slavery. It is God’s work, and we have been aided by the Divine in so many ways. But we do take practical precautions, and only stop in Amherstburg if the ship is devoid of any obvious slave patrollers or bounty hunters.” Captain Appleby smiled broadly at the trio of men.

“And when we get to where we’re going, we’ll be safe, right?” Oscar said this nervously.

“You will be in a different country where slavery does not exist. Amherstburg is at the far western end of what is called Upper Canada, and has its Fort Malden and a core of British troops to protect the interests of Queen Victoria and the laws that pertain to her subjects. But safety is never an absolute concept. You must watch your back, even in Amherstburg, as bounty hunters have been known to cross the Detroit River and pull runaways back to their previous owners. So here are my detailed instructions.” The captain paused for effect.

“I’m listening, Captain. And I have a good memory.” Lucius bore a tense smile.

“Alright, then. When we come up broadside to the wharf, we will slow but not stop. In this way I can say I did not disembark any passengers to foreign soil. The steward will let down the gangway to within a foot of the wharf’s planks, and you will then run down its length and jump onto the wharf. Step lively off the wharf, and quickly clamber up the slope of the riverbank. Keep going in the direction away from the water. After a few blocks you will come to a busy thoroughfare with considerable wagon traffic. That will be Sandwich Street, which runs up to the village of Sandwich to the north. Keep going two more blocks further inland to King Street. Turn to your right and go along King for a few blocks until you see an AME church made of grey stone. Go in there, the good folks of the African Methodist Episcopal church will feed you and find a place for you to stay. If you need to hide because of a bounty hunter, they have a secret chamber in the church floor where you can hide. They are your people, they have been through what you have been through, and they will help you land on your feet. God bless you three souls, and know that you will soon be truly free men.” Gilman Appleby gave each of the three an expansive hug and signaled them to follow him in the direction of the gangway.

x-----x-----x-----x-----x

A week later, Lucius walked tentatively down Sandwich Street, looking for the Post Office. He had been fed and made comfortable in an outbuilding on the church property, and had been given a temporary job of weeding a few gardens for neighbors on the adjoining properties on George Street. Once he had settled in for a few nights he dreamed of Ophelia, and realized that he had hardly allowed himself to even think of her on his long journey northward. He asked for paper and a pen to be brought to him, and a church volunteer who knew how to read and write composed the following note:

‘Ophelia—I am free. I love you, my dear. When you can, run north. Follow the North Star, and the moss growing on the north side of trees. Stay safe, but seek your freedom. I am in Amherstburg, Upper Canada at the AME Church on King Street. I will stay here until you join me. With great love, Lucius.’

He walked along, and found the Post Office after a few more blocks. A bespectacled clerk intently looked at the address on the envelope that the young man had handed to him.

‘Mr. Daniel,

c/o Pittsboro General Store,

Pittsboro, North Carolina,

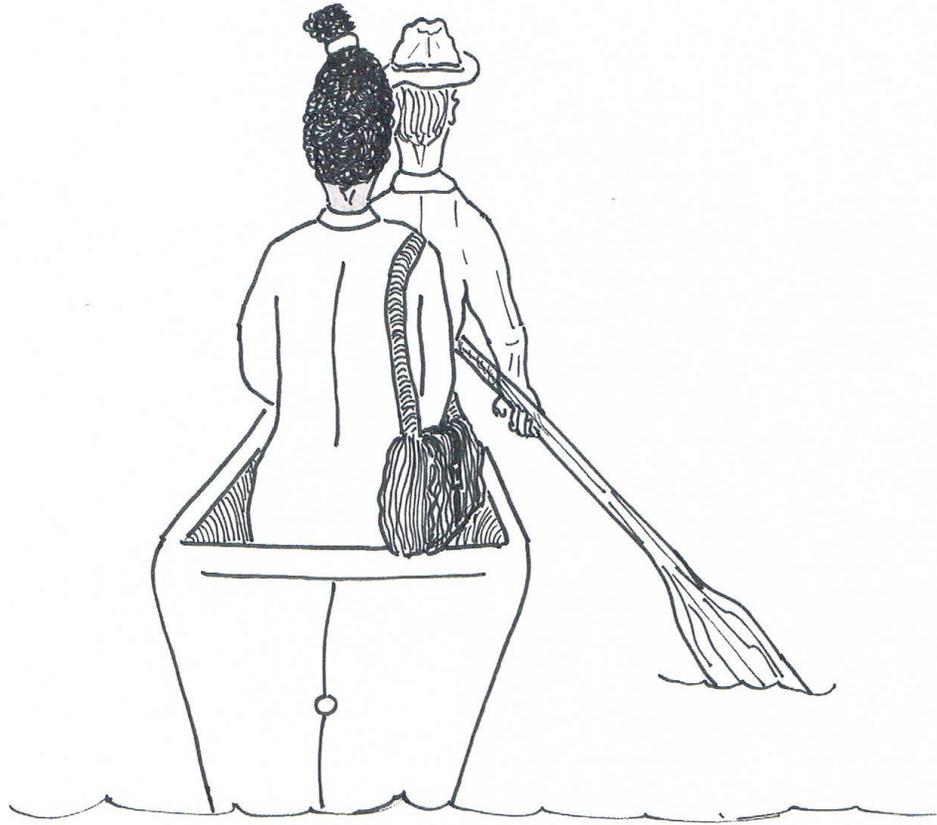
United States of America’

“Sir, how much to send this letter south?” Lucius smiled expectantly.

“Ten penny coins will get you a stamp with Queen Victoria on it, that will guarantee safe passage down to the Carolinas.” The postal clerk reached out for the coins proffered by Lucius, his earned wages from a day of garden hoeing.

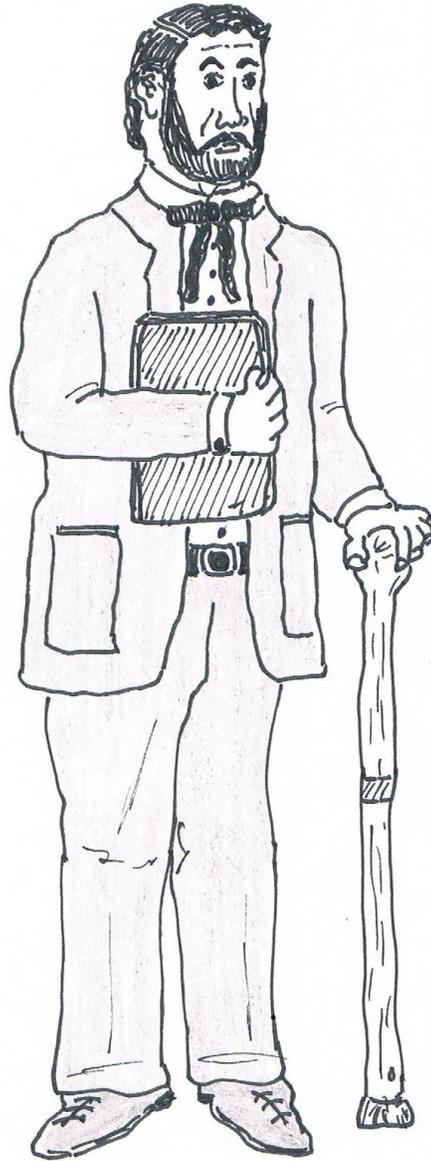
~The End~

Finding a Way



Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

A Doctor in the House



“Tis pretty country in the middle of the state, wouldn’t you agree?” A handsome man, dressed in a black suit and country tie, sat spritely on the edge of a wagon seat, looking admiringly to the thick stands of trees that spilled down towards the Haw River.

“Yes, sir, it would be hard to argue against your sentiments. County upon county, the Piedmont area of North Carolina has a tremendous amount of natural beauty. I’ve only lived down here for a year or so, but I must admit I’ve grown to admire my new home.” The young man turned with a sideways grin, still keeping an eye on his draw horse.

“Where did you hail from, young sir?” The gentleman leaned in towards his driver.

“Upstate New York, not far from the shores of Lake Ontario.” Daniel the store clerk nodded affably.

“Well, well, is that so? My stomping grounds are just on the other side of the lake. I practice medicine in a small city called Belleville. Don’t know if you know any French, but that means ‘beautiful city’. Rightly named by those old French fur trappers that were going through those parts. Yep, those boys could recognize beauty all right, either in the native women they took as partners or in the districts they were travelling through. So I’m qualified to know what beauty means, and I see it all around me here in good ol’ Carolina!” The medical man waxed eloquently, using his broad hands for considerable effect.

“So you’re a doctor? That must keep you very busy?” Daniel nodded primly in the direction of his guest.

“Oh, my family has been involved in the healing arts for a long time. Done well for ourselves, and our assets have accumulated. So I’ve been able to develop a range of other interests. Ornithology, for one.” The good doctor pointed up towards a stand of trees from which a cacophony of sound was being emitted.

“Ornithology? Is that the study of eyesight?” Daniel squinted in the direction of the tree branches.

“Easy enough to get it confused with ophthalmology. No, ornithology is the scientific study of bird life. The winged creatures among us, and their beautiful calls.” The good doctor cocked his head and put one hand behind his right ear.

“Uh, you mean like John James Audubon?” Daniels’ face lit up and his eyes sparkled.

“Exactly, young fellow, spot on. Modesty prevents me from overstating things, but I have been called the Audubon of Upper Canada in certain quarters. So I am down South, escaping the sharpest teeth of the Canadian winter, on a bit of a birding expedition. I’m always on the lookout for rare birds, particularly in the back woodlots of these tobacco farms. And I also offer assistance to other birds that are being held in captivity. To allow the bravest of them to fly free, all the way to Upper Canada.” The gentleman lowered his voice and leaned in towards Daniel.

“You seem to be speaking in a code, kind sir. I wasn’t sure what ornithology was, but I think I know what kinds of captive ‘birds’ you are referring to. I am a Quaker, and have helped many folks to flow through my Daddy’s barn on their way up to freedom.” Daniel had drawn the wagon to a stop on the country road. “Is this the kind of ‘bird’ you are looking for, Dr. Ross?”

“One never knows when one might be overheard, so the adoption of code words seems to be a prudent undertaking. But yes, I am travelling through the South, ostensibly on an ornithological expedition. But the real purpose is to augment the very noble work that you Quakers and others have been doing. Might I count on you for help in this regard?” The doctor looked forward as the wagon started to slowly roll.

“Say the word and I will help you in any way. I have been doing what I can on my own, here and there. And praying to be of greater service. So you are the answer to prayer, kind sir!” Daniel leaned in to his guest in a cajoling manner.

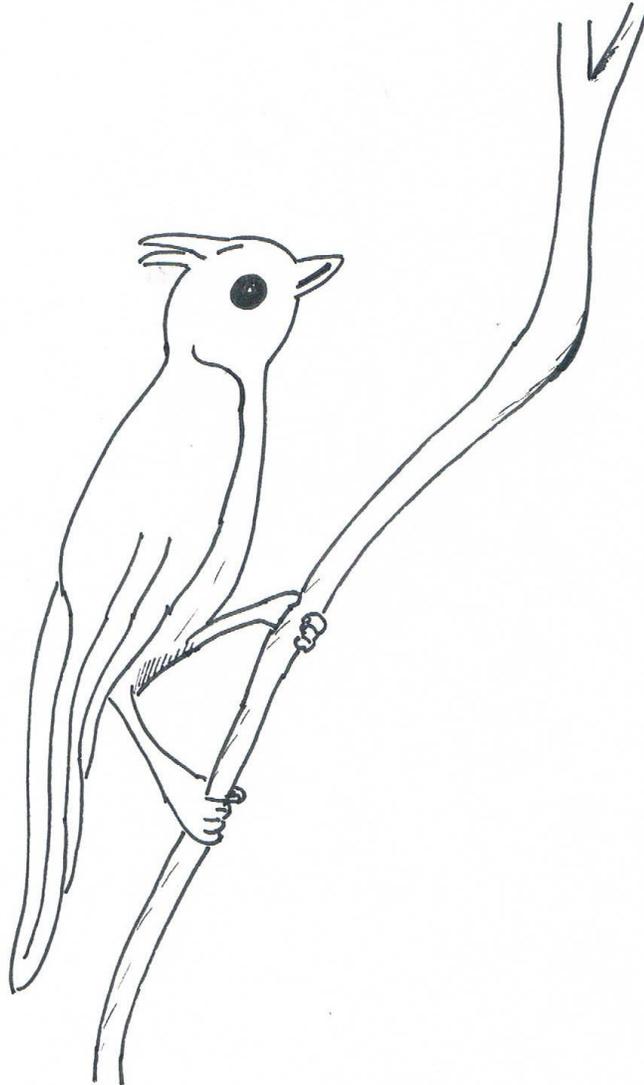
“Alright, then. Take me to a few different farms every day for a week or more. Introduce me to your customers as Dr. Ross, a medical specialist from Upper Canada. And as an expert field ornithologist, looking to catalogue the lovely rare birds of the Piedmont zone. I won’t blush if you call me the Audubon of Canada, and I’ll take it from there. I find the ladies of the manor to be the easiest to charm, and hopefully I will get a number of invitations to return to do some dedicated field work on their rural properties. While I am making my pitch to the master and mistress, you will be delivering your travelling store goods to the good folks who serve in the kitchen. Quietly tell them I am there as a friend and benefactor, and to spread the word amongst other house and field workers that the good doctor will attempt to help them as much as he can and as much as they are willing to be helped.” The visitor’s eyes glistened as he turned towards his driver.

“How much time will you need to do your work?” Daniel was calculating the number of farms he needed to reach that week.

“Oh, it all depends. Some farms may have no interest in me. Others may only have time for me to walk a woodlot or two over the course of an afternoon. But others have become absolutely smitten with my subtle charms, and put me up for a week in the great house, where I can meander and catalogue to my heart’s content. This last category of hosts allows me to do my best work, on many levels.” Dr. Ross gave Daniel a knowing grin.

“I have a number of farms in mind already. One in particular. We’ll go there directly, kind sir.” Daniel clicked his teeth at the draw horse to pick up its pace.

A Bird in the Hand



“Master John, Mistress Marie, it is my great pleasure to introduce you to Dr. Alexander Milton Ross, a medical specialist from Upper Canada and a world renowned ornithologist. Ornithology, or the scientific study of bird life, is becoming increasingly popular in the salons of Paris as a discussion topic of the *bourgeois*. And here in America, the pioneering work of the beloved and recently departed John James Audubon, has put the study of birds on the minds of progressive intellectuals. Dr. Ross has taken up the baton from Audubon, and is currently on a southern field tour, cataloguing Dixie’s rarest bird life.” Daniel the store clerk stood on the steps of the farm house, with the dark-suited visitor holding his dress hat in his broad hands.

“Gentle folk, the pleasure is all mine.” The doctor extended his hand for a tentative grasping of the Master’s left hand, and a gentle and lingering touching of hands with the wide-eyed mistress. They had

both been reading at opposite ends of the porch and had risen at the sound of Daniel's approaching store wagon.

"I know only a modest amount of science, sir. How can we help you in your work?" Master John grimaced slightly, then issued a tentative smile.

"Well, that would depend. I see a farm here well endowed with lovely trees at its boundary edges, and a considerable woodlot at the rear of the farm. Bounteous habitat for birds, and the insects they take as their food. You have considerable area to explore and catalogue over three days or so. I like to get out in the early morning and often even at dusk or into the night so I can observe our winged friends throughout their full rhythms. All of this would be best supported with a wee place to lay my head at night, and modest hospitality to fuel my perambulations in the woods." The doctor looked up casually to his potential hosts, and cast a nervous sideways glance in the direction of the store clerk.

"I happen to love birds of all types, but particularly *les oiseaux des chansons*. I am French by background, *Huguenot*, and we revere bird life." The mistress said this quietly.

"Madame, some say birds are like angels on Earth. For does not an angel have its wings?" The visitor warmed to his subject as he realized that charming the young woman was perhaps his best bet for success.

"I walk the fields and the forest every day, for extended periods. Ruby-throated hummingbirds hover near the plantings, killdeer are in the meadows, and great cormorants fish down by the river. I hear redheaded woodpeckers hard at work in the forest, and turkey vultures silently nest above the curing barns. And sometimes I hear a quick succession of calls, all coming from a single branch of a tree in the deep forest. Might this last *oiseau* be of interest to you?" The mistress appeared child-like, hypnotized by the recounting of the sighting of these birds.

"I have yet to see a Northern mockingbird on this field excursion, but I suspect your farm will grace me with this occasion. The possibilities are immense on your acreage." The good doctor looked out to the fields, where scores of workers worked, tilling the empty fields that would soon be planted.

"You are most welcome as our guest for up to a week. There are two guest bedrooms on the second floor, and the matron will show you to them and you can choose the one that is most to your liking. Our cook will let you know the schedule for meals. And you may wish to do some of your reconnaissance with my wife in tow, as she knows the land much better than I do. Welcome, Dr. Ross." The master smiled tightly and went back to his reading chair.

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"Dear folks, please sit down comfortably and gather around in as tight a circle as possible, as I would like to keep my voice as low as possible for obvious reasons." The doctor stood in the middle of one of the curing barns, dressed formally in his black suit and holding a lit candlestick in his hands. Around him were a couple of dozen field workers, plus Ophelia and Mama.

"I am the guest of the master and mistress, to observe rare bird life in the woods that surround this farm. But my real purpose in touring the southern states is to hold this kind of quiet meeting with workers who are currently not free, and to encourage them strongly to take the steps to seek their freedom." Dr. Ross nodded obligingly to the assembled group.

"Who do you work for, sir?" An older woman with rheumy eyes looked up at the medical man.

"No real employer, ma'am, but those of us involved do believe we are working for God. Quakers, and other people who believe in the emancipation of enslaved souls, we are a group that quietly goes about its work." The doctor smiled tersely and raised his eyebrows.

"So you're here to tell us all to run away tonight, and by tomorrow night we'll be chewed to death by those evil beasts of dogs or shot through the head by an angry master?" A grizzled man snorted derisively.

"Escaping has its risks, that is for sure. But we do what we can to prepare you for flight, and to increase the chances of getting to freedom." Dr. Ross explained this all in a slow and measured tone.

"Yeah, Lucius took off, and he's probably free right now, walking where he wants to walk and getting paid for his work." A young field hand looked about the room excitedly.

"And as far as we know, his body could be lying dead in the river five miles upstream of here. I've got a roof over my head and food to eat, so I'm not running anywhere." The grizzled older man rolled his eyes, to considerable muttering from the crowd.

"No one is being forced to leave. But I will pass packages to Mama here, with a pocket compass and some dried food and a bit of spending money, for anyone who wants to slip away some night. To freedom, by following the North Star. Walk the river for the first few miles, to throw off the dogs. Travel at night, and always stay in the woods. Indians will help you, and once you get further north our people will be on the lookout to help you with shelter, food and a wagon ride. But only for those who want to take up the offer willingly." The doctor nodded over in the direction of Mama.

"Y'all know the young master has a hard heart, and he's become even meaner since the doctor in Pittsboro had to amputate that right hand of his. That whupping of Lucius caused the Master's hand to be cut by that whip, and gangrene is an awful thing. It might have taken his whole life, if it hadn't been for that surgeon's knife. But it's left him meaner than a pole-cat, and I'm thinking things might get plenty unbearable around here before too long. I'm going to give what you said some real thought, Dr. Ross, some real thought indeed. And maybe I'll get one of those packages from Mama to put under my bed, and some night I might just step outside and head north. Up to freedom, y'hear?" A steady-voiced male field worker said all of this quietly but resolutely, and was rewarded with a chorus of "um-hmms" and casually synchronized nodding of heads.

A Healing Touch



Ophelia had been in a bit of a jangled state since Lucius had fled the farm. She knew she had been a part of the puzzle that had caused him to be whipped that morning after the party, and she intuitively knew that the Master's wrath was fueled by more than his religious convictions. Many months had gone by and Lucius had not been brought back in chains. She had heard the whispering that the young man lay at the bottom of a sluggishly flowing river, or that he had melded into one of the Indian tribes living up in the hills of Virginia. But he came to her regularly in her dreams, broadly smiling and projecting across the ether that he was in good health and patiently awaiting her arrival.

She kept this all in the back of her mind as she went about her daily chores. Every week the store clerk would make his rounds by wagon, and she would arrange things so that she got thirty minutes alone with Daniel in the kitchen, to go over key paragraphs of Walker's Appeal and to make progress on the reading and writing front. She was certainly a quick learner, and had moved beyond reading labels on sugar and spice packages to being able to read simpler words contained within the text of the Appeal.

One week, Daniel came through the back door of the kitchen with a box of supplies in his arms and a distressed look on his face.

"Mr. Daniel, I'm always happy to see you and so look forward to our lessons, but something doesn't seem quite right with you this morning." Ophelia came up to him with a furrowed brow and took the box out of his hands.

“Ah, it’s a small thing, but it stings like the dickens! I brushed my wrist up against a rough metal hook on the wagon as I was moving too quickly, and I’m afraid to say it appears that I’ve broken the skin! Some bleeding in fact...” He rubbed his right wrist and grimaced.

“Sit down at the table and I’ll take care of it. Mama keeps a poultice of herbs and salt and pig fat for these kinds of scrapes and irritations. I’ll get a clean piece of linen and some cool water to clean it first, and then apply the ointment. You’ll be as good as new in no time at all.” The young woman moved nimbly and guided the clerk to the table.

“Ah, that does feel so much better, even with just the cool water.” Daniels’ face relaxed, and blushed lightly as the lovely young woman used her long, dexterous fingers to knead the homemade oil into the superficial wound.

“This is something Mama learned from her Mama, who brought the knowledge from back home. One doesn’t have to be a doctor to be a healer, just need to have the knowledge and the ability to grow and harvest the right plants. There, plenty has gone in to your skin. Now I just have to place my hands on the area, and see it in my mind’s eye as fully healed. You need to do this too, Mr. Daniel. Let go of the pain, and know that you’re as right as rain.” Ophelia cupped the store clerk’s wrist with both of her hands, and leaned in towards him in a playful way.

“Young lady, you never cease to confound me! If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you’re flirting with me. I’ve told you I’m a Quaker, and it’s hardly fair to inflame my passions!” Daniel chuckled in a good-natured way, and nervously pushed his glasses back onto his nose.

“Relax, I know my boyfriend’s run away and I’m starved for affection. But this is just part of the healing process. I connect with you, and pass the belief of complete health, that you’re fully healed. I can say this, but it’s better if I think it and feel it. And ask you to feel it. Now be quiet for a few moments.” Ophelia shut her eyes and put her forehead onto Daniel’s extended forearm.

“Okay, you’re healed. Have a look for yourself.” Five minutes had ticked by on the kitchen clock, and Ophelia slowly pulled her hands away from Daniel’s wrist. The affected area was still a bit sticky with poultice residue, but looked perfectly normal.

“My goodness, it’s a miracle! I thought I’d have a ragged wrist for the rest of my deliveries, and would have to pay a visit to the doctor down in Pittsboro. I must say, it does feel just like new!” The merchant’s representative rolled his wrist giddily.

“No need for a doctor when Miss Ophelia’s in the house. Or Mama, who taught me everything I know.” The young lady grinned unabashedly.

“Do you work your magic on other folks on the farm?” Daniel posed this quietly.

“Oh sure, for whoever asks. Any of the workers, field or house. Especially the little ones, they are so much better at believing in quick healing with the right guidance. I’ve helped Overseer Henry a few times, as he has a weak back that pops out from time to time. Animals too, for their cuts and bruises.”

Ophelia nodded matter-of-factly. “The master cut his hand, with the vicious whipping of Lucius. I wouldn’t go near the master for weeks after that, I was so angry. Mama tended to the wounds, but there’s only so much one can do. God works in mysterious ways, Mr. Daniel, so maybe the master was punished for his evil act? Lord knows, he’s reminded of that unfair whupping he handed out, every time he looks down at that stub of a wrist. I’m not a vengeful person, but life has a way of settling things up and balancing things out.” The young lady’s eyes flashed fire.

“Amen, sister. And shall we get down to some reading practice?” The store clerk fished inside a pocket of his jacket for some notes.

Follow the North Star



A week or two passed by, with the rhythms of the farm starting to shift slowly as the early Spring time came to the Carolinas and the promise of another season of cultivation and its associated harvest and profits stirred many farm owners across the region to rise out of their beds in the morning with a greater spring in their step. But for the field workers it was a different story. Lengthening days meant more hours to work through, and the barrage of demands from profit-zealous masters and their equally motivated overseers. For sure, better weather meant not having to shiver to sleep in unheated and drafty huts, and better food from the gardens and kitchens of the farms. But the shift in sunlight generally meant tougher conditions for the workers, where they and their families hunkered down for interminable days of back-breaking and unpaid labour.

This was generally true of the tobacco farm owned by Master John and managed by Overseer Henry. But the passion for maximizing crop yields and farm revenues, if it had ever really been there, had

waned to a considerable degree with the events surrounding the disciplining of Lucius and his following escape from forced servitude. Everyone on the farm, from the field workers to the house workers to Master John and Mistress Marie and Overseer Henry, appeared to be a little beaten down. They went through the motions of their respective tasks, but there was a pinched quality to their countenances and a hardening of their eyes that made it seem like everyone was on a knife's edge. As if they were anticipating the second shoe to drop, with no one being truly aware of what that might entail.

The exception to this was Ophelia, who went about her days with an energy and buoyancy that was diametric to everyone else on the farm. She could see how the others looked at her, with some of the older field workers chuckling a bit at her brazen sassiness and her flashing dark eyes. She was progressing well on her reading and writing lessons from Daniel, and would secretly take away simple storybooks from the Master's library and puzzle over them in her room by candlelight. This was something she kept even from Mama, as she knew that knowledge would set up a chain of worrying about what would come next after the capacity to read and write. She also took to keeping a wee journal diary, where she would write out the main events of the passing days and then read the pages over and over as a form of practice for her secret development. All of this sustained and nurtured her as a budding young woman, who held a strong sense of hope in her heart.

So one Thursday morning, the travelling store wagon rolled up to the farmhouse. Daniel got off his perch slowly and deliberately, and then pulled out a box of spices and sugar destined for Mama's kitchen. The rhythms had been well established, with delivery days having mid-morning routines that saw only the youngest house worker in the kitchen to accept the store delivery.

Ophelia held the back door open, with a broad smile to greet the store clerk from Pittsboro. "Lord, that's a small bit of provisions to justify that long wagon ride from town, sir? I believe we're going to have to make up for that with some extra schooling. Everyone's out of the house, and the weather's so fine, they'll stay out all the way to lunch."

"God works in mysterious ways, Miss Ophelia. But there will be no formal training today, as we have much bigger things to do. Oh yes, this will go down in the books as a banner day." Daniel set the box down on the kitchen counter with an air of mystery and intrigue.

"My, my, pray tell me what's going on! I've been looking forward to my reading lesson all week." The young woman motioned for the clerk to sit down at the table.

"Well, you will be doing some reading alright, but it won't be from Walker's Appeal or your diary journal. No miss, it will be from a letter that I recently received by out-of-state mail. In fact, the letter came all the way from Upper Canada." The young man savoured this last sentence, languidly rolling it off his tongue.

"Canada, Upper Canada? You mean that place where Dr. Ross came from? That place where everyone, absolutely everyone, is free?" Ophelia chirped this out, with her excitement building with each word.

“Yes, indeed. White men, black men, red men. No matter their skin colour, all are free. Slavery was abolished there many years back, and this is where our black brothers and sisters head to as they shed the shackles of slavery.” Daniels’ eyes glowed brightly.

“But who would write to you from Upper Canada? Do you have kin up that way? You’re from up north, aren’t you Mr. Daniel?” The young woman cocked her head sideways.

“I am indeed. From where a fast ship can reach Toronto or Oakville in a half day’s journey. But the letter writer is of no relation to me, no miss.” Daniel rolled his eyes mischievously.

“So who did the letter come from?” Ophelia put her hands out expectantly.

“A woman named Gertrude, from a town called Amherstburg.” Daniel paused for effect. “But Miss Gertrude wasn’t the driving force behind this letter. She wrote it on behalf of someone. Someone we know.” Daniel bit down on his tongue in a devilish manner.

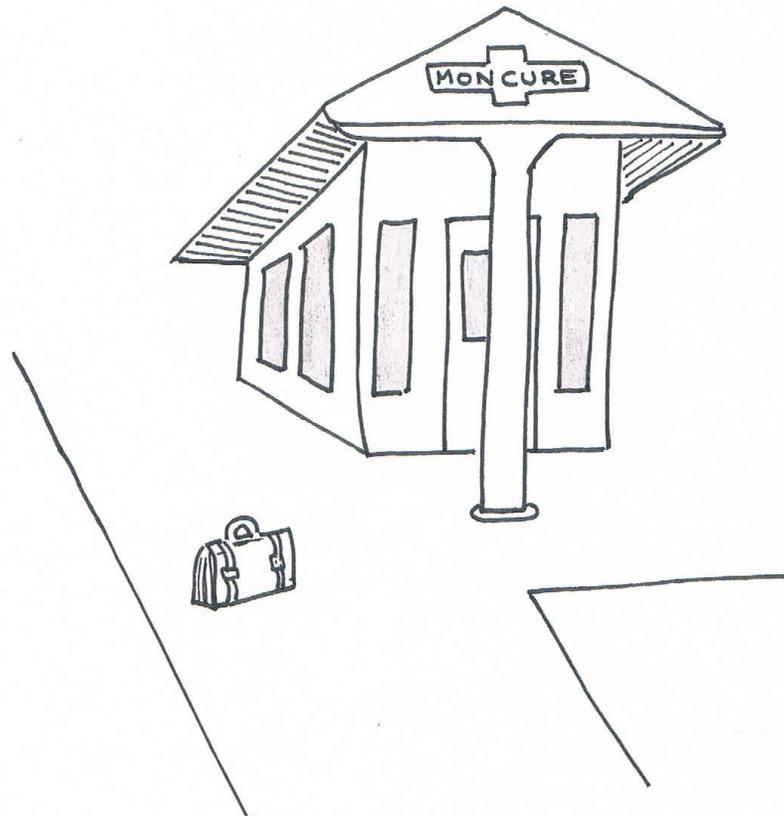
“But I don’t know anyone up in Canada. Lord knows, everyone I know lives right here on this farm. Plus the handsome clerk from the Pittsboro General Store.” Olivia grinned rakishly.

“Oh yes you do. Who do you know who might just be living now in Canada? Against all the odds, taking many risks, and being helped by many people? Now who might that be, Miss Ophelia?” The clerk reached over and grabbed the young lady’s svelte hands.

“Oh my God, my God, my good great God!! It’s Lucius, oh Lordy, it’s my Lucius boy, isn’t it?” Ophelia raised her voice considerably and her arms started to quiver.

“Yes, miss. But keep your voice low. We need to try to read through the letter. It was addressed to me at the store, so I opened it unawares. Read it with tears streaming down my face. The handwriting is pretty spidery, so I might have to help you out in places. But as you’ll see, Lucius is healthy and free. And he’s asking you to do what he did. To do what David Walker has asked of you. To flee bondage, to seek freedom. And to do this wisely and carefully, only when the conditions are right. And to help you, I am giving you a pocket compass left by Dr. Ross. If the North Star is covered by clouds, this little device will point you North, to freedom.” With a modicum of embarrassment, the little store clerk held Ophelia tight to his chest, as she sobbed uncontrollably with joy.

A Reluctant Bachelor



"I shall only stay a week. Which means I will only be away for two weeks or less. I have a cousin from my father's side of the family that has recently been widowed down Charlotte way. I feel the need to console her." The mistress said this out loud during the evening meal.

"Charlotte's not just around the corner. How will you go? We have a lot on here with the impending planting season, and I'm not well placed these days to do a long wagon ride over the plank roads." The master said this with a self-pitying grimace and stabbed at his supper with his fork.

"I did not ask for assistance for traveling. Daniel the travelling store driver has kindly agreed to get me down to the rural station at Moncure, south of Pittsboro, on the Raleigh-Sanford line. I'll ride south as far as Rockingham Hamlet, stay overnight, and catch the Wilmington-Charlotte express train the following morning. I'm only asking your permission to meet a compassionate obligation to my original family. And I am only asking as a courtesy, since we are man and wife." Marie's eyes narrowed, and she focused a sharp and lingering glance in her husband's direction.

The master chewed his food slowly and resolutely. Truth be told, he hardly felt like he was married. There were no offspring from the union, no physical or emotional bond to nurture, no companionship or support linkages to speak of. He could think of no real reason to object to her short absence, but he mulled the issue silently for longer than a moment. "Permission granted. Tell Henry how much you'll

need to get there and back. He's the paymaster around here these days. And we all know the real power is with the person who controls the purse strings."

He was on the porch reading poetry a few mornings later when the store wagon rolled in. Daniel jumped off and tipped his hat to the master, and took a box of supplies up the kitchen steps to an awaiting and smiling Ophelia. The master glowered back at the store clerk, not really sure why he disliked the young fellow. Perhaps it was his jauntiness, his quiet confidence, the way he subtly charmed the women on the farm. At that point the mistress came out with a travelling valise, and wearing a lovely burgundy taffeta gown with a matching hat as her travel attire. The French have a way with fashion, and this was evident to the moping master and a few bright-eyed field workers that tipped their caps to her from a nearby curing hut. She had a striking figure, set off all the more by the lines of her dress. Daniel bustled out of the kitchen and came around to lead the mistress to the wagon by benefit of his extended arm. After placing her travel valise securely in the wagon's hold, they were down the laneway in a cloud of dust and with only a perfunctory wave to the flinty-eyed master.

A few days went by in a blur of inactivity, overeating, and the drinking of a considerable amount of corn mash whiskey. The master had very little to do with the farm operations these days, so he slept even later than normal and started to drink as early as the mid-afternoons. Regular bathing never had much appeal for him, and he set aside his razor as a symbol of protest for his wife taking her leave of the farm. Life tumbled on, but he could feel the worried eyes of the matron and Mama upon him as he ate his meals and sat out on the veranda.

"Might need your advice on a few decisions relating to the planting." The overseer's voice broke him out of a cloudy reverie one day before lunch.

"Do what you think is best, Henry. You've always pretty much run the arm since my Daddy passed. I went through the motions for a few years, trying to do my bit. But now I'm a broken man, not much good for anything." The master looked up from his book, his eyes red-rimmed slits.

"Now stop talking that way, Master John. Every man needs a purpose, and you're the rightful owner of this farm. Lots of decisions to be made, and you can gainfully weigh in on many of them. Besides, I'm not a young man. There will come a day that I won't be around, and you'll be running the operations. You can always hire a new overseer, but the master needs to steer the ship." Henry squatted amiably beside the master and gave him a sideways grin.

"You know I'm useless with this damaged right arm. How can one do any real work with one hand? Useless I am, like teats on a bull!" The master bellowed this out, with a slight bit of spittle foaming onto his lower lip.

"Now Johnny, calm down, and get a hold of yourself. Some people lose a leg by amputation, some fall and get paralyzed from the waist down. You have lost your hand, but you can walk and talk and you have full use of your other hand. You've got a strong mind, and you know how tobacco farming works. I need your help, there's too much work and far too much planning to put on just one set of shoulders

around here. So let Mama run you a hot tub, you can soap up and shave, and you'll get things back on track. What do you say?" The overseer leaned forward and put his hand on the master's left forearm.

"So for you, Henry, life's all about work. But what if I want more, like the stuff I read about in all of these books? Travel, romance, adventure. Cripes, I'm stuck on a farm in the Piedmont, worrying about which seeds to plant and which field worker is going to run away next? And as for romance, I'm married, but my wife doesn't let me get within ten feet of her! How do you think that feels, Henry?" The master whimpered this out pathetically.

"I don't know much about romance, Master John. If I feel what a man feels from time to time, I just let Mama know with a sly wink. She takes care of me real good, y'know what I mean? She's a fine woman that Mama, and if she wasn't a slave, who knows what I might feel for her?" The overseer said this softly under his breath and then continued on. "So why not ask Mama to draw you a bath, and then hang around to do the soaping up? Your wife's away travelling. Who's to know, who's to judge?" Henry smirked lasciviously.

"Who I want is Ophelia. If she could be at my beck and call, I'd clean up real good. Crisp shave, clean breath, sharp clothing. That's the kind of romance that could sustain me, make life worth living. And I know someone's already ploughed that field, having seen her in the hut with Lucius on my birthday. Arrange it, Henry, and I'll be forever in your debt." The master looked down at his overseer, with a hopeful, child-like cast to his face.

"God, she's a headstrong young filly. I will see what I can do, but no guarantees. We might just both get our eyes scratched out." The overseer rose and slowly walked the length of the porch.

A Reversal of Roles



“Thanks for drawing this bath, Mama, I had been letting myself go in the mistress’ absence, and I was smelling well past ripe.” The master sat in a tub of warm water and lye soap suds, his left arm dangling over the side and his right arm buried in the soapy foam.

“Oh, I know men can get like that when there’s no woman around. No bathing, sleeping late, maybe even a drop of that mash whiskey. That’s okay, Master Johnnie, you’ve had a rough road this year. Sometimes things happen that seem unfair, y’know. Gets into a person’s head, and it’s hard to get it out. But you’ll be alright, just give yourself some time.” Mama fussed with a rough towel and brought a kettle of hot water to add into the bath to raise its temperature.

“Is Ophelia in the kitchen?” The master said this in a neutral tone, attempting to hide his elevating heartbeat.

“Yes, she’s there, soaking beans for tomorrow’s lunch. Why do you ask?” Mama looked at the submerged master with narrowing eyes.

“I need to talk to her. To apologize about what went on. Can you send her in and give us some time to talk?” The master brought up a handful of soapy water up to his neck in an attempt to appear casual.

“Sure thing, I can do that. Right fine of you to think of doing that. Things have been a little tense around here.” Mama patted the towel as she placed it on a sideboard near the wooden tub and went directly to the kitchen.

A few minutes went by, consumed by the master soaping his upper body with his left hand and swishing up rinse water from the tub with the stump of his right wrist. He almost didn't see Ophelia leaning up against the door frame, resplendent in a white cotton dress with a red sash tied at its waist.

“Mama said you wanted to see me, to talk to me. I'll just stand here and you can say what you want to say.” The young woman glared fire down on the tub-bound master.

“Ophelia, my dear. Pull up a stool and come near to me. I need to speak quietly, in confidence.” The master beckoned to her and pointed towards a pine stool a few feet away from the tub.

“I'll sit down, but only for a few minutes. Tell me what's on your mind.” The young woman pulled the stool a few inches away from the master, just out of easy reach.

“We're all living under one roof. And we have to get along. I own you, just like I own all the workers here. But you're a special girl, Ophelia. A girl who's growing up into quite the young woman, I might add. If we let bygones be bygones, you could be given a special place in this household. I have a wife, but she doesn't allow me to be a real husband anymore. So if you could take care of the things she's negligent in performing, I would make sure your workload is a lot lighter. And I could get some nice things for you from the general store, things a young woman would like. And all you would have to do is some special favours on a regular basis.” The young man shifted in the tub.

“Favours? Like what kind of favours?” Ophelia's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Oh you know, the kinds of things I've hinted at before. The kinds of things you were doing with Lucius the night of my birthday down in his hut...” A thin line of spittle formed at the right of the master's mouth.

“But Lucius is my boyfriend. We might even have got married if he hadn't run away!” Ophelia spat this out.

“But he hasn't come back, has he? Maybe he's lying dead in the woods ten miles up, barely more than a skeleton by now. Or maybe he tried to get to Canada, but he couldn't swim that far. I hear the Detroit River is fifty miles wide, and a man would drown before he even got halfway. And if he caught a boat to cross, the British troops would shoot him on sight at his landing. Those white Englishmen simply hate black slaves! And if he could hide from the troops, he would soon starve to death, as I hear the soil in Upper Canada is a bunch of rocks! Nope, that boy is dead, one way or another, and he ain't coming back. So what are you going to do? Stay here and marry one of the field workers? Have his babies and shiver down in the huts? Or do you want to sleep in my warm bed, and wear silk bloomers? Not a difficult decision, is it?!” The young master smiled smarmily, and cocked his head sideways.

“Well, maybe we can start today. Right here, right now. But I hate to lay with a man who has a bristly face. Master John. Let me lather up those cheeks and give you a nice, clean shave, and we can proceed on to what you’ve been suggesting.” Ophelia said this in a neutral tone, and looked sideways to the kitchen door.

“Oh my, it’s my lucky day! There’s a bar of soap on the shelf along with a straight razor. Let’s get right to it, I’m like putty in your hands.” The master leaned back in the tub, balancing his head on the thick wooden edge.

“Okay, let’s get a full lather on, and then I can do some long strokes with the razor. Close your eyes, as I don’t want any soap to irritate them.” Ophelia’s voice turned soft and dreamy, and she fussed away at working the soap into his bristly complexion. Completing her initial task, she stood up and went behind the master, rolling the handle of the straight razor in her nimble fingers.

“Take it easy on me, m’dear.” The master smiled below the copious lather and half-opened one eye.

“Oh, I will, just lie back and think about what surprises I have in store for you.” The young woman cooed this into his right ear.

“Mmmm, yes....Christ, what’s going on?!” The master cried out in a strangulated tone, feeling the sharp edge of the razor blade up against his Adam’s apple.

“Stay still, or I’ll slit your throat wide open in a single stroke! You wanted to talk? Mister, I think you need to listen! You might be the master of this house, but I’m in charge now. Get that through your head! Don’t ever ask me again about special favors. And that goes for Mama, too. And if you do, I’ll come up to your room some night while you’re sleeping, and drive a sharp kitchen knife clean through your heart! You got that? You whipped Lucius and he ran away. And you lost your hand as a result. But I swear you’ll lose your life if you so much as look sideways at me from now on. Y’hear me?! And if you don’t, I’ll just go ahead and slit your throat right here, right now. What shall it be?” The young woman roughly gripped the master’s face with one strong hand, and minutely sawed the razor blade across the slick flesh of his throat.

“Good Christ, let me go! I’m sorry, I really am...” The master started blubbering like an infant.

“And you don’t own me, you sniveling bastard! From now on, I own you!” The young woman pulled away the razor, and sharply slapped the master across the back of his head.

Selling South



The mistress came home on a wagon driven by a neighbor, who had been conveniently picking up his own wife from the rural train station south of Pittsboro. The women sat close together on a bench seat behind the male driver, dressed in their travelling finery and conversing in low tones as the wagon rattled over the gravel road leading up to the farm house.

“As luck would have it, Muriel was coming back from an extended stay with her cousin outside of Atlanta. Your little lady was on the train back from Rockingham, and my wife got to chatting with her on the way and discovered that she didn’t have a ride set up to get back home. Now Johnnie, I’ve known since you were a young feller, so I hope you don’t mind my frankness. If Muriel was as pretty as your wife, I wouldn’t be leaving her mouldering outside a rail station in this waning light. If you’re too busy doing whatever, get Henry to hitch up a horse and get on down yonder to pick her up. Just saying, y’hear?” The grizzled neighbor said this under his breath, as he offloaded Marie’s valise to her husband, awkwardly standing behind the wagon.

“My wife does things a bit differently than we do around these parts. I wasn’t exactly sure where she had gone, or when she was coming back. But much obliged, Caleb.” The marginally disheveled master picked up the valise and followed his wife into the house.

"Anything of note happen while I was away?" The mistress stood in the foyer, untying her travel bonnet and carefully disengaging it from her swept up hair.

"Uh, nothing of substance, really. Henry and I have been doing some planning for the planting. Life rolls on here, with every day pretty much the same as the last. Unseasonably warm over the last few days. There's a letter on the entryway bench, that came right after you departed." The master fidgeted a bit with a book he held in his hands.

"You look different, not yourself." The mistress bore down visually on the master, but with a soft voice.

"I'm fine, same as normal. Well, not sure what normal is anymore. But fine enough, I suppose." The master looked at his wife once, noting her hard-edged beauty, and then quickly looked away.

"Did the women take care of you, meet your every need?" Marie took half a step closer to her husband.

"Yup, was well fed, clothes were laundered. All creature comforts provided for." He looked down at his feet.

"What about that impertinent Ophelia? Did she mince around here, drawing all kinds of admiring looks from you and Henry and the field workers?" The mistress' eyes narrowed.

"Um, no, uh, Ophelia's been doing her work quietly and efficiently. Can't say anything negative about her." The master said this unconvincingly.

"Well, let's keep it that way. I'm not sure I cotton on to any of the house workers, but that girl's the worst of the bunch. You might think I don't see anything, but I see everything. And if I ever have the slightest suspicion there's something going on with that girl and you, she'll be gone within a day. I met a gentleman on the train, who told me there's a fellow who will pay hard cash for any healthy slave who's giving you trouble. He takes them down to an auction house in South Carolina, where they get sold off and redistributed. So one hint of trouble of any kind, and I'll sell her South!" The mistress flared her nostrils and wagged her finger at her husband.

"Marie, Ophelia is Mama's girl. I couldn't do that to Mama, she's been too loyal to this family." The master looked imploringly at his wife.

"A trip away is a good thing. *Changez l'air*. Helps you see things with a clear eye. Ophelia was sweet on Lucius, we all know what happened, and then he ran away. So she is upset, and will now make our lives miserable, and then perhaps run away herself. Better to anticipate all of that and sell her off to this gentleman. She's a good looking girl, she'll land on her feet wherever she goes. Maybe bundle up Mama with Ophelia, and they can be an attractive package to some plantation down in Georgia." The mistress said this in a cool, disaffected voice.

"Not sure that sounds reasonable at all. We need to eat, and we need someone to run the operations of the house. The matron's getting on in years, and I don't like the idea of bringing in a couple of the field

workers to do what Mama and Ophelia perform for us so well and so effortlessly.” The master shook his head vigorously.

“What’s that mark on your throat?” The wife squinted suspiciously towards the neck line of her husband.

“Nothing, nothing at all.” John nervously pulled his collar up around his throat.

“There’s a red line running just above your Adam’s apple.” The mistress pointed tentatively.

“Uh, I must have cut myself shaving...” The master nervously turned in the direction of the drawing room.

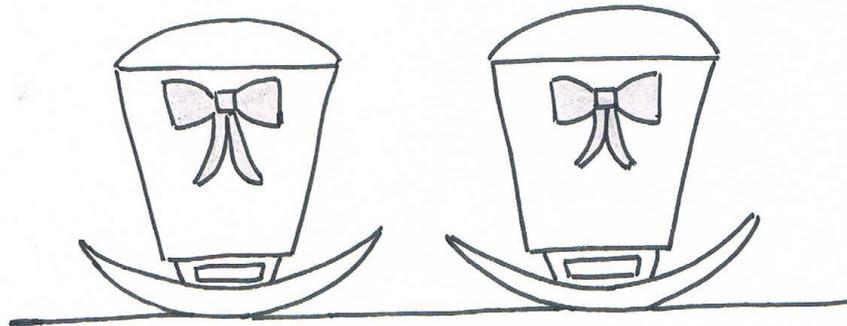
“That’s not a shaving nick, it’s far too uniform.” Marie steeled her brow.

“So here’s that letter, looks like it may be from your sister.” The gentleman of the house handed an envelope written in a beautiful, flowery hand to his wife, along with a silver-handled letter opener.

The mistress opened it up with a flourish, unfolding the letter and beginning to ravenously read the contents. Her initial smile turned to a neutral countenance, and then she very quickly burst out crying.

“Oh my God, my poor sister...” She stood there, tears streaming from her reddened eyes.

Waves of Urgency



“Oh my God, Oh my God, my dear God!” The mistress dropped her travelling bonnet dramatically on the pine boards of the foyer. “*Ma pauvre soeur*, I just can’t believe what has happened to her.”

“Calm down, Marie...let me know what has happened.” The master came forward and grasped his wife by her upper arms, feeling the slightest hint of recoil under the burgundy taffeta.

“Oh, I read it so quickly, and my mind started to reel when I came to the bad part!” The young woman rocked on her heels, throwing her head back in a dramatic swoon.

“But in a nutshell, did their babies die?” The master gripped her arms even tighter, bearing down on his wife with inquisitive and tortured eyes.

“No, that’s the good news in the letter! Both babies came out healthy! A bit small as they arrived earlier than expected, but they are a brother and a sister that will share the same birthday! But that’s where the good news ends, I’m afraid. My dear sister had so much trouble throughout the pregnancy according to her letters sent over that time, but now it’s even more troubling. Ever since the delivery, she has been experiencing bleeding from within. Some days a little, but some days a lot. The country doctor who did the delivery said it would go away over time, but so far it has stayed and maybe even gotten worse!” The young woman burst into tears and started to breathe rapidly.

“Now, now, let’s go sit down in the parlor. I’ll call Mama to make some mint tea that will be calming for us both. Your sister will find the right level, and get back on track. Surely the presence of two healthy babies will be like a tonic to her soul.” The master released his grip on his wife’s arms and put one hand on her back, directing her toward the parlor.

“But I know my sister well. She wouldn’t have written this letter if she felt she was getting better. She’s lost a lot of blood, and the demands of breastfeeding two babies have depleted her even more. She writes that she has become very pale, and has no energy for life beyond sleeping and feeding. And her house workers are ineffective and undisciplined, so she can’t count on them for the support and needs of this critical time.” The young woman sat down on a settee and started to sob.

“Mama, Mama, we need you in here!” The master sat awkwardly beside his wife, calling in the direction of the kitchen.

“Master Johnnie, Mistress Marie, what can I do for you folks? Land sakes, y’all are mighty upset, at least to my eye!” Mama stood at the parlor door, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

“Mama dear, can you make us some mint tea, strong and hot? She’s just received news that her sister up in Virginia is doing a bit poorly.” The master smiled in a brittle way at the middle-aged woman.

“Right sorry to hear, and yes indeed. Always hard to get bad news about family, sets one back on your heels, it does. For sure, I’ll brew up a strong pot for the both of you, and will get Ophelia to put in some of her special calming herbs. That girl knows a lot about what makes a person tick, and how to make them feel better. Back in a moment or two.” The lithe cook stepped away quickly in the direction of the kitchen.

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The herb tea had its desired effect, and the mistress retired to her room and slept for several hours. The rigors of the travels back from Charlotte and the alarming news of her sister’s health had all combined to tire her to a great degree, and she slipped into a dreamscape where she found herself back on a station platform. Her dream attire was a lovey taffeta gown, but instead of burgundy it was midnight black in colour. She got onto an incoming train, but as she walked its aisle she found she was the only person on the train. It picked up speed, the landscape of North Carolina and Virginia flashing by at

lightning speed while she hung onto a chair rail as the train rocked erratically due to its high speed. The train eventually slowed, and it came into a station hundreds of miles from her Carolina tobacco farm home. She looked out through the window of the train car, and saw a hearse wagon rolling by, bearing a large casket. A young man stood by the funeral hearse, bearing two babies in his arms and sobbing uncontrollably. The mistress jumped up and rapped on the train window, shouting that she needed to see her sister one last time. With that, the train started to once again roll and pick up speed, and the mistress could only look back at the receding funereal images.

She woke in a cold sweat, a feeling of dread forming like a dark and heavy stone in the pit of her stomach. She threw on some clothes, and went quickly downstairs to the kitchen, where Master John and Henry were eating supper while Mama and Ophelia bustled about.

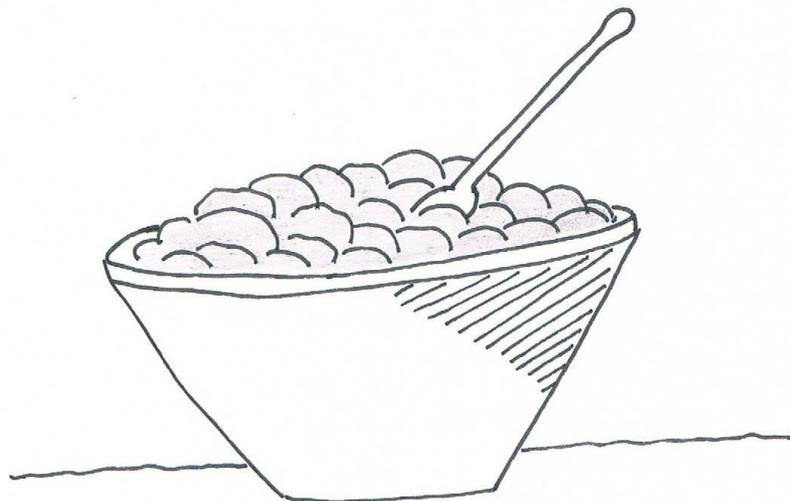
“Mistress Marie, I am very sorry to hear of the news of your sister. John has told me in a condensed fashion, but I understand things are not well.” The overseer rose formally, and extended his hand to join them at the table.

“Thank you Henry, most kind and compassionate of you. I’ve had time to think while I was resting. I need to go to my sister. To either help her return to full health, or to see her before she goes to her just rewards. I will stay a day or two to rest from my trip back from Charlotte, and then I will head north by train.” Her face was resolutely firm, her mouth in a tight line.

“Oh, Marie, I think you may be over-reacting. That’s a very long trip, and you’ve just been away. Take some more time to think things over. Nothing rash, no decision should ever be made in haste.” The master was uncharacteristically compassionate.

“I’ll be leaving the day after tomorrow.” The mistress turned sharply on her heel, catching the eye of a hovering Ophelia.

Jealousy Trumps All Emotions



"I've slept on the decision to go north to be with my sister. The night's rest has made me rethink things and perhaps I was reacting too quickly to receiving the news of her situation on top of being fatigued from my train travel." The mistress sat down to breakfast the following morning, across the table from a bleary-eyed master. "If I go, I suspect I may not provide much of anything beyond emotional support. Nursing an invalid has never been my forte, and there are the two newborns to be cared for as well. She is my sister, but she may simply have to convalesce back to full health with the care and support given by her house workers. The long and the short of it is that I'm undecided about going." The young woman harshly stuck a spoon into a bowl of warm grits.

"It's your decision, as it's your kin. But I would hate to hear of her health getting much worse, where you might feel considerable regret about not being at her side. Perhaps give it some more time, to contemplate the best decision." The master troweled eggs into his mouth and looked balefully at his wife.

"You might enjoy my absence for an extended period of time, is that it?" The young woman sharpened her eyes.

"That barely deserves response. I'm indifferent as to whether you go or stay. I was merely anticipating how you might feel if matters make a sharp turn for the worse." The master scrunched his nose, and looked away.

"When I came back yesterday, things seemed different. Something went on when I was away, didn't it? Something with that young hussy, Ophelia, am I right? Something went on that you don't want me to know about! I can see the way you look at her, at how all the men around here look at her. Something happened, and you don't have the guts to tell me, do you?!" The mistress' eyes brimmed with moisture.

"Nothing happened while you were gone. Nothing has happened in the past. You're imagining things..." The master's voice trailed off, sounding unconvincing to both parties in the conversation.

"I find that response, or certainly its tone, somewhat less than reassuring. I suspect you would love for me to go away for several months, be totally out of sight so you can weave whatever web you want between you and her. That's close to the truth isn't it, no wife under your roof and all the time in the world to lure the house servant into your bed! I know how men think, and I hear whispering going on at church between some of the ladies. Lots of masters seem to have their sights set on their most attractive slaves, so you wouldn't be the first good Christian tobacco planter to have a little harem in his household. Some mistresses may look the other way as they don't want to disturb their comfortable little lives. But not me, sir, not me. I have very few comforts in my life, and I'm sure as hell going to deny you any joy! I'm not going! I'm not going! My sister might die next week, but I'm not going!" The mistress buried her head in her arms, nearly toppling her bowl of cooling grits in the process.

"You can terminate the histrionics now, not only because they appear unseemly, but also because they have no substance or basis. There's a simple solution that will solve all sides to this confounded problem." The master finished his last bite of eggs and wiped the edges of his mouth with a cloth napkin.

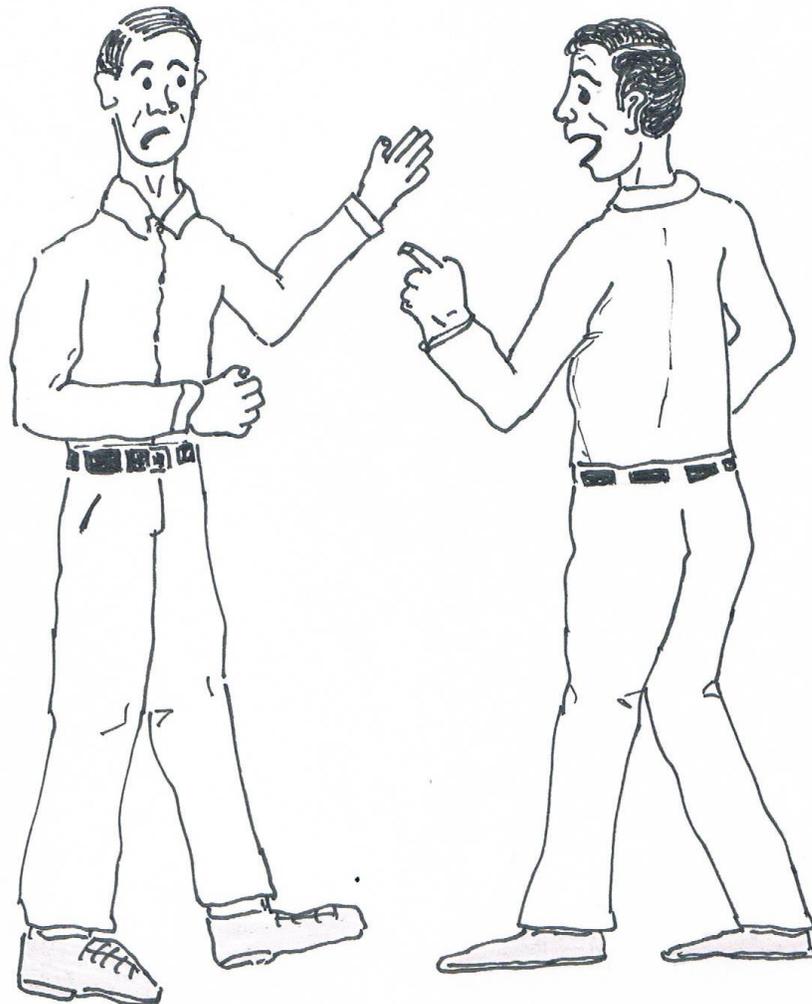
“And what is that?” The mistress fairly snarled this out.

“Send Ophelia as your emissary. Write a letter for her to take to her sister, telling her that you are presently indisposed and unable to travel north. Tell her that the young woman is a great healer and has been directed to help your sister’s recovery using her full range of healing arts. I suspect that Ophelia will be successful in her mission, and she can return back as soon as she is done.” The master said this softly but confidently, developing a plan in his mind as he spoke. Truth be told, he was petrified of Ophelia, and of her threat to do him mortal harm some night while he slept fitfully. But he also knew deep down that he was still attracted to her, to her beauty and her sensuality and her brazenness. So he was a conflicted man, torn between cowardice and fear and lust and longing. And all of this was being made more complicated by a disaffected wife who was suddenly wearing the mantle of jealousy and suspicion. But having Ophelia gone for a few months, on a mission of mercy, would buy him time to think and also allow him to don the cloak of magnanimity that he so rarely put on.

“But Ophelia’s a young girl, a slave who’s never been off this farm. How will she navigate her way up to Point Pleasant in the northern reaches of Virginia? She would be harassed on a daily basis by patrollers, who would assume she was a runaway.” The mistress had stifled her emotions and was looking at the proffered solution with a practical lance.

“Henry can go with her and protect her. As her owner we’ll furnish him with a letter of explanation that he can show to any inquiring party. We can get them up to Greensboro and Henry can figure out things from there. Not sure myself, but perhaps a train to Roanoke, and then on by train to Charleston. From there they can catch a boat down the Kanawha River. Henry will figure it out. But you can do right by your original family, and you can stay here and rest up and put all of these foolish thoughts out of your head.” The master pushed back from the table, intent on finding his overseer.

Calling His Bluff



“I’ve heard cockamamie ideas before, but this one really takes the cake! You want me to drop everything and head north with Ophelia by train to your ailing sister-in-law? On the cusp of planting season? At the risk of sounding pompous, without the proper direction from me, the planting by the field workers won’t get done properly. So we’ll either have no crop to harvest, or a poor crop at best. We barely broke even last year because of the leaf blight, but this could break us. I don’t think you want to deal with the bankers on the basis of a near-bankrupt farm.” Henry leaned into the master, the heat rising in his voice and his forehead.

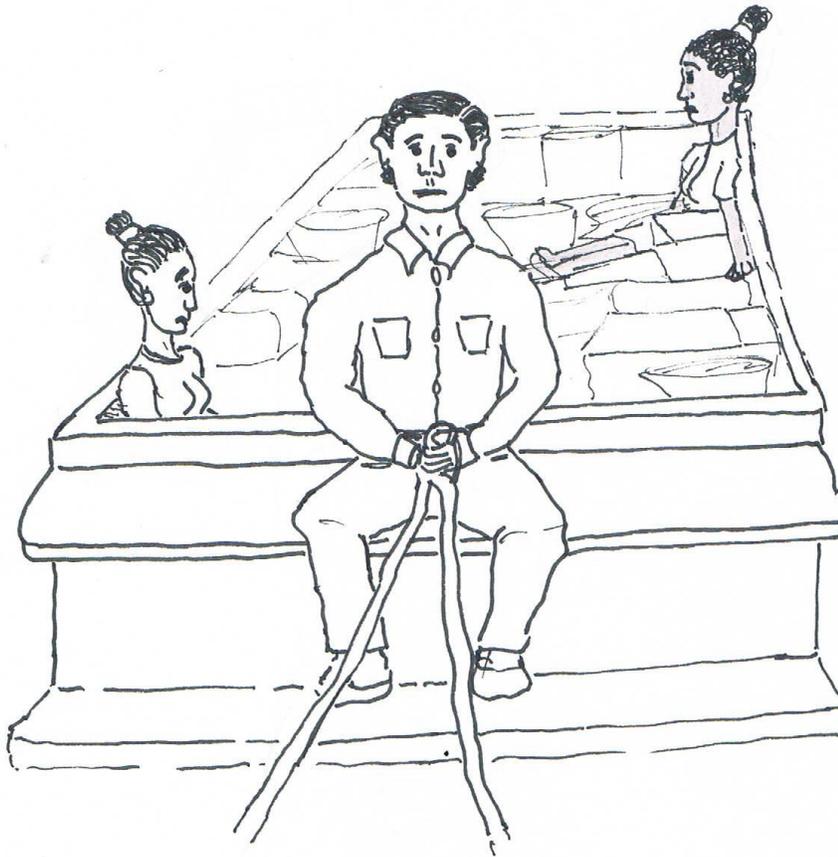
“With good luck, you might be away for just a month. Ophelia is quite the healer and will get my sister-in-law back on her feet in no time. I can take care of things here, I’ll just step up a bit and work longer hours and crack the whip on the workers.” The master smiled dimly, hoping to sway his colleague.

“I don’t mean to be hurtful, John, but you’ve lost touch with how this farm runs. We’re barely making ends meet, and your work ethic is less than stellar. And while I’m being blunt, pardon me for saying that

“That the two of you go together. You keep an eye on Ophelia, and she does her healing work on your sister. Rest as long as you like before embarking, and then off you two go. Henry and Mama and I will hold down the fort.” The master said this breezily.

“I’d probably scratch her eyes out before we got to Roanoke! No sir, I have a better plan. We will travel as a trio, you and me and Ophelia. That way I will have ample time to see if there is some kind of spark between you two. Once and for all, I’ll get to the bottom of this. And if there is, I’ll tear out the eyes of the both of you! And we may be gone for a while, so we’ll pack large trunks and go by wagon. Overland, by reliable horse. Are you man enough to drive a horse for that long a journey, Master John? And can you be that close to two women for so long, knowing that you won’t be touching either of them? This should make for a very interesting journey, no?” The mistress threw back her head and let out a hollow laugh, while the master sat staring glumly at his footwear.

The Open Road



The wagon rolled steadily northward, plying its way along a mix of dirt roads, plank roads and corduroy roads through a range of Carolinian forests. It had been agreed upon that the master would do all of the driving, as the mistress felt wagon driving was beneath her and Ophelia had no real experience with horses nor wagons. On they went, with the driver perched somewhat uncomfortably on a wooden seat and the two women sitting on rough blankets in between various trunks that had been packed for the trip. The master held the reins lightly with his left hand, and would periodically wrap a leather rein around his right wrist to break up the tedium of guiding the horses with one hand. The two draw horses were the best two from his stable of six horses on the farm, and he nudged and cajoled them to keep up the pace even on steady inclines.

“Damn these corduroy roads! My teeth are going to be shaken out of my head before we get much further into Virginia. I do wish these yokels had invested more in smooth planks, beyond just a mile or so outside of these one-horse towns.” The mistress said this to no one in particular, and shifted on her blanket with a wince of discomfort.

Ophelia heard this but simply stared out at the forest, determined to engage with the master and mistress in only the most minimal of ways. She had been told that she was being taken north to help out with the mistress’ ill sister. Going in the direction of north sounded good to her, as she would be

that much closer to Lucius. The recollection of reading the letter sent to Daniel was a continual balm to her spirit, and she went over and over the text of the letter in her mind. She wasn't exactly sure what lay ahead of her, but she reckoned that she needed to stay positive and keep her eyes out for any opportunity to slip away. But for now, she was content to stay where she was, as the wagon and its crew was heading in the right direction one roll of the wheels at a time.

"Is it near time for lunch? I'm getting close to famished." The mistress spoke this out in a shrill tone.

"We'll stop in under an hour. The horses have hit a rhythm and I'd hate to throw that off unnecessarily. We need to roll twenty miles a day if we're going to get up to Point Pleasant in just under three weeks." The master turned back towards the wagon with hooded eyes.

"Why three weeks? Couldn't we break it up a bit, rest some more during the days, even stop in the towns for some shopping?" Marie softened her tone, hoping to alter the schedule to some degree.

"We have dried food provisions for three weeks. And yes, we can get some hot food at a tavern when we come upon one near the end of a day's travelling. That'll stretch out our provisioning time a bit. But I'd like to keep our travelling costs to a minimum, so it'll be hot food only now and then. And as long as we can find a creek and some foraging area at mid-day and again at night, these two robust horses will be fine. And the quicker we roll, the sooner we'll be with your family, just in case your sister is faring poorly." The master said this nonchalantly enough, and then shot a nervous glance in Ophelia's direction.

"Please don't talk about my sister in front of the worker. She's probably all better by now, and my spine is getting shook for naught!" The mistress shifted her posterior, looking again for a more comfortable position.

"If she's not better when we get there, I'll help her to get better real quick. And the sooner we get there, the sooner I can get to working on her." Ophelia said this in a cool and diffident tone.

"What's the next town, and the one after that?" The mistress breezily changed the subject.

"Let's see. The store proprietor back in Danville wrote out directions and the list of towns pretty well up to The Narrows. Hmm, Collinsville is next, followed by Woolwine, Floyd and Christiansburg. He did suggest we spend a day's rest in Blacksburgh, where his brother owns a tavern on the main road. He gave me the brother's name and suggested we'd get more than a fair deal if we mentioned that we know his brother back in Danville." The master said this hopefully, and made a clucking sound in the direction of the horses.

"Ah, I can just feel the difference being back in my home state of Virginia. Carolina is fine, but Virginia is even finer. Wouldn't you agree, Johnnie?" The mistress leaned back on one pillow, and waved her hands at the passing scenery.

“I was born and raised in Carolina, and haven’t stepped much outside the corridor between Pittsboro and the farm. But loyalties set aside, I do agree this is mighty fine country.” The master turned and looked back at his wife almost affectionately.

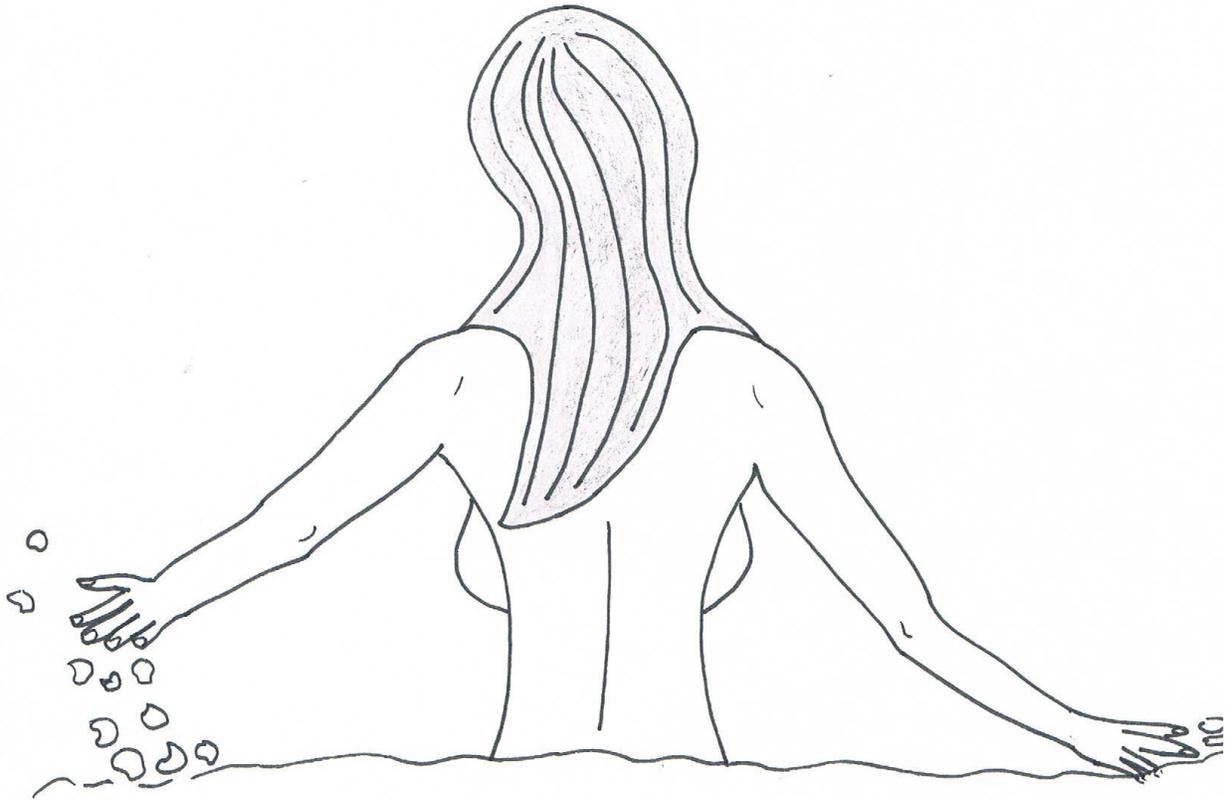
“I’ve never been off the farm up until now. And this is mighty pretty, but I’ll still take the farm over this any day. Yes indeed, that farm of ours is pretty special. No wonder Mama is always so happy, and the matron too. And all of our field workers, they’re just real happy folks.” Ophelia uttered this just slightly under her breath, but it was sufficiently audible to her two travelling companions.

“Well, if everyone is so blessed happy, why did that boyfriend of yours run away? And did he tell you that he was taking off? Signal you in some way? Or was it a complete surprise? And if you knew, why didn’t you run away with him? If he was truly your boyfriend, wouldn’t that be the logical thing to do?” The mistress barked out this string of questions.

“Lucius was a proud man, and your husband whupped him for doing something that is only natural. So he just had to leave. And no, I didn’t know, as he didn’t want to break my heart. But I wish he had told me, as I would have run away so fast you wouldn’t have been able to catch your breath!” The young woman sat upright, her voice rising.

“Ladies, ladies, tempers flare on an empty stomach. Here’s a nice creek to stop by for the horses to drink from, and we can have some provisions.” The master made another clucking sound with his teeth.

In the Forest



The forests and farm fields of southern Virginia gave way to rolling hills as the wagon and its occupants steadily made their way towards the Appalachian Mountains to the northwest. They bedded down on blankets on the wagon's bed, with lovely starry skies being the backdrop for their individual slumber and nocturnal dreaming. Daybreak always came unexpectedly, and they would rise and splash water on their faces, with Ophelia making a small fire for coffee brewing to accompany the dried breakfast provisions. Then off they would roll, keeping a watchful eye out for the quality of the roadway immediately ahead, and the uncertain prospects of crossing paths with a bear or bobcat coming out of the dark woods.

"I must say, I'm growing tired of eating dried beans and seeds every day. That tavern food back in Blacksburgh seems like a distant memory. Have we given any thought to hunting down a squirrel or rabbit, and have Ophelia stew it up with some beans?" The mistress said this at midday about two days out of Blacksburgh, as she chewed impassively on her rations.

"We're all missing Mama's cooking, that's for sure. And some fresh meat would certainly be welcome. The forest appears to be teeming with life, judging by the sounds I'm hearing as we roll along. And we do have a loaded rifle, so it's not out of the question." John said this reflectively, anticipating imminent trouble.

“Well then, stop the wagon and pick up the rifle, and go into the woods. Be a man, and bring back the spoils of your hunting for dinner.” Marie curled her lips mockingly.

“Uh, that’s a problem. I haven’t shot a gun since, since my troubles. I don’t think I can aim and shoot from my left side. I could try, but I’d probably just waste the buckshot. But you could give it a rip.” The master said this softly, with a tone of regret.

“I’m a lady, for God’s sake! I was taught to play the viola, not shoot rifles. As much as I would love a rabbit stew, I’m not going to be the huntress. But perhaps Ophelia could bag us our dinner?” The mistress raised her voice slightly, projecting it toward the young woman who sat off away under a tree.

“Nope. I heal animals, don’t kill them. If you want meat, stop being a lady and become more like a man. I’m very happy with my beans. Seeds are plenty fine as well.” Ophelia took a big handful off her plate and popped it in her mouth, chewing loudly to great effect.

Around mid-afternoon, after several hours of stony silence due to the confrontation over the hunting of small game, the entourage rolled into a sunlit meadow bordered on three sides by steep hills. The master brought the wagon to a halt, and spied a stream off to the right that connected several large pools of water.

“This appears to be a good location for the horses to forage and take water. None of us has bathed since we left home and I’m starting to get to the point where I wince when I raise my arms a bit. We’ve got some good lye soap and some rough towels, so I suggest we take the opportunity to bathe and clean up a bit. I’ll go downstream to give you two women some privacy and to ensure that you won’t have to face my soap suds floating by you as you bathe. Sound alright?” The master brought the wagon to a gradual stop, and stretched his stiff back before dismounting.

He took a towel and a bar of lye soap from the provisions box and trudged downstream, out of sight of the two women in a matter of minutes. He quickly disrobed, laying his garments off to the side of the watercourse and plunging head first into the cool pool of water. Splashing out, he grabbed the bar of lye soap and rubbed it all over his hairy body with the aid of his left hand, doing double duty on his lower decks. Soaped up, he went back to the pool and immersed in the water with a number of vigorous squats, swirling his arms around and kicking his legs to free himself from the soapy residue. The foam flowed away, and he pulled out to the bank and picked up the rough towel, rubbing it over his body as best he could with the use of one hand.

He stood in the sunlight, naked and slightly damp. The feel of the sun on his exposed body made him feel a touch devilish and a bit reckless. A thought formed in his head, and he stepped quickly upstream, running up a path situated on a medium-sized hill. From this vantage point, hidden by a large oak tree, he could see through dappled foliage and spy his wife at the very end of her disrobing. The mistress kicked off her bloomers and then daintily stepped into her bathing pool, recoiling slightly at the coolness of the water. She was waist deep in the water, and splashed her hands from side to side, making her voluminous breasts sway provocatively. The husband looked at his wife longingly, recalling an earlier

day when he would freely enjoy the pleasures of her enviable figure. His right wrist started to throb painfully, as a rebuke to his mind for creating this torment.

And then he heard a commotion of splashing emanate from a nearer part of the stream, and he realized that if he crouched down he would have a line of sight on Ophelia as she bathed in the next pool downstream of his wife. The young woman was lathered in foamy white lye soap that completely covered her breasts, belly and buttocks. But with a squeal she plunged into the cool pool waters twice in quick succession, and emerged onto the bank with water droplets beading on her smooth black skin. Ophelia was lithe and lean of figure, but considerably ample in more than one zone of her toned physique. The master crouched low, drinking in all of the details of her unclothed figure, until his knees cried out louder than his throbbing right wrist. He reluctantly pulled himself away from his voyeuristic perch, and ambled back to his pile of clothing. Shaking his head to clear some water from his ears, he realized he would likely have tormented dreams for the remainder of the trip.

Nearing the End of One Journey



A short, stubby man fussed with the reins of his horses, as he waited outside the general store in the village of Leon, Virginia. He saw a solid wagon approach him, covered in dust and bearing three occupants. A male driver, and two women sitting in the back. Two good-looking women, he thought to himself. But there was something about the white woman that seemed a bit off. The wagon rolled up beside him and he managed a feeble smile and a tip of his hat to the three travelers.

“Friend, we’ve been on the road for weeks. Travelling up to family in Point Pleasant. Would you know how many more days of travel to reach there?” The master looked more than a little bleary-eyed.

“Barely more than half a day’s ride. The Charleston Road’s in pretty good shape in this section. You’ll be there well before nightfall, even allowing for some time to stop and water your horses at Thirteen Mile Creek or Ten Mile Creek a little further up the road.” The diminutive man waggled a finger northward.

“Do you know the Beaulieu farm?” The master was not exactly sure where their destination was relative to Point Pleasant.

“Oh, yes, the Bow-Loo’s have a nice acreage off to the right just as the Charleston Road bends toward the river. Big forested hill behind the farm, can’t miss it. Their name’s on a post as you roll by on the road. Nice enough people, but their missus is mighty ill.” The older man fluttered his eyebrows sympathetically.”

“The missus is my sister. We have come from Carolina to help her get back on her feet. I’m glad we’re that close.” The mistress croaked this out, followed by a hacking cough.

“If you won’t think I’m impudent, ma’am, it would appear that full health doesn’t run freely in your family. I hope you’re well enough to nurse your sister.” The villager smiled apologetically.

“That’s why we’ve dragged her along, as she’s going to be the nursemaid for everyone.” The mistress pointed rudely towards Ophelia, who was sitting calmly and quietly at the rear of the wagon.

“My wife caught a cold a few days back after bathing in one of the streams along the road. We’re hoping it’s just a passing thing, and maybe the sunshine of the day will be a recuperative, or the thought that we’re almost at our destination.” The master said this in a hopeful tone, and looked nervously over his shoulder in the direction of his wife.

“She’ll heal up real quick if I can get the right medicines for her. I dug up some roots in the woods yesterday and made a tea last night with them, but that didn’t seem to work much. Master John, that little store right there may have a small apothecary section. Could I have a dollar to go in to see what they may have to make the mistress as good as new?” Ophelia had perked up and offered this suggestion in a lilting tone.

“Good idea, miss, here’s a dollar and don’t be too long.” The master had rummaged in his coat pocket and smiled nervously in the direction of the older man, who was taking in all of the subtle drama between the wagon’s trio.

Ophelia bounded up the steps of the store and went through its front door, its bell jangling merrily. To her surprise, a young black man stood behind the counter, dressed in a crisp white shirt and a full red apron.

“My, my, you the owner of this establishment?” She widened her eyes and pursed her lips.

“No, miss, I’m just the worker here. The owner’s in the back shed, doing his counting.” The young man smiled tightly.

“Alright then, I need a few things from your apothecary. Dried ginger root, and some ground garlic. Tumeric spice as well. All in little bags, please. And young sir, would you folks have any arsenic?” Ophelia lowered her voice.

“Yes, we keep a small supply for agricultural purposes. But...” A drop of sweat popped out on the young man’s forehead.

The Pulse Quickens



The next few hours went by in a bit of a flurry, with the unpacking of trunks from the wagon by a muscular and amiable Lucas, and a tour of the barn and its environs by a stooped and congenial Ernest. Somewhere in the middle of all that Master John appeared at the entrance of the barn and enquired of Ophelia about the herbal medicines she had bought back at the store in Leon.

“Make a nice hot tea, every hour on the hour. Stir in as much of the ginger and garlic as the missus can bear, along with a pinch of this bright yellow powder. That’s turmeric, and it works wonders, but only in small quantities. Thins the blood it does, and carries away infections. In less than a day she’ll be as good as new.” Ophelia handed three paper bags to the master.

“That little bit of stuff cost you a dollar? Did the clerk hand you back any change?” The master squinted hard.

“No sir. He asked for a dollar, I had a dollar, and I gave him the dollar. I don’t have much truck with the handling of money, Master Johnnie. I just cook and clean and do what I am told.” Ophelia said this more for the benefit of Ernest, who leaned up against a barn column, waiting patiently.

“And do you want to start your nursing of my sister-in-law this evening, perhaps after supper?” The master stole a glance out the barn door, in an attempt to gauge the time by the amount of light in the sky.

“For what I have in mind, it’d be best to start off bright and early in the morning. It’s been an awful long journey, and we’re all past tired. Maybe we can all tuck into some hot food and get to sleep early, and be as fresh as daisies when the rooster crows.” Ophelia said all of this in an uncharacteristically upbeat tone.

“Fine by me. After three weeks on that wagon seat I can barely stand up straight. Come in for food when you’re done being shown around by Ernest.” The master pinched the tops of the three bags with his left hand fingers.

“The white folks eat first on this farm. What’s left over is put on a tray for Lucas and me to eat. Our master will ring a bell to let us know when we can go and get our vittles. There’s a separate tray for the dogs, but some nights it’s hard to distinguish between the two trays. We do the best we can, and Lucas gets a bit more to eat than I do since he’s younger and fitter. I can only hope with another mouth to feed down here at the barn, they’ll take that into consideration when they ladle that food on the trays. Otherwise, we’ll all have to eat some of the food off of the dog tray, but I don’t like to see the dogs go a bit hungry. Mean and testy they are normally, but even meaner and testier when they’re hungry.” Ernest said this patiently, subtly rocking from side to side.

“I’ll mention that Ophelia is now here, and will do what I can to make sure provisions are fair.” The master strode towards the open door of the barn.

Ninety minutes later, with waning light, the bell for dinner was clanged with two sharp pulls by a black cook. Two trays of food had been set out, one steaming with corn and greens and fish, the other with corn, kitchen scraps and chunks of beef that were raw and gristly.

“I corralled the four dogs in the pen behind the barn, and they’re as hungry as blazes. So am I, but I’ll go feed them and join you two at the trestle table in the barn for dinner.” Lucas flashed a broad smile towards Ophelia.

“I’ll go feed the brutes. You men have been working all day, and I’ve just been sitting on the back of a wagon. But leave a little for me, alright?” Ophelia pursed her lips into a flirty pout.

“No, that don’t seem right, you being our guest and all.” Ernest stood stolidly at the barn door entrance.

“Nah, I came up here to work. You two gentlemen take this hot tray inside and get down to some eating, and I’ll join you in a jiffy.” Ophelia took the tray of scraps and meat and walked the long way around to the back of the barn. She looked down and to her satisfaction she saw a large wooden spoon on the tray.

“Perfect for mixing up a fine supper for my new doggie friends.” She said this aloud, just before stopping abruptly and bending down to put the tray on the ground.

Two minutes later she came up to the pen, and felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up as the dogs launched into a litany of breathless barking and sinister growling.

“Now, now, my pretties, who’s the hungriest? The hungriest gets the first big piece, but then has to share the rest with the others. Might it be you?” She flung a piece of meat with the aid of the spoon to a dark furred brute that had to weigh at least a hundred pounds. “Or might it be you?” She spooned a victual to a sandy colored German Shepherd. “Or maybe you?” A muscular young cur with a mean mouth rushed up for his allocation. “And last, but not least!” She flung a large chunk to an older dog with mean, wounded eyes.

The Sins of the Father



She knew she had to run, not just walk, but run. Ophelia reckoned she would have less than six hours before life would begin to stir back at the farm. Lucas would rise and start lining things up for the day's work. The kitchen workers would be bustling around with preparations for breakfast, all the more harried with the demands of the travelling relatives to accommodate. But not too many minutes would go by before someone would figure out that the farm yard was quieter than normal, that no dog barking or bristling canine energy was marring the peace of the beautiful sunlit morning. It might be another ten minutes or so before Lucas would stumble upon the lifeless body of the German shepherd, its eyes bulging with a grotesque glassiness and its large red tongue lolling lifelessly out of the side of its cruel mouth. And then the finding of the second dog, and the third and the fourth, all victims of the same fate with their furry, muscular bodies all tense and hard with eight hours of rigor mortis having seeped in. Ophelia could imagine that Lucas might frown and scratch his head reflectively, before heading back into the barn to report his bizarre findings to a slowly rising Ernest. How they would both call out to their newest barn guest, but that no answer would emanate back from the cot under the loft rafters. How they would spend a few moments putting two and two together, before they would plod over to the house and convey the unwelcome news to their master and his visiting brother-in-law, the man who had just lost a valuable asset only mere hours after finally arriving at his three week journey destination.

Ophelia kept running through the woods covering the hill north of the arm, keeping her thoughts at bay around what Master Johnnie would do on learning the news of her abrupt departure. She had seen first-hand how he had reacted when Lucius ran away, stamping his foot repeatedly and yelling at the top

of his lungs. She had often wondered since if the commotion he caused had contributed in any way to the loss of his injured hand. 'An angry mind leads to an angry body', Mama would always say. And so he would undoubtedly become very angry, and move quickly to apprehend his runaway house worker. The draw horses would be tired and the wagon wheels were in some level of disrepair, so she reckoned he might just borrow a horse from the farm and ride north towards the river. He was not a skilled rider, even less so with only one useful hand, and would not know the local roads or geography. So she had a bit of time on her side, and hoped that the white hot anger bottled up in her predator would diminish his abilities to skillfully track his prey.

Ophelia crested the top of the hill and stood in a bit of a natural clearing. She looked northward and could see a presence coursing sinuously through the broad valley. Silently it tumbled on, almost majestic in its bearing. She knew instinctively it was the river, and she had the good fortune that its southern bank only lay a country mile to the northwest. She knew from overheard conversation at the store in Leon that a village lay not far beyond the farm, and knew that she needed to stay away from the built-up area as that would be where the master would first go, asking questions of the townsfolk about a certain female runaway. So she looked up at the stars before commencing a slow, shuffling run downhill and between trees, asking for guidance on her best course of action.

As the sky started to marginally lighten, foreshadowing the rising of the sun in under an hour, Ophelia came down to a single lane road that meandered along the south shore of the Ohio River. She knew the road would be travelled upon in the not-too-distant future, and also knew that her presence would be of interest to anyone that she came across. The arriving daylight would not be to her advantage, and she knew internally that she needed to get across the river and into Ohio as soon as possible. So she walked westward, keeping a nervous eye over her shoulder and hoping for some form of divine assistance.

After fifteen minutes of rapid walking, she came upon a vegetable stand where two young black women were setting up their wares.

"Sister, where you from?" The tallest gal, dressed in a blue gingham frock, called this out to a nervous Ophelia.

"Uh, I'm a worker on the Beaulieu farm, just over the hill." Ophelia gestured nervously over her left shoulder.

"No you're not! We know Ernest and Lucas real well, they would have told us about a pretty little thing like you! Now, c'mon, where you from?" A shorter, stockier young woman with a frilly bonnet chirped this out while she sorted yams and potatoes.

"Um, down-country a bit. Carolina, actually. Just up here with my master and mistress to do a little healing work on Mrs. Beaulieu." Ophelia slowed up, but immediately started to wonder if she should have kept on walking.

“Oh yes, that missus is close to dead. You’d have your work cut out for you to heal her, from what I’ve heard. Sad, but that Mr. Beaulieu is a mean piece of work. Maybe he’ll get pulled down a peg or two if he has to raise those two little babies on his own.” The tall woman scrunched up her face and shook her head slowly.

“But c’mon, sister, we weren’t born yesterday! That wild-eyed look, that bag on your shoulder. You’ve run away, haven’t you? No, don’t get jumpy, there’s nothing to be afraid of. In fact, we can give you a little helping hand.” The young woman with the bonnet repositioned it on her head.

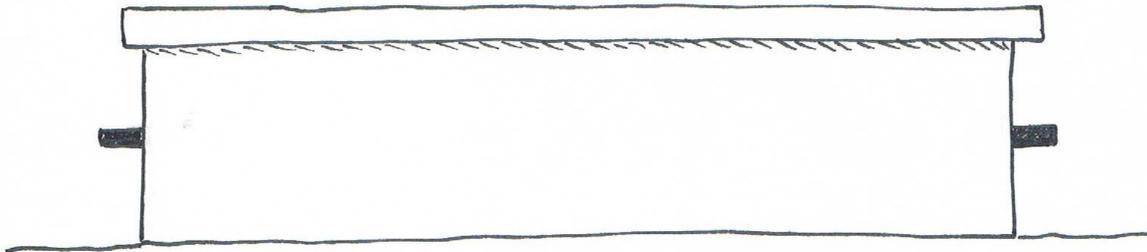
“Help, in getting to freedom? How?” Ophelia said this tersely in a low voice.

“We’re just minding our business, setting up a stand to sell our master’s vegetables. We got a fine master and he takes good care of us. He’s a widower you see, lost his wife about five years back. So we’ve been taking good care of him, in every respect. We’ve each had a baby by him, and he takes care of the little ones while we go and sell our vegetables. All pretty domestic, don’t you see? But it allows us to do some important work.” The woman in the gingham dress smiled mysteriously.

“Which is?” Ophelia started to wonder again if she needed to push on.

“We keep our eyes and ears open. And we see and hear a lot of things. And when we see a sister or brother on the run, we help them. Just like we’re going to help you.” The shorter woman came up to Ophelia and put her arm over her shoulder. “Head down the road another fifty yards. Big ol’ hollowed out stump on your right, by the river’s edge. Hide in there. Every morning a boat comes along the river. Piloted by a nice young man, a white boy. He’s the son of one of the biggest planters in Virginia, and that boy’s seen a lot of slaves treated badly. So now he does what he can to help other poor souls get across the river. He knows we help runaways, and the tree stump is one of his pickup points. He’ll float by in under an hour, steady as rain. We’ll flash him a little signal. He’ll stop and call out to you, and then lift you across the river. Don’t be scared, he’s a good lad. But he’s got to be careful and discreet-like, or the slave patrollers would be on to him and drown him in the river like a cat! Now go, girl. Time’s a wasting.” Both women went back to their vegetable stacking, whistling low under their breath.

On Free Soil?



The young son of the planter had been no more than a year or two older than Ophelia, and had quickly landed his boat on the south side of the river and signaled to her to come to him from her hiding place inside the hollowed out stump lying casually along the shoreline. He then rowed like the wind, tacking at thirty degrees or so against the strong current, and they came aground at a treed expanse of shoreline on the north side of the river.

“Alright, young miss, I’m headed back to see if I might have any more passengers to ferry across from another pickup point a little west of where we left from. I tend to nibble around the edges of Point Pleasant, avoiding the centre of town for the most part. My daddy knows a lot of people in and around these parts. He’d be none too happy with me if he knew what I was doing, but I do it anyways.” He tipped his hat back on his head and helped Ophelia out of the boat.

“Thank you very much. I feel better getting across that river so early in the morning. If we’re in Ohio, does that mean I’m free?” The young woman looked around with wide eyes.

“Well, you’re about as free as you think you are. There are free black folks here, going about their business, getting paid for their work. But I suspect your owner may not be far behind you, miss, and if he can prove he’s your owner, he can legally take you back south. And even if he doesn’t catch up with you himself, there are plenty of slave patrollers lurking around in Ohio, who’ll grab you like a ripe plum and sell you back south. Maybe to your master if they can find him, or they’ll find another owner who would be happy to have you.” The young man frowned reflectively.

“So you’re saying I’ve got to be careful. About where I go, and who I talk to.” Ophelia pursed her lips firmly.

“Yes’m, exactly. If you see a black person, they’ll pretty much help you or answer any question. White folks are trickier, they might not be out to harm you, but they might mention they saw you walking on the fringes of a town to someone who knows a patroller. These are small towns around here, strangers stick out like a sore thumb. So it’s better to hide in the woods during the day, rest up a bit, and then move under cover of darkness. So I’ll leave you now, with wishes and prayers for a safe and successful journey to true freedom.” The planter’s son’s eyes shone brightly.

“How do I best go onward from here?” Ophelia felt a sense of despair welling up in her from the looming uncertainty of her plight.

“I might suggest you hang out in and around this grove of trees for the rest of the day. When dusk arrives, head west along the shoreline. A mile or so down you’ll come to a small town. There’s a saloon on the main street near the river. Step safely in the shadows as you approach it, but then get inside quickly. The gentleman who owns the establishment, Mr. Phelps, will be serving drinks from behind the bar. Get up to him quickly and tell him Andrew sent you. He’ll know what to do from there to keep you safe and help you on your journey. God bless you, miss.” The agile young man put one leg in his boat and pushed off into the current with his other leg.

Ophelia lied down under a broad shingle-oak tree, quickly feeling the burden of three weeks of travel and her sudden flight from the Beaulieu farm. She fell into a deep sleep, where for the next ten hours she lay dormant with only a minor twitching of her arms and legs. Her fatigue took her into a dreamless state, with only an ominous feeling of being pursued coming to her sleep consciousness at several points during her sleep period.

Waning light and an overly full bladder finally brought her back to a waking state, and she quickly found herself walking south and west along a path that traced the shoreline of the river. When she saw a few homes and vegetable gardens appearing just ahead, she ducked behind a large tree and let another hour of dusk descend upon the town. She then skirted the homes along a hedgerow and followed a meandering creek. Coming upon a more major street, she heard a wagon go by and then another one as she lurked behind an outbuilding of what appeared to be a granary or a feed mill. The young woman felt the presence of someone standing close to her, and she turned to see a white-haired older black man leaning up against a shovel.

“Girl, you came around that corner so quick I was knocked speechless! Can I help a pretty little thing like you in any way?” A gummy smile was extended towards the young woman.

“Just trying to get to the saloon down by the water. Would you know the quietest way to get there?” Ophelia exhaled loudly.

“You’re on the run! I get it. Lord knows, if I was younger, I might just run with you! Saloon’s three blocks away, straight down First Avenue. But listen, miss, there’s no quiet stretch of First Avenue. It’s the commercial district of town. People always milling about, and some of them are plenty unsavoury. But you’re going to have to walk the gauntlet. Act big and brassy, like you own the town. If anybody hails you down, just blow by them and keep on walking.” The man’s rheumy eyes twinkled sympathetically.

Ophelia took a big breath and strode out on First Avenue. She kept her head up and her back straight, walking fast. One block down the street, she came up to a gaggle of white teenagers, who were leaning up against some barrels with no apparent purpose. They muttered something indistinguishable to her, but she kept walking purposefully and they went back to their stories.

On the second block she walked past a few stores that were still open and were warmly lit. A few matrons stood on the stoops, shopping baskets in hand and catching up on the gossip of a small town. They looked benignly in Ophelia’s direction and kept on whispering to each other.

Up ahead, outside the saloon, was a knot of disheveled young men, with mean faces and wolf-like eyes. They slouched with their hands in their pockets, but Ophelia’s looming energy was sufficient for them to furrow their brows and take notice of the young stranger.

“Miss, come here and give us a kiss!” The most brazen of the group extended a hand towards her, in a show of mock affection.

The young woman broke her stride imperceptibly, and then staggered noticeably. She emitted an alluring smile and then primped a bit for the admitting entourage. "Boys, I've had a bit too much to drink. But I think I need one more cup and then I'll be right back to entertain you gents. Is there a saloon around? My uncle said it wasn't too far down the road. Oh, here it is, it's my lucky day!" Ophelia changed her tone and altered the pitch of her voice, slurring the endings of each sentence as she feigned drunkenness to the admiring crowd.

She pushed through the doors and fortunately found a relatively quiet interior, with two men off in one corner with glasses of whiskey in their hands. A balding man polished glasses at the bar.

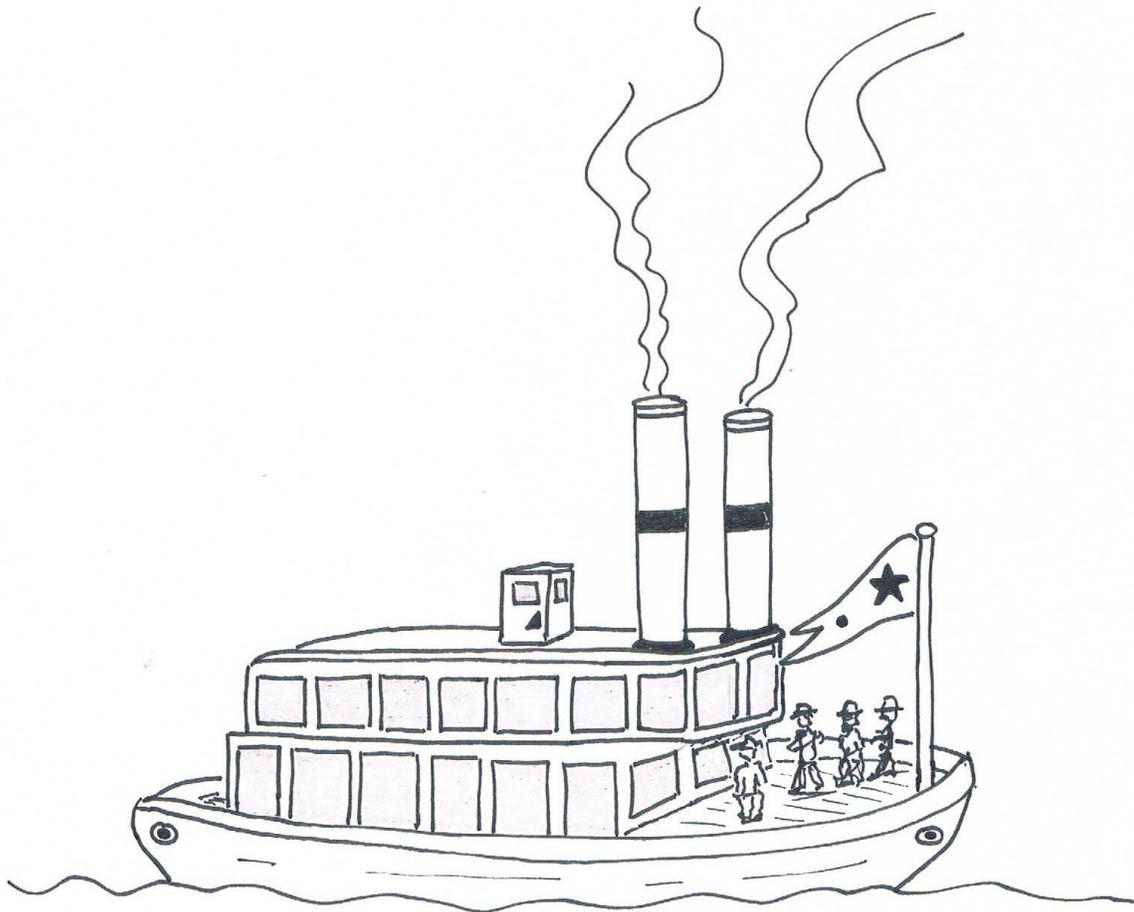
"Mr. Phelps? My name's Ophelia. The planter's son said you would help me." The young woman put her hands compliantly on the bar's wooden surface.

"Andrew's a good young man. Come quick with me, in the back. I just had a few patrollers in here and those louts on the street are friendly with them." He turned and hustled the new arrival into a musty room full of casks.

"Where do we go from here?" Ophelia looked around nervously.

"You're going to lie in one of those boxes over there for the rest of the evening and into the night. Don't worry, there are a few breath holes in the sides. You'll get loaded onto a steamboat that's going downriver. And if those patrollers do come back, they won't know you're tucked inside a whiskey box, all nice and safe. I'll give the bastards a free drink and they'll quickly forget why they came back into the saloon. But let's not waste any more time." Mr. Phelps opened up a long box with whiskey bottles at either end and a hollowed-out cavity in its middle.

A Spanner in the Driveshaft



The hours had ticked by very slowly in that dark and claustrophobic box. She had no room to move on either side, and maybe an inch or two above her head for a breathing layer that linked in to the two holes on either side of her to allow a slipstream of oxygen to enter the chamber. Her arms were by her sides, and just once when an itch broke out on her perspiring forehead she tried to raise them for some form of dermal relief. Frustrated when her fists quickly hit the underside of the lid, she took a deep breath and willed the itch away. Her stomach rumbled a bit, and she felt a twinge in her bowel, but she bore down mentally on both and told herself she wouldn't be in the box forever. Soon enough she would be walking the streets of Amherstburg, arm in arm with a beaming Lucius, peeking into store windows and trying to decide where to spend their daily wages.

But the hours ticked by slowly, and she began to harbor doubts about Mr. Phelps and his bar operation. Even Andrew, the planter's son, was cast into a pit of uncertainty and suspicion. Might all of them have been working together, spinning a web to trap her long enough for her master to cross the river and catch up to her? She could feel the stump of his right arm, dragging itself across her body in all manner of offensive and disgusting ways, until she cried out in defeat. Her mind was a swirl of hazy and tormented thoughts, accentuated by her physical entrapment in the near-complete darkness. But in an

instant she felt a pervading sense of mental clarity. She would not go back, she would not be overtaken, she would not be apprehended. The stronger she held on to this focused thought the more certain she became of her destiny. She would be just fine in the end, she simply needed to be patient with her plight at every point in the journey.

Ophelia must have fallen asleep, tumbling into a deep and dreamless state that humanely allowed the clock to move that much more quickly. She awoke to the sound of muffled voices, low in tone, and then she felt herself and the whiskey box moving. After a minute or so the box took on a steep pitch, and she felt a row of whiskey bottles press uncomfortably against the top of her head. There was nothing she could do to relieve the related pressure, so she scrunched up her face and blew out a chuff of breath until the box levelled itself and was set down heavily and unceremoniously in a manner that shook her bones to their core.

A few excited yells pierced the box's insulation, and she then both heard and felt the start of a large hydraulic motor. It rose and fell in a number of unpredictable pulses, and then sputtered along steadily for close to half an hour before she heard the welcome sound of a steel chisel tap-tapping along the side edges of the box's lid. And seconds later, the lid was pried upwards and a middle-aged white man with a flowing auburn beard stared down into the box's interior.

"Young miss, I'm very sorry for the predicament you just faced! Akin to being buried alive, I must say. So pop out of there and you can go below decks to freshen yourself and then come back up here and enjoy some of my wife's best soup. She sent a big tureen of it along for our run down to Cincinnatti, far too much for me and the men to handle, and we'd be delighted to share it." The gent held out two meaty hands and pulled Ophelia to a sitting position.

"Whew, that was almost more than I could handle. My name is Ophelia, but where am I?" The young lady pressed herself up and out of the box, felling a pins-and-needles effect as blood rushed towards her feet.

"My name is Adam, and the pleasure is mine. I'm the captain of this steamboat, and we're out in the middle of the Ohio River, with a final destination of Cincinnatti, Ohio. We run all kinds of goods up and down the river from Pittsburgh to Cincinnatti and back. Beans, flour, sorghum, whiskey. And sometimes more than just whiskey!" The bearded chap smiled broadly and pointed out the way to the stairs that led to below decks.

Several hours later, after two big bowls of a hearty bean soup, the sky started to open up and the first streaks of daylight flared across the sky from the east.

"Promises to be a fine day. We have a few stops here and there along the river, to both drop off goods and pick up various things. But with good luck, we should be in Cincinnatti by sometime tomorrow. You're going to need your energy for your next few legs of your journey, so you rest throughout the day and let me know if there's anything you need." The amiable captain stepped away to look after some details.

Ophelia spent most of the day napping on a shaded cot at the rear of the boat, getting up a few times to walk the perimeter of the vessel and admire the passing scenery. A hearty supper of chicken stew and biscuits was served by the ship's cook in the early evening, and she fell into an early and deep sleep that took her to the hour just before dawn. She stretched and went to the front of the boat, finding the captain sitting with a steaming mug of coffee.

"I've never been in a city before, and I'm a bit nervous about what I will find when we get to Cincinnatti." The young woman smiled nervously.

"It's a busy place, but there are good people down by the docks that will know where to take you safely and how to move you best on the next leg of your journey. There's no slavery in Ohio, but it borders a lot of states where unfortunately it still exists. So one always has to keep an eye out for the patrollers." Adam offered his guest a mug of aromatic fluid.

"Patrollers?" Ophelia raised her eyebrows quizzically.

"Oh, a fancy name for devilish scum, if you ask me. They're ne'er-do-wells that can't hold down a real job. So they cross the river and try to catch folks like you who are seeking freedom. They're plenty nasty while they're doing this, and then sell back their prey to whoever will pay them. We know who most of them are, and work around the bastards if we have someone under our wing who we're trying to help. Cincinnatti will be full of them, but the good folks will know how to stay one step ahead of them. Don't worry one bit, miss." Adam smiled a reassuring smile.

As if on cue, a loud racket started to emanate from the boiler room. Clanging of metal bits, sputtering of steam and loud hissing sounds caused Adam to jump up and bark out orders to his crew. Ophelia looked left and right worriedly, and got up and started to pace the deck.

"Ophelia, we've got an unanticipated problem on our hands. Not sure, but it looks like a boiler might blow. And if it does, we'll all be thrown up to the heavens or into the drink in itty-bitty pieces. So I've got the boys shutting the unit down, and we're going to limp into the docks of Ripley, Ohio, just downstream. I know one of the dock masters, and he'll get a wagon over to pick up a whiskey box but it'll be delivered to a private home and not a saloon. There's a preacher man, Reverend Rankin, who used to be the Presbyterian minister in the village, who now guides a flock of abolitionists. They'll help you and feed you and get you on another boat down to Cincinnatti. We could be laid up here for more than a week of repairs, and we'll have more than a few patrollers paying us an unwelcome visit over that length of time. But I'm afraid it means something unsavoury has to happen." The captain wrinkled his nose.

"Which is?" Ophelia rolled her eyebrows.

"You'll have to go back into that coffin one more time. But for an hour at the most, just so you'll stay safe and undetected."

Up the Hill



The second time in the whiskey box seemed like an eternity to the young woman trapped inside. The clanging and banging of the off-kilter steam engine didn't help matters, but eventually she felt herself being lifted and transported unevenly down a gangplank by two loud-voiced men whose conversation easily penetrated to the dark interior of the wooden box.

"Up, steady, an inch more, and a heave-ho from the back!" The box was foisted upon the back of a waiting flatbed wagon, driven by a prim older woman wearing a fancy dress bonnet and a striking blue cape.

"Gentlemen, thank you, I'll take it from here. Appreciate your hard work, and as always, Reverend Rankin sends his best regards to Captain Adam." With a click of her teeth and a light snapping of the reins, the horses pulling the wagon stepped away at a steady pace down Front Street.

Fifteen minutes later, having negotiated the awakening streets of the village of Ripley on its market day, the woman and the wagon pulled up to a stately house on a hill overlooking the Ohio River. She waved out to two black men who were building a trellis on the south side of the house, and they loped over to the wagon and jumped up on its flat bed, one on either side of the box.

“One, two, three...there we go!” The men lifted the lid in unison, allowing daylight to reach a blinking and weary Ophelia,

“My, my, it’s our lucky day to lay eyes on such a pretty little angel! What’s your name, sugar?” The older man smiled broadly, while his eyes sparkled.

“Ophelia, my name’s Ophelia. Where am I now?” The young woman sat up tentatively.

“Now don’t pay any attention to this old fool! Thinks he’s a charmer, he does. But we all know who the ladies favour, and that would be yours truly! Give me one of those delightful hands of yours and we’ll help you out of there.” A younger man with a wiry build extended a weathered hand with long, elegant fingers.

“Where are you from, darling?” The wagon driver stood at its tailgate and wrapped her cape tightly against the wind.

“Carolina. But I was travelling with my owners to some of their family near Point Pleasant, Virginia. Slipped away the first night and somehow got across that river.” Ophelia looked out across the expanse of fields and greenery unsheathing itself beside the panorama of the majestic watercourse.

“These two flirt with just about every girl or woman who comes through Ripley, so don’t pay them any heed, y’hear? But you are pretty, and I bet that master wants you back in his clutches real bad. But our mission here is to not let that happen, so you can rest assured you are among friends. We’re not Quakers, we’re Presbyterians. But we read the same Bible, the same Bible those slave owners read. But when we read the Bible, we conclude that slavery is wrong. So we do what we can to right that wrong. C’mon inside for some breakfast.” The woman assisted Ophelia down off the wagon, and extended her other arm since the young lady’s legs were more than a bit wobbly after her time inside the confinement of the wooden box.

The first major room they entered was the kitchen, which was brightly lit and warm in all aspects. Seven or eight people sat at a broad table, eating from plates of eggs and ham with large slabs of buttered bread on the side. At the head of the table sat a man in his mid-fifties, distinguished and calm, with a glowing countenance.

“This is Reverend Rankin, Ophelia. Reverend, Ophelia was captive on a farm down in Carolina, but got away from her owners after they travelled up to northern Virginia. She spent more than a few hours in a whiskey box, but the steamboat had engine troubles and she had to get moved off the ship here in Ripley.” The matronly woman untied her cape and pulled out two empty chairs from the table.

“Sit, my dear. You are most welcome at Rankin House. I’m not really a minister of a church anymore, but many people still feel the pull to come help us with our work. Here, break bread, you must be very hungry.” The patrician offered a plate of food to Ophelia.

“Thank you kindly, sir. I am most grateful for the help. But I thought if I got across the river, I would be safe, as slavery is not allowed here?” The young woman took up a big forkful of eggs.

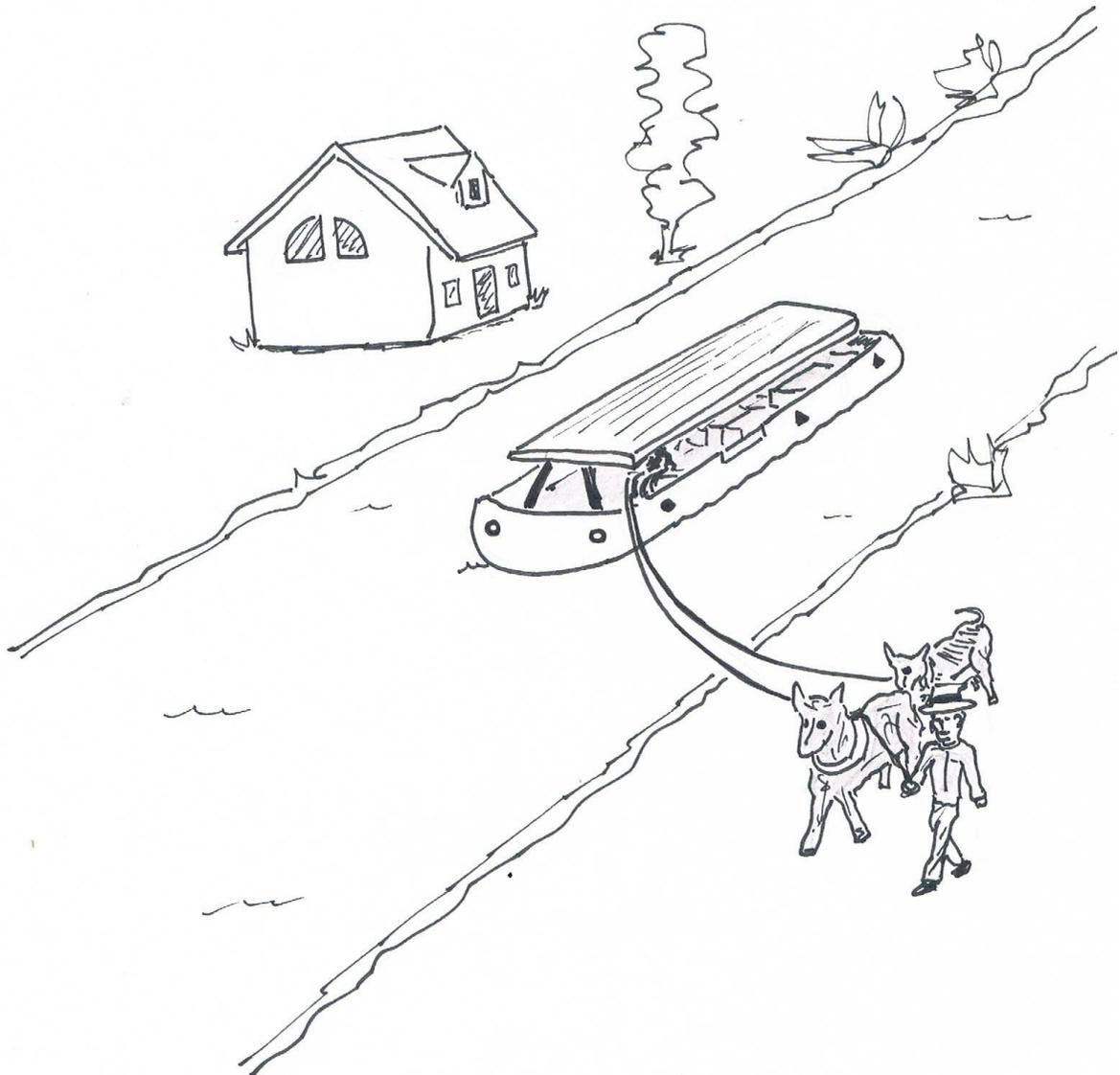
"I can understand the confusion, as it makes no real sense. The problem is that Ohio borders a number of states where slavery is still considered legal. And because we are part of the United States, the spineless leaders in Washington created a law that makes it illegal for us to aid former slaves to freedom. But we disregard that law, as we know it is in opposition to God's Law. But we must be careful, and even a bit cunning, or we could all be put in jail or even worse. So Rankin House is a refuge for all, no matter your skin colour or your situation. We're all God's children, no matter our exteriors or our circumstances." The preacher man broke a large chunk of bread and popped it into his mouth.

"And speaking of being careful, we do take a lot of precautions. If a patroller even begins the ascent of our hill, we have volunteers working in the fields that quickly signal the house that our guests must quickly get into their secure hiding spaces. But before we show you yours, Ophelia, we need to determine how to best move you down the line. Patsy, what's your best judgment? By land or by water?" The wagon driver addressed this to a sharp-eyed young white woman who sat across the table sipping from a cup of tea.

"There are reports of wagons being stopped for searching on the two land routes out of Ripley. We have another steamboat stopping in town in sixteen hours' time. Bound for the Queen City, just like the last one, but hopefully with a better engine. Will load at midnight, so with the drunken patrollers home snoozing in their beds at that hour, it will mean you can hide under a blanket on our wagon, and no more time in the whiskey box!" The logistics person smiled wryly.

"Thank God for that..." Ophelia rolled her eyes and took a big bite of her ham steak.

On the Hunt



“Don’t be an imbecile. We need to stay here and help out my sister’s family until they get back on their feet. God brought us here for a reason. I thought it was to help get my sister back to full health. But now that she’s gone to her just rewards, we have to stay and help with the caring of her two little babies. The loss of a wife and the needs of two little ones are too much for one person to bear. We’re needed here, and that’s that.” Marie turned sharply to her husband, her mouth set in a hard line.

“I humped and bumped over corduroy roads for three weeks to show you I was a good husband. And it made sense to try and help your sister recover. That’s why we brought that damn girl along, to help with the healing. But she’s hightailed it out of here, and I’m going after her. I’ve lost her boyfriend, and now I’ve lost the girl. If I go back to our farm without her in tow, I might as well tell all of the other workers they can run away at will. Within a year our farm will have no workers, and we’ll be bankrupt. So say what you want, I’m saddling up a horse and then crossing the river to track her down. I might

need some help to get it done right, but there'll be plenty of mercenaries I can hire in Ohio that are experienced slave trackers. I leave at dawn." John pursed his lips and averted his gaze.

"This is not about helping the farm, or sending the right message. I can see through that cloak of cobwebs in a second. You've always been smitten with that girl, haven't you? But nothing could be done about that, could it? Because I wouldn't look the other way if you took one of your slaves as your mistress! I'm not like the other wives at church, obedient and compliant, making love to their husbands mere hours after they were down fornicating in the slave quarters. I would have cut off your testicles one night while you fitfully slept, so you'd be a one-handed eunuch! Or poisoned your soup, just like she poisoned the meat for those dogs!" The mistress' voice ramped up shrilly, and her dark eyes bulged out of their sockets.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I am simply going to reclaim my property. She's a young girl, who has never been off the farm. She'll make a mistake and walk into some kind of trap. And I'll be right behind her, scooping her up and bringing her back. We'll return back here, and if you have done enough babysitting and have decided to return home, then we'll reunite back at the farm. I'll return with the girl, and we can try from that point on to become man and wife once more." The master let out a heavy sigh as his angry wife turned on her heel and left the bedroom.

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Ophelia's trip downriver to Cincinnati was relatively uneventful, but she had been sent in to a bit of a tizzy by the beehive of activity in and around its docks. This was the first city she had ever been in, and the attendant noise and frenetic energy both fascinated and frightened her. The docking of the steamboat in the early afternoon allowed an older Quaker woman to silently slip up its gangplank and have a quiet word with the steamboat captain. In under a minute she had linked her arm with one of Ophelia's and they were soon quickly walking down a secluded street near the wharf. The young lady would be fed and provided tidy quarters in the attic of an old brownstone townhouse, and the next morning after a hearty breakfast she was taken by hansom cab to the Cincinnati terminal of the Miami and Erie Canal. There she was put on a barge boat bound for Toledo, piloted and managed by an older black couple in their fifties.

"If anybody asks, you're our daughter. You were born in Ohio, and are as free as anybody you see here. We barge up and down this blessed canal, pulled along by cantankerous mules, dropping things off and picking things up. We go up and down in a system of locks, like water stairs. Up and down we go. If you see anybody who looks unsavoury, go quick below decks. And if we call out to go below decks, you do it in a jiffy, y'hear?! And since you're now our daughter, we'll treat you like one. Which means this pile of potatoes needs to be peeled for supper!" The broad faced matron smiled warmly at Ophelia.

"Yes'm. I'm happy to earn my keep, and I'll get right on those potatoes." The young lady flashed a sly grin and got down to work.

An Unsavoury Alliance



Master John had secured a quick passage across the Ohio River from Point Pleasant to Gallopolis on a flat skiff carrying barrels of edible oil and a few farm animals destined for market. His borrowed horse was a bit jumpy on the ride from the farm to the dock, and even jumpier on the river crossing. The skiff wobbled and bobbed a bit as the midstream currents turned more turbulent, so the uneasy equestrian pulled on the reins and spoke reassuring words to his borrowed mount. They arrived at the dock in Gallopolis in relatively short order, and the master walked down the gangplank with his horse in tow.

“Say friend, where’s the best place in town to get a drink? Where the patrollers go to slake their thirst?” He realized his Carolinian drawl might seem a bit out of place on this side of the river.

“Two blocks down, on the left. LaPierre’s is one of the oldest bars in French Town. Henri’s the owner and the guy behind the bar. He doesn’t court the patroller trade, but they seem to congregate there. He’ll take their dollars, even if they’ve been earned in a dubious way.” A middle-aged man with a ruddy complexion pointed down the street, a mild grimace on his face.

“Thank you, sir, I’ll meander in that direction.” The master clicked his tongue, tugged on the reins of his horse, and was soon tying it up outside LaPierre’s.

“Henri? I need your advice. And give me a glass of your house bourbon.” The master sidled up to the dark wooden bar.

"I'll pour your drink and you can tell me what you're thinking about. Sort of slow right now, so it's a good time to give counsel." A short, muscular Frenchman in a crisp white shirt and black vest reached for a bottle of Old Tub bourbon. "So what's your quandary?"

"I'm from Carolina. Own a tobacco farm with a bunch of workers on it. Brought one of them up north to help heal a family relative, but she ran away the first night. Poisoned every dog on the farm, so she got away without a peep. She's a valuable asset, and I aim to find her and bring her back. But my relative went into a downward spiral and slipped into eternal slumber. Sad, but it also cost me time. I'm disadvantaged by at least three days, and I'm now going to need help to track her down. Professional help." The master took a slug of bourbon.

"Happens a lot. Ohio is a free state. Blacks living here are free, and when a runaway crosses the river they are the closest to freedom they've ever been. And it can be hard to tell the free blacks from the runaways. So you're right, you're going to need someone who knows the general game to solve your specific problem." Henri wiped the bar with a greasy cloth and hitched up his trousers.

"Who around here would you recommend?" Master John raised his eyebrows and peered over his shot glass.

"Oh, there's a lot of good trackers, but they're often lazy louts who want to lay around and drink all day. There's good money in this enterprise, and the spoils of the hunt have led to the ruin of many. But often they find their prey within twenty-four hours of the bird taking flight. They work on local tips, from people who've seen things and will spill their information for a few dollars. But three days or more out, your gal could already be down in Cincinnati or even halfway up to Canada. The underground railroad folks are getting even smarter and brassier, and move their passengers along to freedom quicker than you might think." Henri folded his arms across his chest in a show of mock defeat.

"Railroad? Do you mean an actual railroad?" The master stuttered and sputtered a bit of his whiskey in the bargain.

"In some cases, yes. But the Underground Railroad is a human network of people who think slavery is wrong, and use their homes and barns and friends to move runaways up the line. Could be by rail, or wagon, or boat, or on foot. But they're organized, and they'll be three steps ahead of you unless you know their methods." Henri leaned over towards the master and spoke this out quietly.

"Which takes me back to my primary question, who's the best tracker in town?" John leaned in and softly slapped his hand on the bar.

"He's good, very good, but comes at a high cost. And he's hard to work with, as he does things his own way. But Peter Greeves is a crazy good tracker of humans, and he often comes in here around 5:00 for a drink. Which means you have another forty-five minutes to kill. How about another shot of bourbon?" Henri had the bottle already hovering over the master's glass.

Peter Greeves was a shade over six feet, lanky and raw boned. His face was a grizzled mask of random stubble and undisguised disgust for his fellow man. He walked with a slight limp, and wore clothing that

looked like it faced laundering only infrequently. When he came in to LaPierre's, Henri motioned right away for him to approach the bar.

"Peter, this fellow is from Carolina. Lost a slave recently and wants her back. Could you hear his story and determine if you might be of some help?" Henri poured a generous shot for his recent arrival.

"Depends on a lot of things. Most of all if I think we can work together productively." The middle-aged man took a long pull of his whiskey.

"I'm, I'm sure that we could be amicable colleagues. I need someone experienced, and you are highly recommended by Henri." The master nervously tucked his shirt inside his waistband.

"Again, maybe, and maybe not. What's the girl's name?" The mercenary looked over at the master with a steely gaze.

"Ophelia. Her name is Ophelia." The master's voice became quavery.

"Pretty little thing?" Greeves arched his eyebrows fully.

"Uh, well, yes, I suppose you could say that." A bead of perspiration popped out on the master's brow.

"Alright, I think I understand the motive for chasing her. How long has she been on the run?" The patroller leaned in towards the master.

"Three days, minimum. We had a death in the family to attend to." The master shrugged apologetically.

"Good Christ, man, she could be up in Canada already, given the way the Underground's been moving runaways lately. Alright, I'll take it on as a challenge. But I set the rules, and I set the price. Are we clear?" Greeves went back to his shot glass.

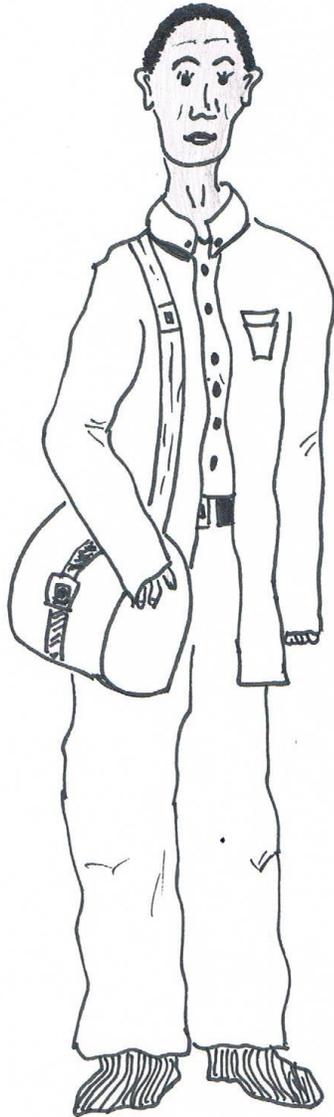
"And that would be?" The master bleated this out timidly.

"Fifty now, fifty when we catch Miss Ophelia. A hundred dollars in total. Do we roll?" The unsavoury character furrowed his brow.

"But that's probably more than she's worth." The master mildly protested.

"This is not about what she's worth at auction, sir. This is about recovering something that you own, that you desperately want back. And one can't set a price on that, can one?" The patroller swiveled and put his elbows resolutely on the bar.

Like Samson, But Stronger



The barge boat poked along the canal, inching northward, with its three occupants working hard to load and offload goods on its journey. The transporting mules were changed at the end of each day of strenuous pulling, with fresh mules provided by a network of farmers up and down the canal. The domestic operations of cooking and cleaning were quickly taken over by the efficient and affable Ophelia, and the barge operators clearly and demonstratively appreciated her energy and enthusiasm for carrying out a range of mundane tasks.

Late in the afternoon after more than a few days of flowing north, the barge boat pulled into a dock that was an established mule switchover point for the transport operation. A farmer stood there waiting with four fresh mules tethered together, beaming a big smile at the gentleman pilot who he had worked with for many years as he and his wife plied up and down the canal.

“Jeb, good day, kind sir! Particularly happy to hand over these here cantankerous beasts, as they’ve been balky for most of the day. I don’t know if they deserve their rations, but I reckon you always take good care of your animals.” The pilot reached out with a barge pole in the direction of the farmer.

“Amos, we all have a few bad days. I’ll give them a good talking to, and they’ll be ready for you on your way back down. There’s been a lot of patroller activity up and down the canal today. These bastards seem agitated and are like dogs that smell blood. One of the friendlier ones gave me a bulletin of the runaway they’re trying to track down. That fellow Greeves downstate had the master give a description to a crack illustrator, and they printed a thousand copies and ran them by fast horse all the way up to the border. Ever seen this young woman on your travels? She’s in the crosshairs of a pretty ruthless hunting squad.” The farmer handed over a wrinkled sheet of paper, with a woodcut etching that bore an uncanny resemblance to the young woman cutting vegetables in the bowels of the barge boat.

“Hmmp, can’t say as I have. But if you don’t mind parting with this, I’ll show it to the wife and we can keep an eye out for the young filly.” Betraying no emotion, the barge pilot folded up the bulletin and put it in his back pocket before setting to the tasks relating to the mule transfer.

Ten minutes later, Amos tromped heavily down the steps to the lower decks. “Mama, we’ve got a real problem. Greeves and his gang are turning over rocks to get that girl who’s been with us. It’s only a matter of time before they intercept our path and search the barge. She’ll be a sitting duck, and we’ll be at risk too. Things can get plenty nasty real quick, especially if they’ve been drinking.” He held the tattered poster out to his wife.

“Lord, no!! That’s a spitting image of this beautiful gal. She’s got to get off the barge and take her chances in the woods on foot. But we can do what we can to help her.” The woman turned and stepped quickly to the kitchen, where she found her boarder moving pots on the stove.

“Miss Bea, I’m not even ten minutes away from having dinner ready. Hope you folks are hungry, as I think everything’s going to turn out real tasty with all those good ingredients you’ve given me.” Ophelia flashed a broad smile and tucked a wisp of her trademark hair up under a band.

“Ophelia dear, we’re going to be eating very quickly tonight. We’ve just got some bad news, that your pretty little face is on a thousand bulletins up and down the state. Your master must want you back real bad, if he’s hired Peter Greeves to track you down. He’s a bit of a legend, as he has had a lot of success in nabbing runaways and returning them to slavery. So we’re going to have to be just as cunning and ruthless. So let’s eat and then get started on your transformation.” The woman frowned, and scrunched up her nose.

“Oh no, I can’t go back! Not under my master, he’ll have me whipped within an inch of my life if I get caught. I’m feeling caged in already on the barge here, I have to run! You’ve been very kind to me, treated me just like my own Mama would. But I’ve got to go now, I’m sorry.” Ophelia’s eyes bulged and her head moved nervously from side to side.

“You will have a square meal before you go. It might be the last one for a while. And as much as I hate to say it, I’m going to have to cut off all that beautiful hair of yours. Give you a man’s haircut, and dress you in some of Amos’ old clothes. Something baggy, to hide that figure of yours. We’ll let you off at a woodlot near the canal, and you can go from there on foot. You could still be in trouble if you cross paths with a patroller, but he’ll see a young man and not the young lady he’s so desperately looking for. Tell anybody who asks that you’re a free man, and that you’re running an errand for your boss to the next town. Keep your voice husky and low, and say very little in general. You’ll be alright girl, and I’m going to miss you like the dickens ‘cause you’ve quickly crept into my heart!” The older woman enveloped Ophelia with a warm embrace.

Two hours later, the barge stopped along a segment of the canal that was heavily wooded. A lithe young man, wearing baggy pants and a jacket far too big for his frame, ran down the gangplank and turned for a last wave to the couple on the deck. Cinching up a bag on his shoulder, he pivoted resolutely and plunged into the stand of trees, picking his steps in a northward arc.

Searching for a Haven



The young man set down his axe, tired after hours of chopping wood. The woodpile out back hadn't quite got them through to the full blush of Spring. There was more light into the evenings, but the temperature hadn't kept pace with the calendar so his Ma had asked him to spend some time and chop

“Which town?” The young man smiled affably.

“Oh, uh, near Pittsboro.” This was said in a husky tone.

“Pittsboro, hmph, never heard of Pittsboro, Ohio. But it’s a big state, so one can’t know all of its towns. Where you headed?” The lanky lad slid down off his perch.

“Oh, north, up north. Amherstburg.” Ophelia grinned broadly, donning a cloak of casualness.

“Amherstburg, hmmm, don’t know of an Amherstburg, Ohio either. But wait a minute, there is an Amherstburg on the other side of the Detroit River. On British soil. Why are you heading out of the country?” The boy’s tone was friendly enough, , but his eyebrows knitted together suspiciously.

“Oh, uh, family. Getting back with family. Yessir, it’s all about family.” Ophelia started to walk slowly down the trail.

“Oh, hold on, no, no, hold up. I get it now. You’re on the run. You’re running from the patrollers, aren’t you? You want to get up across the river, so you will be free.” The young man’s face shone brightly.

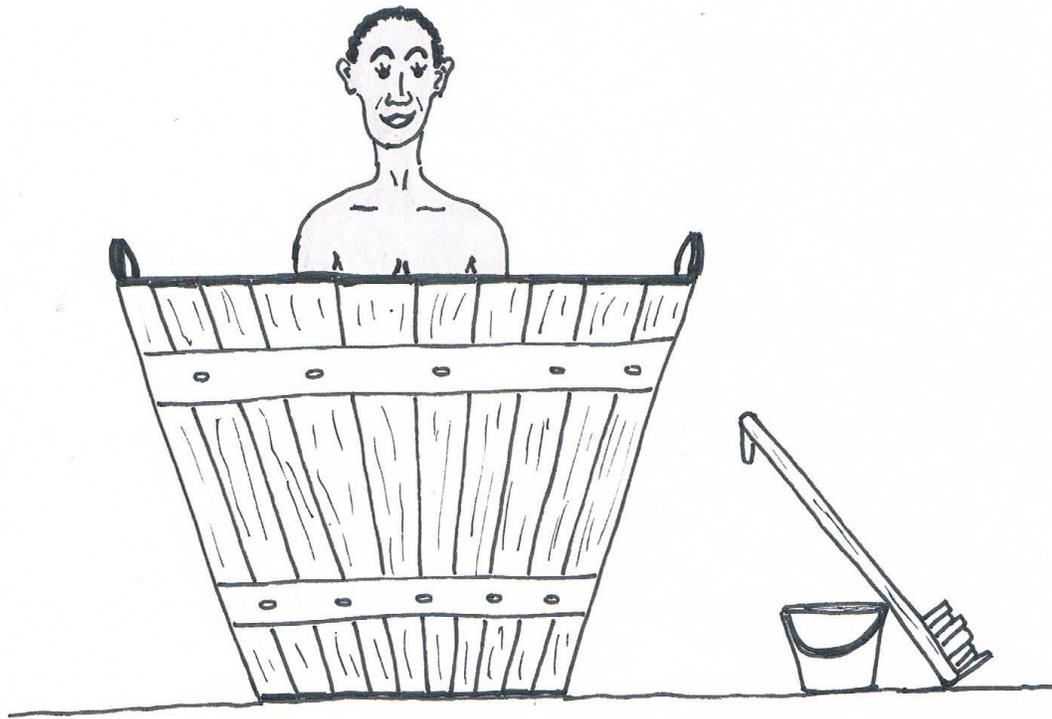
“No sir, I’m already free. Just walking some distance to get to my family.” Ophelia kept her voice low and started to take a few more nervous steps away from her conversation partner.

“Okay, okay, but listen. Where are you sleeping tonight? Too darn cold to sleep in the woods with the frost we’ve been having. Come with me, we’ll give you a hot meal and a warm place to sleep. Lord knows I’ve been chopping wood all day, so the house better be warm.” The lad grinned goofily.

“Much obliged. How far is your home?” Ophelia said this shyly.

“Less than a mile. But we might take a slightly longer route to avoid the back forty of our neighbor. He’s kind of a mean piece of work, and has been known to turn in black folks to the patrollers. Some people will do nasty things for money. If you are truly free, or might just be running to freedom, let’s exercise some precaution. And I know you’ll love my Ma’s baked beans and pork dish.” The two young folks walked in the direction of home, a bit awkwardly at first but soon becoming engaged in a deep conversation.

Hitting the Target



“I’ve seen Caleb lurking on our fence line twice in the last day. It’s like he has sixth sense that we’re harbouring someone under our roof! Remember the last time we sheltered a runaway? He sniffed that one out too, and if we hadn’t moved quickly, that young man would have been nabbed by the patrollers who showed up in just a few hours. You say this young fellow claims to be a free man?” Peter’s mother had a network of worry lines etched across her face, accentuated by the heat and steam rising from the pot of soup she slowly stirred.

“That’s what he claims, Ma. But I haven’t asked him for his papers. Even if he has documentation, with the wrong set of patrollers showing up they’ll just rip it up and yank him South anyways. We just need to offer him a roof over his head and some victuals until the time is right. Caleb will give up and go back to his porch if we stay calm and there’s nothing to raise suspicion.” The rangy lad smiled tightly, hoping to reassure his mother.

“Alright, alright. It’s just been riskier this past year to help black folks. The magistrate in town has started to enforce the Fugitive Act, and I don’t want you or anybody in this house to get into trouble. In some towns they look the other way, but not here. You know what I’m saying?” The mother’s eyes became dewy.

“Yep, I get it. I reckon it’ll help if Caleb stops sniffing around. Maybe I’ll go out and do some shooting practice. Might just let a few go astray right over his head as he lurks in the woods, accidentally on purpose, y’know?” The young man picked up his rifle and headed out the door.

He sauntered over the field to the west of the house, peering up into the trees of the nearby woodlot. Truth be told, he had become a crack shot over the last few years due to a steady hand and some expert training offered up by his father. He didn't much like shooting birds out of trees, and would only do it in the dead of winter when meat supplies ran out. But he could shoot the centre out of an oak leaf from a hundred yards or more, and he banged off a few rounds as he scanned the forest edge with his sharp eye. He spied a grey coated bulky figure leaning up against a tree, so he fired three quick rounds into its trunk about ten feet off the ground, from a distance out of a hundred and fifty yards.

"Christ, Peter, are you trying to kill me?" The shadowy neighbor ducked reflexively, and yelled this out in a muffled tone.

"Caleb, is that you? Dreadfully sorry my man, my aim isn't worth writing home about! I'm committed to improving it, but it's going to take a lot of practice. By the way, anything I can help you with?" He smiled roguishly as he saw his neighbor wave him off and stride purposefully in the direction of his cabin.

"This soup's going to need to stew for another hour or more before it's ready. I'm just going to curl up in a chair by the fire and have a wee nap. I ran a few buckets of hot water out to the tub in the woodshed and told the boy he should bathe with some of that good lye soap we made in the Fall. It appeared to me that he hadn't had a bath in some time. But I just realized I didn't give him a towel to dry off. Run this back to him and sit a spell with him while he soaks in the tub." The mother held out a large swath of rough-cut cotton fabric.

Peter went through the pantry with the towel on his shoulder, whistling through his teeth. He found the door leading into the woodshed closed, and he hesitated for just half a second before turning the knob and stepping into the dimly lit space. In the middle of the woodshed sat a large tub with wooden slats. And inside the tub, sitting in a frothy mix of hot water and lye soap, was a shorn Ophelia. But repeated scrubbing of her face had taken off the grime of sleeping rough and cold in the forest, and the absence of her long and voluminous hair only made her stunning facial features all the more attractive. As she sat immersed only to mid-torso in hot water and soap, her curvy and lithe breasts were eminently visible to her goggle-eyed host.

"Just brought you a towel." A few seconds of silence ticked by. "And, uh, you're not really a boy, are you?" Peter blushed a bit but didn't look away from Ophelia.

"No, I'm definitely a young woman. Who just had all her hair cut off to make her look like a boy. To disguise myself, so I could have a better chance of getting up to Canada. So I'm not a boy, and I'm not free either." Ophelia uttered this resolutely, pushing her shoulders back.

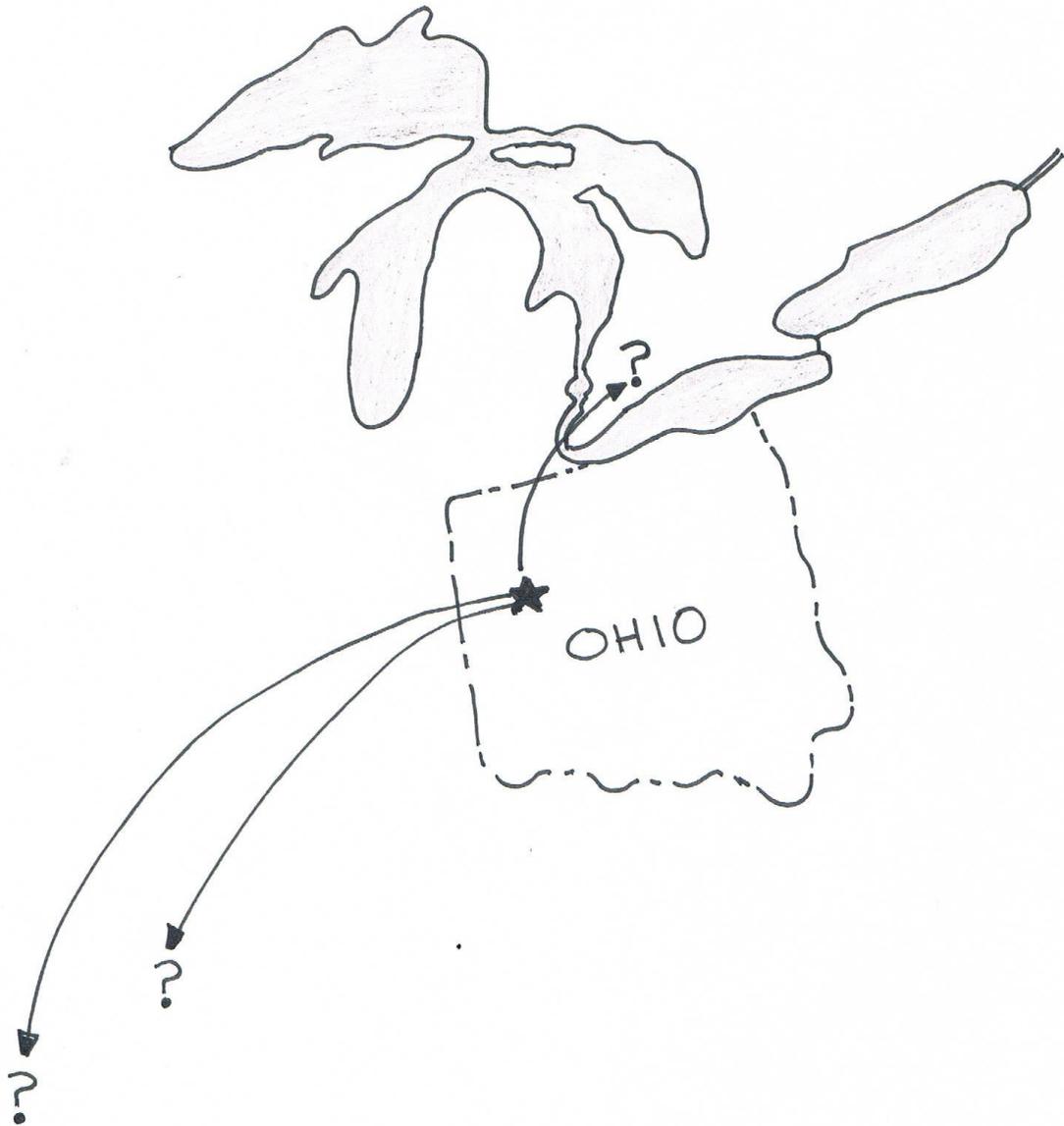
"You're, you're the girl on the posters, slapped up on the board at the Post Office! I should have known by your eyes...your beautiful eyes." Peter smiled grimly and set the towel on the edge of the tub, turning to leave.

“Wait just a minute.” Ophelia’s hand shot out and firmly trapped the boy’s wrist. “Have you ever lain with a woman?” Her voice was soft, yet husky.

“No, miss. I’ve never had a girlfriend, and just live here with my folks.” He said this shyly and turned away from her lingering gaze.

“Well that’s going to change right now. Pour that extra bucket of hot water in here and pop out of that shirt and those britches. We’re going to enjoy a little bit of soapy playtime and then who knows what might happen from there?” The nubile young woman grabbed Peter’s neck and gave him a lingering kiss, while he awkwardly unbuttoned his shirt and reached for the handle of the water bucket.

Running on the Spot



The next few weeks tumbled by in a hazy weave of anxiety, tension and unbridled romance. Ophelia's night of passion back in the Carolina slave hut notwithstanding, both participants in this whirlwind love affair were neophytes in the art of emotional entanglement. She was a down-country slave who had tended to domestic duties on a struggling tobacco farm. He was an only child on an unkempt mixed farm in Ohio, dreaming of bigger horizons but rooted to his parents' limited expectations. But they were both bright of mind and attractive and healthy young people, and their emotional and physical attraction was palpable and exciting to both of them.

Modesty and cultural norms prevented the young man from hinting to his parents that he was falling in love with the runaway living in their attic. He thought it prudent to maintain the façade that Ophelia was a young male runaway, and he became the bearer of all food trays, bath towels and bed sheets so

that his Ma would have no opportunity to discover the truth. Caleb kept lingering at the tree-line of their farm, even being seen with a spyglass in his hand to aid with his observation of the fields and the home of the adjoining farm. Once, when Peter was in town to pick up supplies, he overheard an agitated conversation between two men at the post office. Leaning against a nearby pole to subtly overhear, he learned that a major bounty reward had been placed for the capture of the young Ophelia depicted on the runaway bulletins. So late that evening, as the young couple took their habitual long walk through the forest for some fresh air and exercise, Peter hesitated to initiate a difficult conversation with his playful paramour.

“C’mon sourpuss, give me a big kiss!” Ophelia tugged his right hand and attempted to draw him in close.

“I need to...it’s just that...” He gave her a short peck on her lips.

“Not fair! Your Mama’s fast asleep half a mile away. I need a better kiss than that!” The young woman wrapped both her arms around his midriff and sensually pushed out her lips.

“You know I love to kiss you, and you also know I love to do more than just kissing! But there’s some things I need to tell you, and some things I need to ask you.” Peter’s eyes burned brightly.

“Alright, spit it out, I’m all ears!” The young woman smiled broadly.

“You’ve been really good at laying low, hanging out quietly in the attic all day, and just walking with me at night like we are now.” He was starting slow.

“Yeah, your taking a break from your chores every afternoon and coming up to pay me a little visit has helped break up the tedium. And there’s a small library of childrens’ books I’ve been working through to practice my reading. And your Mama’s a pretty fine cook, so no real complaints.” Ophelia’s eyes flashed.

“I know you came to us, not intending to stay, just passing through on your way to freedom. And from what I can tell, there are some people that really want you back. Old Caleb’s still sniffing around as he has some sense we’ve helped runaways in the past, but I think there’s other and more sinister folks floating around who are on the lookout for you.” Peter said this softly and quietly.

“I’m not going back! I’ll kill all of them before I let that happen!” Ophelia snarled, holding a mental image of Master Johnnie with a sharp shaving razor taut to his throat.

“No, no, calm down, my sweetheart! You’re safe with us, no reason to have to move on. You can stay with us forever, if I have a say in the matter.” Peter reached out and held both of Ophelia’s hands.

“But I am running for a reason. To be free, for sure. But I am also running to reunite with my boyfriend. He’s from the same farm in Carolina, the master became jealous and beat him, so he ran away. He got up to Canada, to Amherstburg.” This all tumbled out in a quick flurry.

“How do you know he got there safely?” The young man’s face felt on fire.

“He wrote me a letter. Asking me to come join him, and to make a life together.” Ophelia retreated imperceptibly.

“That’s fair, or fair enough. But stay with us, with me, until it’s safe to go. Maybe I can convince you, show you, that I’m even a better boyfriend than this other fellow. And if I can do that, we can run away together. Go out West, or down to Mexico. Where we don’t have to worry about slave patrollers, and where we could build a real life together. Sound like a fair plan?” Peter went up to his young lady with outstretched arms.

“Yessir! Now give me that big kiss!” Ophelia embraced him tightly.

Spring came late, followed by a short but hot Summer and a majestic Fall with beautiful coloured foliage throughout the nearby woods. Brisk and cool breezes portended an early Winter, and the poster of Ophelia on the post office board curled at the edges and eventually blew away. Ice started to form on the Detroit River several hundred miles to the north. But a love between two young people burned brightly and passionately throughout the passage of these seasons. And the trail of the runaway slave Ophelia seemed to go as cold as the waters of northern rivers.

~The End~

Holding the Dream



Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

Running In Place



Ophelia looked around the attic room, admiring the colourful weavings her dear Peter had hung from the rafters, in a sweet attempt to make the space a bit more livable and cozy. The attic had become incredibly hot for sleeping throughout the Ohio Summer, and now the space was starting to become uncomfortably cold as the fangs of Winter started to sink in and take hold. So she now spent her nights under several eiderdown quilts to keep warm, and she had decided to let her hair grow out a little to afford her some warmth on her head while she lay sleeping. But it was still short enough for her to slick it down into a young man's haircut, to offer the small advantage of disguise if and when she needed it.

Truth be told, she was more than happy with the way things were, for the time being at least. She had had a very small room back home on the farm to call her own, and the attic somewhat reminded her of her original confined space. She had a dormer window to discreetly peek out of to enjoy views of the fields and forest and sky, and this also let in a reasonable amount of daylight to cheer her spirits and guide her sleeping cycle. Good home-cooked food was brought to her three times a day by her attentive suitor, and the rest of the day was spent practicing her expanding reading capacities and doing some mending and sewing for the household that Peter had reluctantly agreed to her to do. All in all, a calm and bucolic way of being, except for the odd time when she would hear a wagon roll up to the house. She had perfected the process of sliding into the hiding space under the floor, then deftly pulling the boards over top of the joists and lying there until all was quiet.

But it was her dreams that caused her mind not to be fully at ease. One dream in particular, that would recur frequently and sometimes run itself twice or thrice through a single night of sleep. In it, she would be walking near a river. Not a large river, but a mid-sized watercourse that tumbled by slowly but surely on a flat tidal plain. In this dream state, she felt free and unencumbered, with a lightness of heart that she had regrettably known only in fleeting glimpses throughout her actual life. She would look off to the trees in the distance, recognizing they were different than any flora she had experienced in Carolina or

so far in her Ohio refuge. Birds flew overhead, and she could instantly project herself into their winged forms, gliding with the thermal currents and fully enjoying the panorama unfolding below. She felt free, truly free, and her spirit luxuriated in that knowing for several lovely moments in the dreamscape's time domain.

And then she would be back in her body, feeling its strength and flexibility and litheness. But there was a fullness to her form, a ripeness, that she had never felt before. And as she reached down to feel the distinct curve of her belly underneath her cotton sheath, she realized she was carrying a baby inside of her. So strong was this realization that she could feel the baby shift inside of her, making small adjustments to get comfortable in its aqueous sac and perhaps prepare for its imminent entry into the outside world.

And as if on cue, two youngsters ran out of a nearby cabin. Both were girls, with mountains of curly tresses piled up askew on their beautiful little heads. Scampering in a colt-like fashion towards Ophelia, they grinned goofily and playfully elbowed one another to see who could be first to wrap themselves around her sturdy legs.

"Mama, we were looking for you but you were nowhere to be found! Papa will be coming soon and we have to get some food ready for supper. Let us help you, please?!"

The dream always ended the same way, with her walking slowly back to the open door of the cabin, and with her two daughters clinging to her and looking up with their adoring eyes. And she would wake up from it all with a start, the eiderdown quilt spilling off the bed as she sat quickly upright.

"Lord, Lord, may it be so. Help me get to where I can be free, Lord. And help me find my husband. And may those children be real, 'cause I know I'm going to be a fine Mama! But this dream has to become real, y'hear me, Lord?!"

And with that the young woman would gather up the comfortable quilt and settle back in for a bit more sleep. But as she drifted off, part of her conscious mind realized that she may soon have to leave this place. She knew there would be risks, but she had to find the place she had experienced so clearly in her dreams, and to find the freedom that she had been dreaming about for a much longer time.

The Wrench of Fear



The two men rode up on horseback on a sombre late November day. No snow was yet on the ground, but the temperatures had dropped considerably and a moderately strong wind from the West had chilled them even more. The patroller Peter Greeves was used to being out in all kinds of elements as he did his human tracking work, but the tobacco farmer from Carolina was cold and miserable. His right wrist ached terribly in the damp Ohio air, and there had been plenty of moments when he wondered why he wasn't at home lying in his comfortable bed. The last six months they had crisscrossed Ohio, following the shifting routes of the Underground Railroad and looking for any hint of their prey. But having worked their way as far north as Detroit, they started to double back downstate, with the hope that Ophelia had been waylaid on her journey and that they might be able to nab her when she resumed her northward pathway.

"Anybody home?" Greeves called this out loudly, an edge of malice tingeing his homespun accent.

A door opened and a young man stuck out his head. "Gentlemen, good morning. How might I help you?"

“We’ve become a bit chilled with this lazy wind, one that would rather slice through a person than go around him. Could we tie up our horses and come in for a spell to warm up by your fire? And perhaps have a coffee, if you’re so disposed?” Greeves sneered out a half-smile, showing a poor set of teeth.

“Uh, sure, you’re welcome to enjoy some hospitality. My father’s resting in bed, and my mother is knitting by the stove. You can come into our kitchen, which is the warmest room in the house.” The young man sensed trouble to some degree, but felt obliged to invite the two men inside.

“Kind of you, young sir.” The other man dismounted creakily, and the boy noticed his southern accent.

Ten minutes later, after the shucking off of their cloaks and hats, the two men sat opposite their young host, with steaming mugs of coffee in their warming hands.

“So what brings you two gentlemen to these parts?” Peter struck an affable tone.

“We’re on business. Or at least I am doing my business, and this gentleman is handsomely paying me to carry it out.” Greeves scrunched his nose and slurped loudly from his mug.

“What kind of business are you in?” The young man was genuinely curious.

“Oh, it goes by lots of names, some of them none too charitable. I call it returning what’s rightfully owned to its owner.” The lanky patroller squinted his eyes.

“Oh, I suppose I understand. But that explanation could mean many things, I guess.” The young man’s face clouded perceptibly.

“What Mr. Greeves means is we are tracking down someone I own. A slave. A young woman slave. Ever seen anyone looking like this girl around these parts?” The master had taken out one of Ophelia’s fugitive posters, unfolded it, and held it uncomfortably close to his host’s face.

“Well now, I do remember this poster being up on the board at the post office some months back. But it’s pretty quiet around these parts, didn’t see a soul looking like this person. Nope, afraid we’d be of no help with this business.” A wave of fear went through the young man’s gut, causing a pulse of saliva to well up in his throat that made his speech turn guttural in nature.

“You’re sure now, boy? Take a good look at that poster. Pretty girl, no? Beautiful hair, stunning eyes. The master here says she has a right fine figure. If a young man saw a woman like this one, black or white, surely he wouldn’t forget her?!” Y’agree with me?” Greeves adopted a chummy smile and leaned over and placed his hand on the young man’s knee.

“No sir, never seen this girl. We live quiet lives out here in the woods. Farm a few acres and take care of my folks. My father’s not so well so we’re even quieter than normal these days.”

“Well, well that sounds pretty domestic, don’t you think, Master John? But it doesn’t quite square with what we’ve heard about you folks. Had a little conversation with a barkeep up in Celina, who’s got a cousin named Caleb. Yep, Caleb, your next-door neighbour. So we stopped in for a few moments for a

short chinwag with Mr. Caleb, and he swears he's seen strange goings-on around your place over the years. Has a strong suspicion y'all have been harbouring and assisting runaways up to Canada." The patroller said this slowly, choosing his words carefully.

"I, uh, don't..." The young man's eyes bulged slightly.

"We don't know what you are talking about, sir. We obey the laws of the land, and wouldn't want to contravene the Fugitive Act in any way." The mother interjected quickly, her eyes steely. "And Caleb's an old fool. Sits over there in his cabin, miserably cold and malnourished. He's too cheap to buy food and too lazy to grow it. He'd see a shadow behind a tree and think in his sorry head that it might be a runaway slave."

"Appreciate your honesty, ma'am. But if everything's just right with the law, then there's nothing to hide. So I suppose you wouldn't mind if Johnnie and I had a look-see upstairs, and perhaps even in the attic?" Reeves hitched up his trousers.

"We have nothing to hide, take a gander anywhere you want. But be very quiet as you peek into my husband's room, he's ailing and needs his rest." The mother went back resolutely to her knitting.

The two unwelcome visitors mounted the stairs to the second floor, with the young lad right behind them. They poked their heads into each bedroom, spending mere seconds on each space. Reeves looked upwards, tracing the line of plaster lath on the ceiling. "Attic is through that trap door?"

"Yessir, we rarely go up once Fall is over. Just too darn cold." The young man's countenance was flat and impassive.

"Ladder to get up?" The patroller looked around the hall corridor.

"Keep it in that bedroom, off to one side of the bed." Peter waved his hands casually, hoping they would decline to ascend.

"Pop it out for me, we'll run up and take a quick look around." Reeves nodded in a falsely amicable way.

"You go ahead, Peter. I've never liked ladders much, and now I only have the one hand to grip with so it's a bit dangerous." The master waved the stub of his right hand towards the young man by way of explanation.

"Alright, shan't be more than a few minutes..." The lean patroller scaled up effortlessly, popped the attic door open, and pulled himself up into the attic.

"Not as cold up here as you made it out to be. Hmmm, there's a bed up here, with quilts on it. Any of you folks use this space for sleeping?" Greeves' voice echoed a bit as it rained downwards to the second floor.

“No, sir. We just have a spare bed up there, used only when Mother’s cousins come for camp meetings.” The young man projected his voice upwards by putting his hand beside his mouth, nervously casting a sideways glance towards the master.

“Okay, no living thing up here. I guess your Mama is right, Caleb is an old fool spinning tales for the amusement of his cousin. But at least we have checked off this lead. This whole goddamn search is like looking for a needle in a haystack.” Reeves came down the ladder even quicker than he went up, signaling to his employer that they needed to get back on their horses.

Ophelia lay quietly in her hiding space in the floor joists underneath the attic bed. She waited for the harsh voices to recede and the sounds of departing horses before she reached up and slid the pine boards away from their carefully arranged positions.

Mounting Pressure



“You did real well. Didn’t hear a peep from the attic, not a whit. But it had to be scary, my dear Ophelia. My own heart was pounding out of my chest when that patroller mounted the ladder and was walking around the attic.” The boy sat on the quilted surface of the attic bed, holding the hands of a visibly shaken young woman.

"It made me think back to the two times that I lay in that whiskey box, to be loaded on and off that steamer boat upriver. Just like a body would feel like in a coffin, but the big difference is that I was alive! Not a good feeling, no sir. Laying there in the dark, afraid to twitch a muscle. Hearing footsteps on these creaky old floor boards, knowing that you might get found out in a second! The Lord had mercy on me, helped me to be brave and stay quiet." The young woman expressed a rueful smile.

"I now understand why you ran away." Peter frowned and pursed his lips tightly.

"Mmmhmmmm, he's a mean piece of work. Don't know if it was always festering inside of him, but he's certainly become a mean and ornery man. You got to see it first hand, right? The master has no heart, that's for sure, and the heartless bastard is sparing no expense to try to get me back." The young woman's eyes moistened.

"'Tis true. This Greeves guy would be expensive to hire, and they've gone up and down Ohio for the past several months looking for clues. I'm still not sure how they came this close, but it's probably got something to do with our nosy neighbour. If he keeps hanging around our property line, he may just take a bullet between the eyes some afternoon when I'm doing shooting practice. Accidentally on purpose, y'know what I mean? He's pretty much a hermit, so he could lay there getting picked over by coyotes and wolves for a few months and no one would notice his absence." The young man expressed this in a volley of words and with hardened eyes.

"Stop that talk right now! You're not going to kill anyone because of me. I've already put you, and your folks, through enough trouble being here so long. I think it might be best if I got clothed up real warm, packed a bag, and slipped away under the cover of darkness real soon. You never know if those two men might return, and what if they found me then under the boards? They'd probably be so angry they'd shoot you dead, and your folks! And I'd be back on that tobacco farm, probably in chains in the master's bedroom! As good as dead. We'd all be dead or as good as dead!" Ophelia broke out sobbing.

"No, no, that's crazy talk! That's pretty much what my Mama suggested after the two men rode away. She said you would need to go, that you've been here too long, and the whole household was now at risk. But she doesn't see the whole picture. She still thinks you're a boy. And she doesn't know that we're in love!" The young man grabbed Ophelia by her hands and also started to cry.

"Yes, we're in love. But what if that puts us in real danger? All of us?" The young woman looked sternly at her paramour.

"Okay, so we'll run away together. Maybe out to the Oklahoma Territory. And if that doesn't suit us, we'll keep going to Mexico. Let's get things ready, and I can make preparations for someone to look in regularly on my parents. Let the Winter roll by, and we can be out of here by those first few warm days of Spring! What do you say?" Peter's eyes glowed brightly.

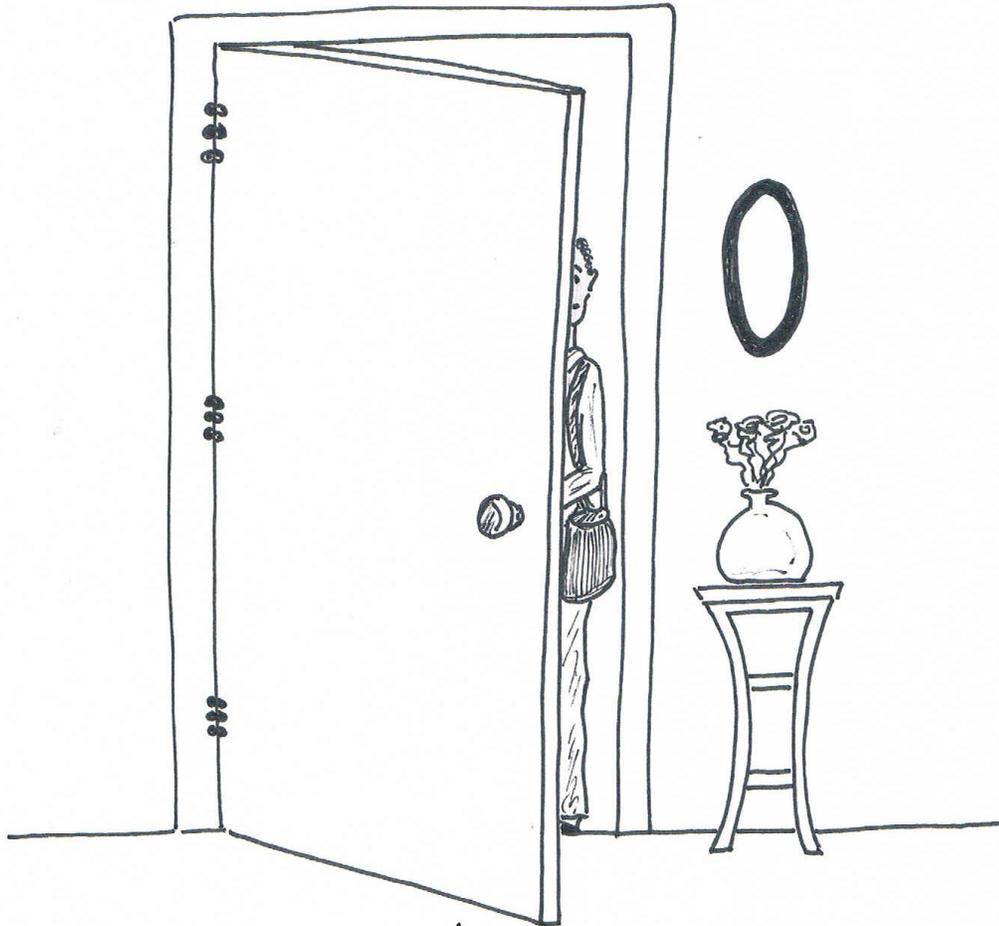
"Part of me would love that, but..." Ophelia's voice faltered slightly.

"Those two rogues will never think of tracking us to the SouthWest. They'll run up and down between here and Detroit before they fall off their saddles in exhaustion! Just allow me some time to get things

in order. Now you've been through a lot, just lay down and get some rest." The young man rolled back the quilts.

"Life is meant to be lived, young sir. I'll sleep well after a certain someone lies under these quilts with me." Ophelia circled her arms around Peter's neck, her actions betraying a hint of sadness in her eyes.

The Click of the Latch



A few days had rolled by uneventfully, with plenty of time for the young woman to contemplate her situation and mull the recent intrusion of the patroller and the master into her carefully protected world. The idea of extending her stay deep into another Winter, with considerable uncertainty as to when and where the two lovers would flee, did not sit comfortably atop her psyche. Her dreams became frenetic, with images of her running across frozen fields and through deep forests. And more than once there appeared a snarling image of the rabid young master, with veins popping out of his forehead and a twisted smirk enveloping his cruel face. And just once she had a sweet and comforting dream of Lucius, leaning up against a hoe near the Carolinian bean patch, his handsome face illuminated with a bright smile. The experiencing of this overwhelmed her as she came out of sleep, and the young woman sobbed bittersweet tears of fond memory and potential loss of her first love. But it also served as a jolting reminder of why she had run away in the first place. To follow the push of Mr. Walker's

Appeal, and to obey the wishes contained in Lucius' letter from the town where he now lived in Upper Canada.

Holding this all together in her mind, she quickly justified that by staying she was putting herself at considerable risk. And every member of her adopted household would also be in the same boat, if Peter Greeves and Master Johnnie returned and her presence was found out. So she knew in her heart, conflicting thoughts notwithstanding, that she needed to be on her way North. But she also knew she had to do it alone, and that would mean leaving Peter with his parents. If the patrollers returned, they would be under no threat as there would be no runaway slave under their roof. It would be better that way, she constantly repeated to herself. But the only challenge would be how to best untangle the enmeshed heartstrings that had coalesced so sweetly over the last six months.

As she lay with Peter under the quilts each afternoon, or walked hand in hand with him in the woods after dark, she soon enough realized that she couldn't say good bye. If she did, her plan would soon enough be dashed on the rocks of his pleading insistence to stay and take the chance of forging of a life together. No, she had concluded, she would have to dig deep into her core and simply walk out the door. But when? Perhaps late into a night with low moonlight, creeping down the ladder from the attic, and then negotiating the creaky steps to the first floor before opening the door and stepping out into the chilly night air? She played that possibility through her mind several times and in the end concluded that Peter or one of his parents would hear a footstep through their slumber and call out to her.

The other possibility that came to her was to hatch her escape on a morning that Peter would have gone into the village to the general store and post office. This was done at least once a week and he would be gone for an hour or more. This plan would not have the benefit of being done under the cover of darkness but would afford her sufficient time to pack up the essentials and slip out the front door, heading across the fields to the forest, away from town and going in the direction of the North Star.

With this plan in mind, she knew she needed to execute it as soon as possible. Peter always let her know when he would be going out, usually the night before when they would return from their nocturnal ramblings. So two evenings later, as they lingered outside the front stoop of the house, she felt a stab of fear and anticipation run through her as he spun her around and hugged her.

"I'm heading into the general store tomorrow. Going to buy a piece of red silk ribbon for my best girl! Your hair's starting to grow out so nice and thick, you're going to need something to wrest it under control soon enough." The young man reached behind her head and gave her burgeoning mop a playful tug.

"Hey, watch out, mister! Two can play that game!" Ophelia grabbed the young man's blonde bangs and yanked them this way and that.

"OK, sorry, sorry. I'm going to give you a kiss goodnight and then hit the sack, as I did a lot of work today and I'm feeling tired." The young man batted his eyes dramatically.

"Hmmmm, I'm all puckered up, young sir." Ophelia leaned in for a kiss, that she held for a long period.

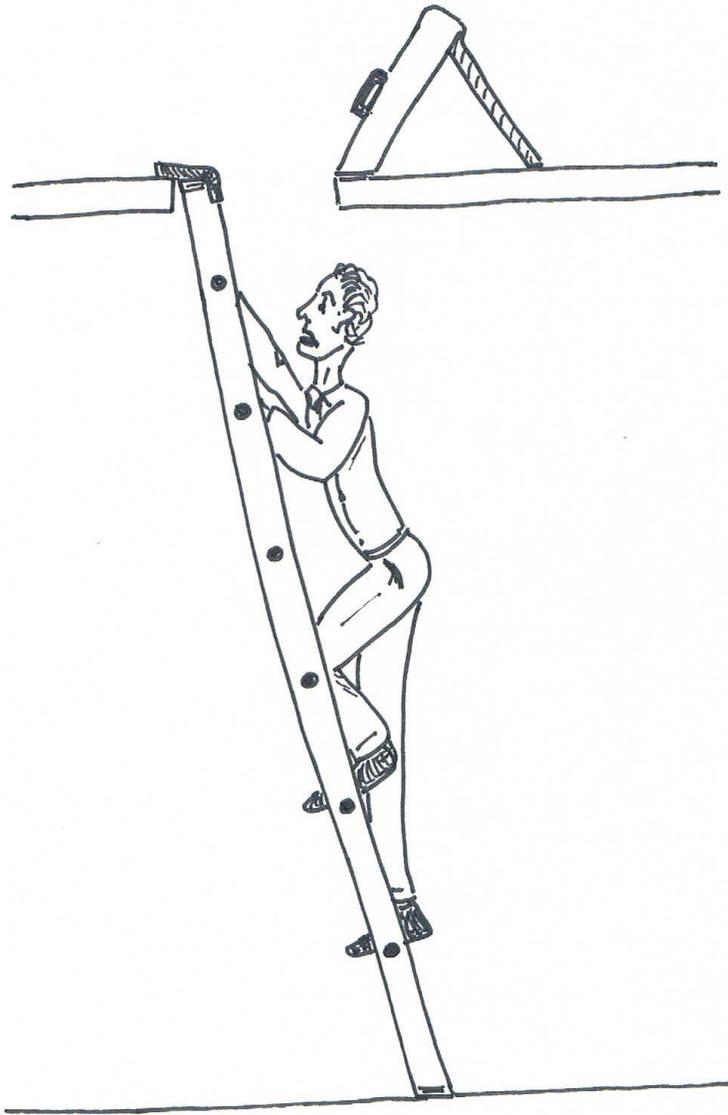
“My, my, not many men in this county can say their gals give them a kiss like that!” Peter issued a goofy grin.

“OK, that means you need a real kiss.” The young lady choked up momentarily, and held her suitor close for over a minute. “I’ll always think the world of you, Peter.” She broke the embrace and turned away quickly, in the hope that her emotions would not betray her intended plan.

After breakfast the next morning, the young man popped his head through the attic hatch door and reminded her that he would be going into town mid-morning. With a heavy heart she packed her bag with some warm clothes and an extra pair of shoes, along with bits and bobs of food she had secretly stashed away from her trays over the last few days. She put on the baggy pants and the jacket of Amos that she had arrived in, and caught her image in the looking glass by the bookcase. She then realized there was one more thing she needed to do to prepare for her journey. Taking a pair of scissors out of a sewing cabinet, she methodically pulled on strands of her hair and cut off large swaths of the curly tresses in quick and smooth strokes, being careful to put the hair in her bag for disposal somewhere in the forest. She heard the front door close and knew that would be Peter departing, so she accelerated her tonsuring considerably. In her haste, a few wisps of her curly hair evaded her attention and dropped to the floor. As she moved around the room packing the last bits of her travel bag, the errant hair remnants curled further and rolled under the night stand.

Ten minutes later, the young woman floated lightly down the steps to the first floor, and cast a nervous glance in the direction of the kitchen. She opened the door into broad daylight, stepped out quickly, and closed the door with a soft click of its metal latch.

The Quiet Roar of Falling Tears



“Ma, I’m back! Sorry to have been longer than normal, got chatting with Elmer at the general store, and then there was a bit of a lineup at the Post Office. All in all, got everything checked off, and here’s the sugar and flour you were needing.” The boy came in rosy-cheeked and full of life, carrying the pantry staples in a burlap bag.

“Never worry about us, my dear. It’s good for you to get out of the house, off the acreage. A young man needs to see life, get beyond his daily routine. It seems like the last few months you’ve been sticking closer to home, not going for those long forays into the woods for lengthy target practice sessions like you used to.” His mother glided around the kitchen as she prepared lunch.

“Oh, I don’t know, may have been a bit more around the farm as Pa is not quite what he used to be. And we do have our visitor to keep an eye on. Can you imagine what might have happened if I was out in the woods when those patrollers showed up a few days back? I shudder to think!” The young man’s face took on a serious pall.

“I could have handled those villains easily enough. And the boy upstairs would have just as easily slid into his hiding space, out of harm’s way. Speaking of that, the bean soup and corn bread are ready for an early meal. You can port a tray of food up to that young fella whenever you are ready.” The kind matriarch picked up an earthen bowl and a ladle.

As he had done so many times over the last few months, he balanced the tray of steaming food on one hand and held the stair rail with his other hand. As soon as he turned from the stairwell he realized something was amiss. He could see in an instant that the hatch to the attic was open, and standard practice was to keep this closed at all times to give the impression that the attic was only rarely used. But compounding his growing alarm was the fact that the jute rope ladder, normally rolled up and stored away in an attic closet and only used if an emergency run to the outdoor privy warranted its use, was fully unfurled and swung slowly from its anchor pins in the wooden floor of the attic.

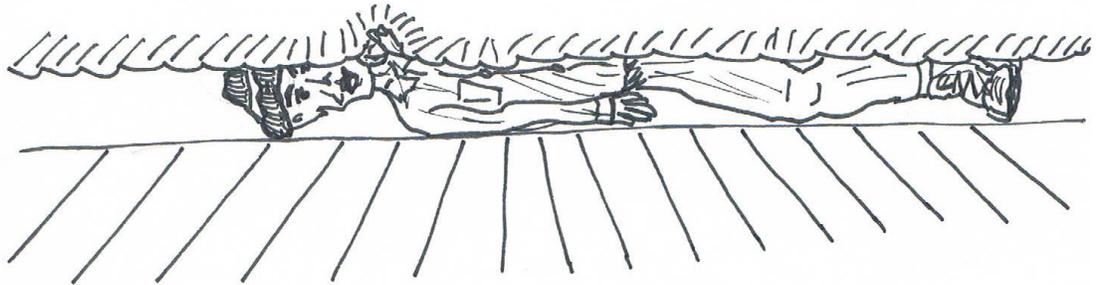
Emitting a silent scream in his interior primal landscape, he hurriedly set down the tray and dashed up the rope ladder, pulling himself into the space above. In panic, he looked around the dimly lit room, seeing no one and being jarred by the absolute silence. All quilts and blankets had been tidily folded, and the space appeared as if no one had lived in it for some time. On the top quilt was an envelope, with ‘Peter’ written on its front face in a looping feminine hand. The boy ripped it open, reading its contents in a rising fever.

‘Dear Peter---I know you will be sad, but I hope you’ll understand. I have felt an inner call to move on, to go North. I need to be free, or die trying. Waiting to do this with you could hurt you and your folks in the end, and that wouldn’t be fair. Know that I love you, and always will. With a big hug, Ophelia. PS Thanks for everything, including teaching me how to improve my reading and writing.’

The young man sat on the attic bed, re-reading the note several times and breaking out into a deep bout of agonized grief. The feelings of loss and emotional devastation rolled across his psyche in crashing waves, each one bigger than the one before. He would eventually compose himself, and go out into the forest a ways in a half-hearted attempt to intercept her and talk her out of her plan. But he knew deep down it was futile, and he gradually worked his way back home, feeling as if he had been sucker punched and not really knowing how he would now fill his afternoons and evenings.

Love being lost generates powerful emotions. But the loss of your first love is even more traumatic. The looming Winter and the realization it would be spent without the energy and charms of the lovely Ophelia served to deaden and numb the persona of the Ohio farm boy.

The Return



The next day and a half went by in a blur of self-doubt and sorrow. The young man dutifully informed his mother that the runaway was no longer in their attic, and muttered something about him probably wanting to get up to freedom before the heaviest of Winter conditions would descend upon the landscape. He stood out in the fields staring skyward, as if hoping for some kind of Divine communication to set his mind at ease and to know that she was alright as she traversed the Northern forests. On the second night after its tenth re-reading, he threw her note into the fiery chamber of the kitchen's wood stove, in a gesture of turning the page and eliminating any evidence of her time in their household.

But early next morning, just as breakfast preparations were underway in the back kitchen, two riders on horseback came up stealthily to the farm house. It was a cold morning, with a steel grey sky, and they wore heavy capes to keep the frost at bay. The leader of the two knocked roughly on the front door, and let his arm swing back into the folds of his cape. The matriarch of the house opened the door, and a dark frown immediately enveloped her face.

"Ma'am, good morning to you." Peter Greeves' voice had an almost-friendly tone.

"Gentlemen, I thought we had seen the last of you. What is your business here?" The older woman closed the door incrementally.

"Oh, our business is never done until our task is completed. And Master John here and I are still out looking for his runaway slave." Greeves pursed his lips and angled his head towards his employer, who stood shivering at the bottom of the stoop.

"I told you both the first time you were here, we are not harbouring any runaway. We live a simple life here, keeping body and soul together as a small family. So you're simply barking up the wrong tree!" The woman went to shut the door, but Greeves stuck a rough boot in between the door and its jamb, blocking its closure.

"Yes, yes, we heard all that. But we would like a word with your son before we go. Now that's not asking too much, is it?" The patroller reached out and pushed the door back an inch against the woman's resistance.

“Peter’s just sleeping in a bit, as he hasn’t been quite himself for the last few days. If you could come back this afternoon...” The mother put her shoulder up to the door in a futile attempt to re-close it.

“Oh, we shan’t be but a few moments, we can confer with him while he lays in repose. C’mon along, Master John!” Greeves elbowed his way into the hallway, with the tobacco farmer right on his heel.

“Well, I never! I’ll have to ride into town and summon the sheriff to charge you with trespassing!” The matriarch clawed at their capes.

“Now you just run along and do that, ma’am. By the time you you’re back we’ll be done our work and gone. And if our suspicions are right, the sheriff might be very interested in how you folks have been breaking federal laws! Alright then, upstairs I presume?” Greeves swirled off his cape onto one arm as the duo mounted the stairs.

“Peter, another Peter here to see you, plus Master John of Pittsboro, North Carolina. Where are you laying down your sorry head?” The patroller’s voice echoed down the second floor hallway, as the intruders spied the ladder to the attic leading to an open hatch door.

“Might someone be snoozing in the attic, attempting to evade his questioners? C’mon along, John, just grip each rung with your left hand and step up one at a time.” Greeves dashed up the wooden ladder to the attic above.

“Mmmhmmph, our treasure hunt has led us to some success! Young man, the cock has crowed, it’s time that you were up and helping your Mama cook some porridge! C’mon, look alive!” The bold interloper prodded a mass of quilts, out of which the young man’s head protruded.

“What’s going on? And why have you two returned?” The young man had been deep in sleep, and scrunched up his face at his abrupt awakening.

“We need to ask you some more questions. And get some real answers this time.” The master had caught his breath after the climbing of the ladder, and stood ominously over the boy.

“We told you last time, we haven’t been protecting any runaway slaves.” The boy sat up in bed.

“Yes, yes, we heard all that. But we hear a lot of things in this trade. Some of it is true, but we also hear a lot of lies. So we have to sift through it all, looking for real clues.” Greeves paused for dramatic effect before going on. “Two days back, your sharp-eyed neighbour thought he saw a black runaway running off across your fields in the direction of the forest. Do you recollect what you were doing in the middle part of that morning?”

“Yes, I went to town. Picked up some supplies at the general store and some stamps from the Post Office. And people walk through our fields from time to time, what of it?” The young man stood up defiantly.

“But ol’ Caleb could have sworn the runaway came from the direction of your house. Like maybe they had been staying here, and were moving on.” Greeves uttered this slowly, and stared intently at the young man.

“And let us ask you, why are you sleeping up here in the attic? Thought you said it was just an overflow space for relatives when they came to tent-peg evangelist meetings? Is this where you hid her? Where she holed up for the last six months? And then when she took off on you, you came up here to remember how she felt underneath those quilts?” The master spun this out slowly, looking out the dormer window towards the fields.

“I have no idea what you bastards are talking about...” Peter’s voice started out strong, but faltered when he realized the scent of Ophelia was still lingering in the enclosed space.

“Now John, let’ not get ahead of ourselves. But if a girl did stay up here for the better part of six months, you would think she’d leave a clue or two behind. Wouldn’t that be logical, some kind of evidence?” Greeves smiled while his face turned hard.

“Yep, makes sense. But as I look around here, I don’t rightly see many belongings of a twenty year old slave girl.” The master scrunched up his nose and gave his compatriot a perplexed look.

“Well, maybe we’re not looking closely enough, or in the right places. By my experience, I always get down and look under the bed. Lord knows what kinds of things roll under a person’s bed. Let me see...” The patroller lithely got down on all fours and stuck his head under the bed. “Nope, nothing of note, just some dust balls. But while I’m down here, let me look under this nightstand. Uh, hmmm, what do we have here?” The man’s eyes burned brightly as he snagged a long, curly lock of hair.

“What, have you found something?” The master’s voice rose expectantly.

“My, my, my. Young man, you have disappointed us with all your falsehoods. Have a look at this, will ‘ya? Any of those relatives have wiry black hair? Like the kind of hair you’d find on the head of a lovely black slave? Like the hair of Master John’s Ophelia?” The dastardly patroller savoured the moment as he stepped menacingly towards the young man.

Not more than fifteen minutes of harsh interrogation and some physical inducements were needed to extract the destination of their runaway prey from the young man. They also knew she would look differently than before, her fine head shorn close to her scalp as she navigated her way towards Amherstburg. And now with two dedicated hunters following her, with a renewed commitment to her capture.

Progress, in Small Increments



The first night back to sleeping rough in the forest had almost killed her. If not physically, some kind of mental sandpapering that frightened her deeply, but shocked her into a realization that she would have to adjust to a considerable degree if she wanted to stand more than a fighting chance to see herself as a truly free person. Even though she was strong and fit after many months of good food and bounteous rest and energizing romance back on the small farm she had just left, she understood quickly that she didn't have the physical capacity to run all day, eat meagre quantities of food, and then sleep under a bed of pine needles in a forest with Winter quickly setting in. So not unlike Lucius before her, she took to running and walking when the sun had set, the activity keeping her warm and focused during the coldest part of the twenty-four hour clock. When the first rays of sunlight would appear in the eastern sky, she would keep her eyes peeled for a barn or some other sturdy outbuilding, and then quickly step across the fields to her refuge for the next eight or more hours, where she enfold herself into a large mow of hay or a pile of grain and lay her head down on her soft travel bag. Upon rising she would often have good luck in finding a cache of stored apples in the barn or a welcome supply of canned preserves in a root cellar near the barn or outbuilding, where she would eat her fill before slowly trotting off northwards.

A full week passed where she had no direct contact with other humans, save for modest amounts of clanking and banging coming from farmyards while Ophelia slept unnoticed in her quiet nooks. As she would drift in and out of sleep she started to question why she had left Peter's home, with its home-cooked meals and exuberant bouts of affection. Then she thought of Mama, and wondered why she

had run away in the first place. She could have flatly refused to go with the master and mistress up to northern Virginia, hoping that her stance would cause them to waver on their plan and she would now be back in the warm kitchen sharing a laugh and a hug with her adoring Mama. But then an image of Lucius' face would appear, his beaming smile and twinkling eyes settling all of her doubts. Things might get tough, she might suffer physically from hunger and the impending cold, but she became resolute in her conviction that she had made the right choice and had done the right thing.

But with all of that settled in her mind, she still faced many practical questions relating to her plight. How many more miles would she have to run? Would she stay healthy on a diet of apples and preserved peaches? Might she cross the path of some patroller who would sell her back across the river? Or even worse, would her master and his cold-blooded mercenary intercept her erratic path, and she would be back into a situation that she entertained only in the most ferocious of her nightmares?

But what quelled her wildest imaginings was the thought of Daniel, the earnest store clerk who would calmly read her excerpts from Walker's Appeal, and hold her hands when she would tremble and quake at the derived emotions from his powerful words 'As a Quaker, I trust in God.' He would repeat this over and over to his keen student, and this reassuring phrase had sunk deep into the young woman's psyche. So as she rolled over one late afternoon in the lowest level of a multi-tiered hay mow in a tidy and expansive barn, Ophelia found herself muttering this same phrase semi-audibly.

"I trust in God, I trust in God. Lord knows, I trust in God. Lord help me, God help me. I trust in God." The young woman rose slowly out of her dream state.

"So do I." The responding voice was high-pitched and sweet.

"Hey, who are you?" Ophelia sat up quickly, with numerous hay stalks falling off her jacket.

"Jeb. My name's Jeb. Who are you? The young boy was no more than six years old.

"Ophelia, my name's Ophelia. And what might you be doing, young man?" The young woman dropped any pretense of masquerading as a man to her innocent questioner.

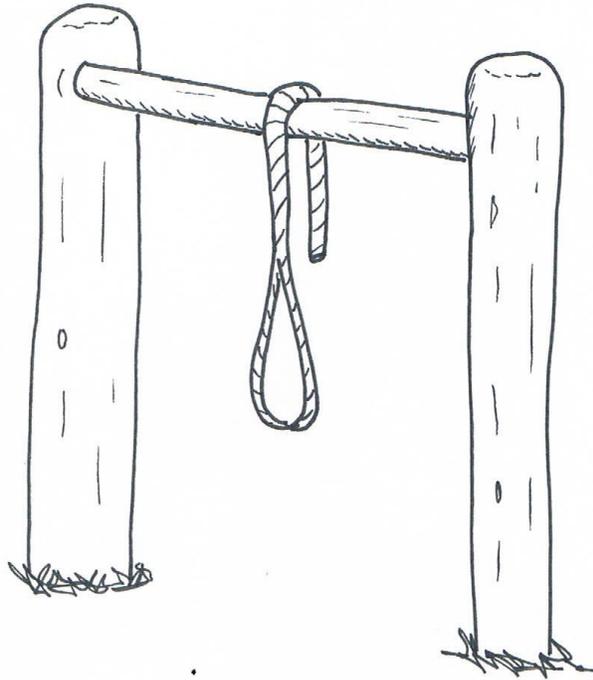
"My Daddy told me to come out to the barn and bring some apples back for a pie for supper. They're over there in the cold storage bin." The boy pointed towards a corner of the enclosed space. "Would you like to come in and sit by the wood stove, and stay for supper?" The lad smiled shyly.

Ophelia would cautiously accept this kind invitation, and in due course would discover that by Divine appointment she had been meant to be harboured by one of the most active nodes on the Underground Railroad in Ohio. Jeb's family fed and housed scores of runaways each year, nourishing them and strengthening them for the remainder of their journey northwards. She would spend three days under Jeb's father's roof, earning her keep with kitchen chores and the healing of a nasty cut on Jeb's mother's hand with the aid of an herb poultice.

Ophelia was put in the false bottom of the farm's draw wagon as it rolled ten miles northeast for a family wedding. Thus began a series of travel elements from one Quaker family to the next, up through

Ohio and into southern Michigan. Progress was slow, as movement was done within the normal rhythms of rural life so as not to raise suspicion in any of the authorities or gangs of slave patrollers roaming the byways of the farming areas in the two states. But increment by increment, the young woman crept closer to reaching her goal.

For the Want of a Good Horse



They both still held the internal feeling that they were searching for a needle in a haystack, but they had experienced an incredible stroke of luck at that farmhouse on the outskirts of Laura, Ohio. The two men didn't know where their target prey was at this very moment, but they now knew her intended destination. They didn't know if she would be running on her own, or getting some help from altruistic folks along her path, but it didn't really matter. They would certainly keep an eye out for her as they trekked northward, as it would be all the better to nab her earlier rather than later with Winter settling in. But if not, Peter Greeves was more than prepared to cross the river onto British soil and pull the impertinent runaway back to enslavement on that modest tobacco farm in the Carolinas. Crossing the line into Amherstburg excited the energized master, as he correctly surmised that the risky foray would entrap not only Ophelia but also Lucius. Two runaways secured would more than justify the extra expenditures that the search for Ophelia had incurred, and he mentally salivated at the image of them shackled and tightly bound in a wagon as he triumphantly drove it up the driveway to his farm.

They ambled at a steady gait on their first day out of Laura, stopping at a few villages along the way to enquire if anyone had seen a young black person on the run. As daylight faded they found an old shed near a creek where they and the horses could take on water, and after a meal of dried rations they bedded down inside under a bunch of blankets that they unfurled from their packs.

Within an hour of riding on the second day, the master's horse started to stride with some irregularity, mildly at first but increasing over time.

"Something's the matter with the horse, he's breaking his rhythm and favouring his right front leg." The master yelled ahead to Greeves.

"Hmm, I see what you mean." The patroller slowed and cast an eye backwards. "Could just be that something has got under that right front shoe, or he might be going lame in the front leg. Might be easy to solve, or it could become a big problem."

"Looks like a settlement up ahead, maybe it will have a blacksmith?" The master's voice sounded more dubious than hopeful.

They rode into the small town, sizing it up for its potential to offer some equine shoe repair and possibly hot food and coffee as a side bonus. It wasn't a bustling place due to the early hour, but it was sizeable enough and a number of people walked along its streets.

"Young man, good morning. We're looking for a couple of things. Ever seen anyone looking like this, walking or running through or near here?" Greeves held up a poster bill with Ophelia's illustrated image, folded at the three-quarter line so as to greatly reduce the volume of her hair. "And does this fine town have a competent blacksmith?"

"Not sure, we have a lot of people coming and going in Buzzard's Glory." A tall lad with a shock of red hair squinted at the poster and set his mouth in a firm line.

"Now, now, let's be a bit more welcoming to two kind strangers. Surely someone like this would catch your eye, and stick a bit in your memory?" Greeves' voice turned syrupy.

"Are you two patrollers? If so, I might recommend you just keep on rolling, straight out of town. We don't cotton kindly to slavecatchers in these parts!" The young man sneered, and turned to walk away.

"No offense taken. We're just trying to earn an honest living, by finding the rightful property of landowners. Now what about our second query, where we might find a blacksmith?" Greeves sucked air in between his two front teeth.

"Perhaps head down to the general store, two blocks on the right. Mr. Buzzard has been known to re-shoe a horse from time to time. But he might be too busy for the likes of you, as he has a mercantile operation to oversee." The redhead spat this out as he moved away.

"Alright, to the store we go. Maybe we can find a hot coffee there while the proprietor checks out my horse." The master sounded hopeful, and wiped a crusty residue from the side of his mouth.

The two men slowly clip-clopped the two blocks, sizing up the town and its people. As they came up to the general store, they saw several horses tied outside to a brightly painted hitching post.

"Y'know, Johnnie, I just had an idea. To save time and money, why don't you tie up beside that beautiful dappled grey horse on the left? But instead of going inside and engaging with Mr. Buzzard, simply untie the grey and jump on and we'll ride away quickly without anyone being the wiser. I'll pull up and block sight lines from this side while you're getting on." Greeves muttered this out of the side of his mouth.

"I'm not all that keen on becoming a horse thief!" The master whispered this tersely in the direction of his partner.

"More like a horse trade, in my opinion. Just make sure to grab your pack off your steed, get on the grey securely and we'll ride out of here purposefully. We've got Miss Ophelia to apprehend, remember? With good horses, we just might come upon her this very day! C'mon, man up!" The patroller waved his hand with a grand flourish.

Master John looked nervously this way and that, and then guided his horse to the hitching post and tied it up securely. Taking off his pack, he awkwardly shunted it over to the dappled grey horse. He timidly looked in the direction of the general store, and then resolutely put one foot into a stirrup and pulled himself up into the unfamiliar saddle.

"Now, Johnnie, back it up. Take command of your mount." Greeves barked this out and swung his own horse to the side to clear space for the other horse to exit.

"Git, c'mon, git!" The master started to perspire heavily. "It's not responding!" The grey horse stood planted to the ground.

"Git now!" Greeves bellered this out, and lashed the horse across its backside with a whip that he had pulled out of his pack.

"Is there a problem here?" An older man walking by on the wooden plank sidewalk furrowed his brow.

"Hey mister, that's my horse you're sitting on! We don't take kindly to horse thieves up here in Buzzard's Glory!" A heavysset middle-aged man came out of the general store and ran down its steps.

"These two are slave patrollers, and were looking for a blacksmith. Guess they figured that it'd be easier to steal Ed's horse than re-shoe theirs." The ginger-haired young man who had previously encountered the two strangers came upon the unfolding drama.

Greeves lashed out several times with his whip, but within a few seconds a posse of men had circled the duo and pulled them roughly off their saddles onto the dust of the street. Several punches were thrown in the melee, and in the end the two were tied with their wrists behind their backs and thrown into a makeshift gaol at the rear of the general store, to await the arrival of the sheriff from Lima the next morning.

Any Problem Can Be Unknotted



“Well, we certainly find ourselves in a fine kettle of fish, Greeves, thanks to your asinine suggestion. We could have spent a few hours and a few dollars getting my horse re-shoed, and we would now be twenty miles north of here sitting in some warm tavern having a hot meal. But instead we sit here, cold and hungry, waiting for the sheriff to arrive. Damn you!” The tobacco farmer sat off in one corner of the holding shed behind the general store. The two predators had been bound and tied by the gang of men in the morning, and it was now nearing the supper hour, judging by the declining light in the sky.

“I’ve built my existence on taking calculated risks. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have jumped on that grey and wheeled it out of town before anyone would have had an inkling of what was going on. But you’re the one in a hundred that rides a horse like an old grandmother, with no fire running through your veins. It was inevitable that we would get caught. But you’re right in a way, I

should have realized you'd be a coward and not made the suggestion in the first place!" Greeves lounged in the opposite corner, his ankles bound and his wrists cinched tightly behind his back.

"So what do we do now? Just moulder here until the law man shows up? And what then? I've heard of horse thieves getting shot on sight, in cold blood. Nobody knows we're here, they could easily put a bullet in our brains and throw us into a shallow grave in a field on the edge of town, and no one would be the wiser. It's not as if my wife would come looking for me, or my overseer either. They're probably back on my farm right now, getting along real well, and the farm's probably running like a top in my absence. What do you say to that, Greeves?!" The master's voice took on a plaintive tone.

"I'd say you're still acting like an old grandmother, and one who's read too many story books. If we were going to be shot in cold blood, it would have been right at the time when tempers were running hot. And no county sheriff is going to blow us away either, they're lawmen for Chrissakes! We'll probably have to sit in a cell in the county jail up in Lima for a bit, maybe have to pay some sort of fine, but we'll be alright in the end." Greeves shifted his hips in an attempt to get more comfortable.

"What about you, you got anybody who'd come looking for you?" Johnnie's voice took on a child-like register.

"Nope, none at all. Never got married, really have no time for women. And all my original family are gone, Mama and Papa and my two brothers. I was the only one to get out." The patroller's eyes turned distant.

"Get out, from what?" The master realized how little he knew about the man he had spent the last six months with.

"A big house fire. My folks ran a farm down in Kentucky, with twelve slaves. My Papa was real hard on them, particularly the men. So one night they ganged up and set the house on fire. Nailed all the doors shut as they lit the tinder. I got burned pretty badly, but managed to jump out of an upstairs window after breaking the glass with my fist. Everyone else died inside. I was fourteen at the time, and have stood on my own two feet ever since." Greeves looked down at the floor.

"My, that's quite a story. You hear accounts like that from time to time, but I've never met anyone before who was directly affected." The master looked over with a modestly sympathetic look.

"Well, life deals you some cards, and you have to play your hand. So over time I made it my mission to avenge my family's deaths by pulling back any slave I could from their freedom. Man, woman or child, doesn't matter to me. I catch them and take them back to be enslaved." Greeves snuffled loudly.

"So now I see your motivation to be in the line of work you do. And here I thought it was money." The master smiled wryly.

"The money doesn't mean as much as it used to. But even the work doesn't feel the same. We're losing the battle, Johnnie. For every slave I catch, it feels as if ten are slipping away! This Underground Railroad thing, they're smart and efficient. Pretty soon there will be no slavery, as all of the slaves will

have run away and have been helped along the way! This gal we're chasing, she's emblematic of the problem we're facing. She's out there somewhere, but she's not easy to catch. Times are a-changing, Johnnie boy!" The patroller ruefully shook his head.

"So with those encouraging words, we just sit here in the dark, waiting for the lawman, shivering and famished? There's got to be a solution to our predicament?" The master sighed expansively.

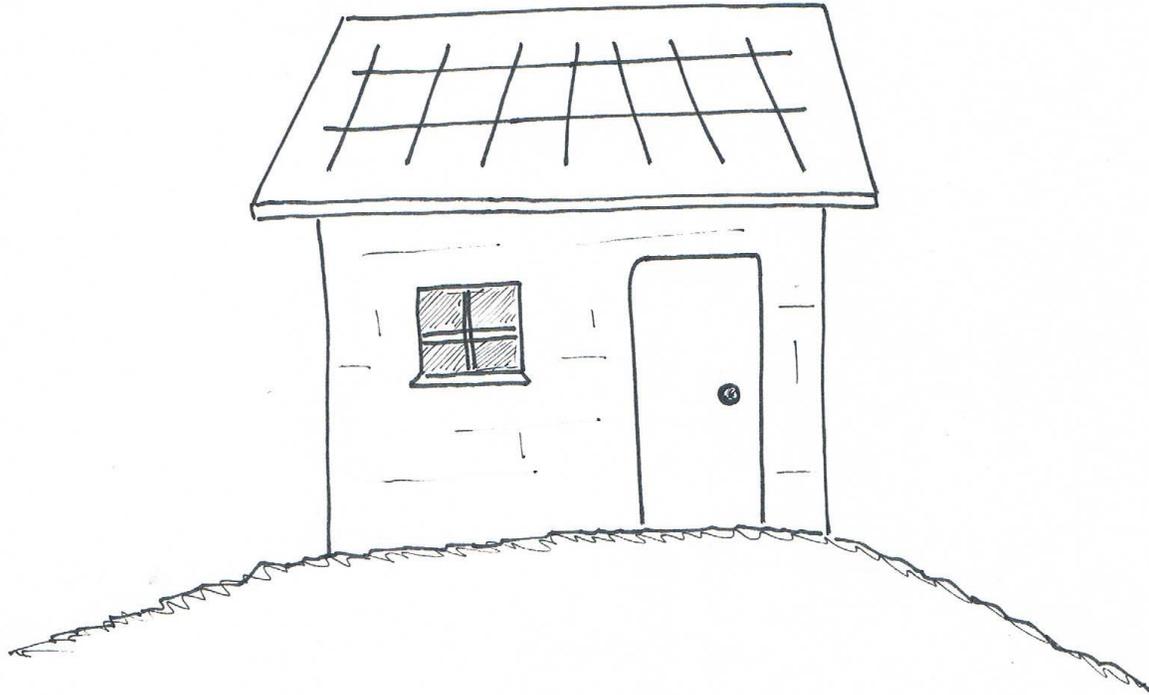
"Hold on, grandma. I just had a thought. My wrists are tightly bound, and I can't wriggle the rope off of them because of my bulky hands. But you're shy the one hand, so how have they tied you up?" Greeves sat upright.

"Uh, they've tied my left wrist, but for the right arm they lashed the rope several times around my right elbow and cinched everything up real tight." The master wriggled his shoulders for effect.

"Yeah, but just think about it. If you roll over here and flip over on your left side, I should be able to back into you and slide the rope off of your right wrist as there's no hand to block its passage. C'mon, get over here. That's right. My hands are tied, but I still got some feeling in my fingers! Breathe out, make your ribcage as skinny as you can. Almost there, c'mon you bastard, ah...ah, there we have it!" The rough rope slipped over the curve of the master's wrist stump. Fifteen minutes later he had unknotted his own ankle restraints, plus all the rope knottings of Peter Greeves. The patroller then untied the knots from the master's left wrist, and they were largely free men at that point.

The door to the shed was locked firmly, but a few boards at its rear were quickly kicked away and the two men slowly slinked down the alley behind the store in the gathering dusk. A solitary figure observed all of this from a vantage point in a rear belfry of a nearby church, and slowly scaled a wooden stairwell to the alley.

Within Sight



Several weeks passed by, and Ophelia made her way northward in fits and starts. Sometimes she would be hidden in a barn, sometimes in a back woodshed, and sometimes in a cold attic. The days were getting shorter and the temperatures were getting cooler as she went closer and closer to Canada. Her hosts, often Quakers, made sure she had sufficient and good food to strengthen her for the ordeals that lay ahead, and plenty of warm blankets and quilts to keep her warm in less than toasty sleeping quarters. Through it all she kept positive and cheerful, willing herself to a successful ending. She could almost sense Lucius' energy, and had an unshakeable knowing that she would soon reunite with her first love.

More than a few days back her host family let her know that she was now in the State of Michigan, the last state before the border to Canada. She felt a pang of bittersweet emotion, as Ohio had been the first free state she had landed in, and where she had experienced so many harrowing incidents. But she would always think of Peter when she remembered Ohio, the lovely young man who had so willingly connected with her heart and her soul. The thought of him now almost made her stop and turn around, but she knew better. She was a determined young woman, and she would meet her goals. And she intuitively knew that to return would be courting significant danger, as the patroller and master had somehow found their way to the remote farmhouse where Peter lived with his parents.

"Miss, that's about as far as I can go, so that I can safely get back home in this failing light." A young Quaker man wearing a wool hat and a heavy cloak helped her out of the back of his wagon where she had laid hidden under a pile of blankets and tarpaulins. He smiled warmly as he gripped her hand firmly, reminding her of Daniel the angel store clerk back in Carolina.

“And Canada would be in that direction?” The young woman pulled a scarf up around her neck and pointed in the direction of the river.

“Yes’m, due east, a bit north-east, of here. That’s the town of Amherstburg over there, and just to its north is Fort Malden. If any trouble arises, seek help immediately from the British soldiers stationed there.” The young man lifted down a travel bag filled with food and blankets.

“Not so far, really. I just have to walk across this open field to get over there?” Ophelia shouldered the bag and tightened her coat.

“No, miss. That’s no open field. That’s the Detroit River, with a skin of ice over it. We sometimes call it Jordan, as the other side is the Promised Land. The cold temperatures have been with us for the better part of a week, so it should be thick enough to hold your weight. In the Summer you could swim across, but that water has gotten far too cold over the last month for any kind of swimming. It would take a person’s breath away in under a minute.” The young man looked out towards the river with a dim frown on his face.

“I’ll be alright. I’ve gone through a lot to get this far, so a bit of water don’t scare me one bit!” The young woman’s voice had surfcial bravado, but her eyes took on a frightened pall.

“But to be prudent, traverse the first half of the river today before nightfall. There’s a little wooden cabin on Sugar Island over there where you can overnight. No heat, but you can snuggle under these blankets and eat your provisions. Tomorrow in the clear light of day you can take on the second and last segment. That way you can see any thin areas in the ice with the daylight, where the water will run close to the surface, and you can walk a wide arc around these spots. Good luck, Miss Ophelia, and God-Speed!” The young man gave her a sideways hug and quickly mounted his wagon.

An hour later, in near darkness, Ophelia stepped from an icy surface unto a gently sloping riverbank, where a mixture of snow and mud signalled to her that she was on Sugar Island. She peered through the brush up ahead, and saw the dim shape of a small wooden cabin. The young woman trudged towards her overnight destination, happy to be on firm ground and contemplating the welcome supper she would fashion out of the victuals in her bag. Lost in thought, she didn’t sense that someone back on the Michigan shore was observing her path with the aid of a spyglass, before turning the instrument over to his shivering compatriot.

Walking on Thin Ice



Ophelia woke with a start, catapulting back into her body from a very deep dream state. She had shivered for the first hour in the drafty old cabin, until enough of her body heat had accumulated under the blankets to allow her to slide off into some form of fitful slumber.

But as the first rays of light came through the small window on the eastern side of the cabin, she felt a sense of impending danger. Peering out in the direction of Upper Canada, the recently frozen river was a desolate landscape of clear ice and white snow ridges. Stretching tall and beginning to fold her two blankets, she once again felt a jarring wave of unease roll through her torso. The young woman folded the blankets into her travelling bag and leaned down a bit to look out the window on the cabin's western side. What she saw through the frosted glass sent alarms of terror flooding across her mental landscape.

Two men, dressed in dark coats and dark hats, walked across the ice between Meso Island and Sugar Island. They pulled some kind of sled behind them, and each used a walking pole to afford them better stability as they negotiated the icy surface. She couldn't tell from that distance who they were or what their business would be out on the frozen watercourse. But instinctively she knew that she had to leave immediately. No time for eating any kind of breakfast from her meagre supply of rations, no time for anything but putting on her coat and running eastward from the cabin on Sugar Island.

The young woman knew immediately when she was off the island and out onto the Detroit River. The footing became much more treacherous, with the icy surface offering only minimal friction to the soles of her threadbare shoes. She slipped and fell twice in the early going, hitting her knee hard on the second fall and cracking the ice in a substantial way. Some river water bubbled up through the crack,

wetting the bottoms of her footwear and providing the first direct evidence of the power of the rushing water below. Ophelia exhaled sharply and found her mettle before slowly continuing eastward.

She soon found out that the snow ridges were favourable to her progress. A wind from the northwest had caused their formation over the last few days, and she walked on top of them as well as she could, the six inches or so of crusted snow providing a modest ridge trail that had more friction and would provide a softer landing surface if she encountered another fall.

The sound of sharp and excited voices at some distance behind her caused the young woman to stop momentarily and look backwards. The two men looked as if they had just stepped off Sugar Island and were now out on the main part of the river, only a hundred yards behind her. The voices had some degree of familiarity, and the uncertain digestion of that perception sent the young woman into a frenzied panic. She started to run fast along the snow ridge, looking over her shoulder every few seconds to gauge the proximity of her apparent pursuers. For a few minutes she seemed to be putting more distance between herself and the two men, due to her inherent foot speed and the apparent tumbling-down of one of the men on the slick ice surface.

But then the ridge of snow petered out and she found herself on a plane of clear ice, glass-like and colourless. She could see the flow of water underneath, the Detroit River roiling along just underneath her increasingly cold feet. Her instincts told her to slide her feet along, more like skating than running, to reduce the stress she was imposing on the thin ice layer. More muffled shouting came from behind her, and she started to pick up her feet and run again. But at that instant she heard a sharp cracking sound, and saw the smooth ice in front of her break into an infinite number of pieces. Ophelia instinctively froze, but the momentum of her body caused her to take a few more steps just as a large piece of ice broke, creating a ten foot wide rupture in the frozen surface. All of this happened quickly, with the young woman stepping into the formed hole, her leg plunging into the cold river water up to her hip. Panicking, she rolled sideways and her second leg fell through, so that she was now waist deep in the frigid water. The coldness took her breath away momentarily, but she held onto the ledge of ice precariously, with both of her elbows providing just enough support that she thought she might be able to push herself up and out of the rapidly unfolding danger zone.

“Yup, that’s our girl. The hair’s much shorter than I would have imagined, but we had a clue on that from the attic floor.” Peter Greeves squinted his eyes from about fifty yards out, reaching down into his sled for a length of rope.

“Well, let’s get over there and pull her out. If she loses strength and goes under the ice, she’ll be dead and drowned in the twinkling of an eye.” The excited master started to lurch forward.

“Oh my good ness, I have half a mind to just let you plunge on out there and grab your girl. Your rushing out and your weight will create an even bigger hole, and the both of you would be in an underwater grave in mere seconds. Given the troubles I’ve faced during the last six months over her and you, I should just encourage that! But I’m a professional hunter, and I’ve now come upon my prey. And she’s at a disadvantage, no? So give me time to tie a lasso knot here and we’ll inch out real slow.” Greeves worked dextrously with his rope and then walked towards the flailing young woman.

“Ophelia, you pretty little thing! Just hang on for another minute or two. Be strong, darling, Mr. Greeves is going to send you out a lifeline. Take the loop I throw out to you and put it over your head and get it under one of your arms. With that, I’ll slowly pull you into safety. Here you go, sugar.” The patroller cast out the coil of the lasso, expertly putting it within reach of the young woman.

“You’re the patroller working for my master. To hell with the both of you! I’d rather die right here and now than go back to that tobacco farm with him.” Ophelia’s eyes flashed fire, but the bottom half of her body was numbingly cold.

“Oh I know, I’ve come to see that he’s a real bad man! Mean as an ornery bear, he is. But if I pull you out, and you cooperate real nice, maybe I’ll just let you go across there to Amherstburg? What do you say to that, Master Johnnie, let’s do a good deed and let the girl go find Lucius?” Greeves oscillated the rope and turned to leer at the master.

“You’re a goddamn nut! All of the time and expense I’ve sunk into this search, and you’re going to let her go?” The farmer was beside himself with anger.

“C’mon Johnnie, she’s earned it, don’t you think? Her freedom? And she’s way too pretty in real life for an ugly cuss like you to even lay a finger on her. No, if I pull her out, I have the say on where she goes. C’mon honey, grab that rope and let me help you get free.” The patroller turned sharply to the master and gave him a subtle sly wink.

The young woman felt herself getting weaker by the second. Connecting to the persuasive charm of the patroller, she reached out and grabbed the rope with one hand, pulling it over her head and lifting one elbow off the ice to tuck the rope under one of her arms. She blinked hard and nodded encouragingly towards the two men.

Red Ice



“That’s it, little darling, it’ll be no more than a minute before we get you out of that river. Let the rope settle in real tight under your armpit and I’ll start reeling you in. C’mon now!” Greeves’ face was a contorted mask of concentration, his eyes bearing down sharply on the young woman struggling on the edge of the ice fracture. “Push up with your hands to lift out a bit, and I’ll do the rest.”

“I’ll try real hard, but the river’s current is working against me!” Ophelia bit her lip and leaned in to her task.

“Try to swing your left leg up on the ledge, and the rest of you will roll right out with the force from my rope.” Greeves snarled this out as he wrapped another round of the cord around his right hand without any reduction in its tension.

“I’ll give it my best, but my legs feel close to dead from the cold. And as heavy as logs...” The girl got her torso up a few inches higher onto the ice and started to slowly rotate her left hip. But just when it appeared she might be successful, the river currents pulsed and she went back down, bobbing lower than before.

“Damn it, Greeves, I’m going out there to pull her out of the drink. I started this whole search and I’ll be darned if I’m going to just stand around as a spectator while we lose her to the current.” The master grimaced hard and looked across the expanse of ice.

“Alright, make yourself useful. But don’t think you can just walk over there and pull her out. Your weight will create an even bigger hole, and you’ll both go in quick as a blink. Get down on your belly,

and spread your weight out over a larger area. And take this walking pole, it'll give her something extra to hold on to while we both pull." Greeves fished out a long wooden pole from the sled and gripped the rope tightly.

In under two minutes, the tobacco farmer had shimmied out on his chest and belly to within five feet of Ophelia, and slowly extended the pole to within six inches of her half-immersed body. "Ophelia, we can help you. We can save your life. Grab the end of this with your right hand, and hold the rope with your left hand. Then we'll all give it our best effort, and we'll get you out of there. C'mon now..."

"Only if I can be free. Otherwise, I'd rather drown right now." The young woman's eyes burned like embers.

"Yes, yes, we'll pull you out and you can keep going on your way across the river." The master's voice sounded hollow.

"Alright, one last try. I'm gripping hard on both the rope and the pole, and I'm going to pull and pull." Her wet torso came up to the line of the ice ledge. Both men bore down hard and her left hip came out of the water, just before her entire body was swiftly extracted out onto the slippery ice edge. Peter Greeves went hand over hand in rapid succession, and soon the runaway slave was lying at his feet, cold and shivering.

"Thank you sir, and thank you Lord! I'm going to need some help to stand to start off here, as that ice and cold water have made my legs plenty numb and lifeless. Thank you, sir." Ophelia offered a faint smile to the patroller as he helped her up, and wrapped one of her arms around his shoulders. She did this while purposefully ignoring Master Johnnie, who had slithered back with his walking stick in tow.

"Alright, task complete, let's roll." Greeves pulled roughly at her waist, and started walking westward.

"Whoa, hold on. Amherstburg's that away...we're going in the wrong direction!" Ophelia's eyes grew large and her body tensed up.

"We're walking back to Michigan, young lady. And then you're going back to Carolina, with Master John here." Peter Greeves said this breezily.

"Hold it right there! You bastards promised you would let me go! If I had known you were tricking me, I would have just slipped under the ice to a watery grave. That would have been way better than spending the rest of my life with this despicable master!" Ophelia pushed away from the patroller, but wobbled more than a bit as the feeling was not yet fully back in her legs.

"Master Johnnie, kick her knees so that we can get her down on the ice...yes, that's it. I'll use the end of the same rope we just used to pull you out, Miss, to bind your two hands behind your back. No use fighting now, or do I need to give you a cuff across your head to knock some sense into you? Did you really think we were going to pull you out and then give you a two man escort over to British soil...you are a live wire, aren't you? But we'll get those hands tied soon enough!" The patroller kneeled heavily on top of Ophelia's lower back, working furtively with his rope and periodically pushing her face down

into the cold ice surface. The master stood by impassively at first, then ran around behind Greeves to hold the young woman's flailing legs.

The first shot rang out, hitting Greeves in his right temple and exiting at his left jawbone. The metal slug killed him instantly, but he momentarily stayed erect until a second shot hit his right pectoral, driving through to pierce his still-beating heart. He rolled off to the left of the young woman, in a disarray of tangled rope and flecks of blood.

The master blinked hard in disbelief at what had just happened over the handful of seconds to reload and shoot, looking first towards Ophelia and then turning his head back in the direction of Sugar Island. He had a fraction of a second of reaction time to marginally duck, assuming he could see the slug of cold metal hurtling towards him through the frigid air, and the shot intended for the center of his chest entered his trachea instead. The insurance shot was hardly needed, but it caused him to fall away from Ophelia in a near-graceful manner.

The young woman, almost frozen to her waist, looked around in disbelief. The quiet of the icy strait was practically deafening, but then she heard the sound of running foot strikes, fast approaching.

"My dear Ophelia, I'm so glad you stayed down so I didn't put you at any risk." A young man leaned down and tenderly kissed her cheek.

"Peter? How did you ever find me?" The young lady's face glowed.

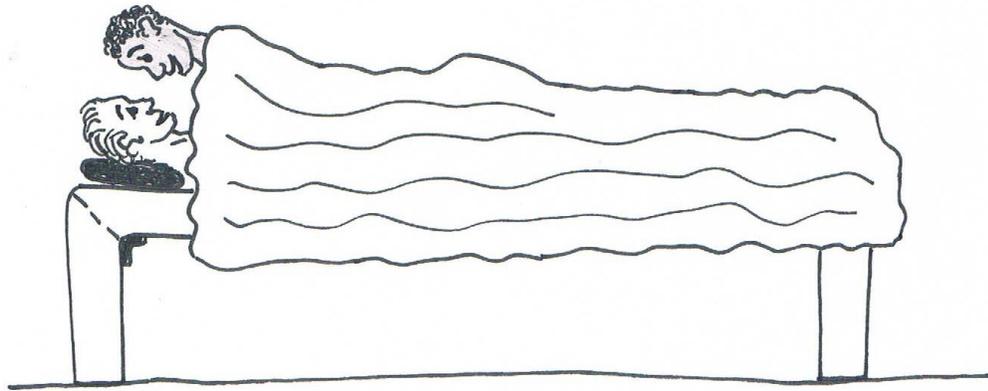
"We'll have plenty of time to chat after I make a fire to warm your bones. But first, I have one more task to do relating to these two scoundrels. The ice should be thicker closer to the island, with lower river flow. I don't want the local constable to happen upon their bodies and start asking a lot of questions. So give me just a few minutes, my darling."

The young man took the butt of his rifle and cracked a hole in the six inch ice cover. Punching it out methodically until it was nearly a yard in diameter, he stopped and wiped his brow. In turn, he dragged the bodies of Peter Greeves the feared slave patroller and Master Johnnie the Carolina tobacco farmer and slaveowner, from their blood-spattered positions on the ice to the edge of the formed hole. Greeves went first, slipping in like a lean side of beef and being quickly drawn under the ice by the moderate current. The master went next, but his body got caught on the lip of the circumference for a few seconds. The young lad gently pushed the corpse with the butt of his rifle, and it bubbled away to its icy grave.

"God rest their souls." The young man looked piously at his paramour.

"Where they're going, those two are going to have to deal with the Devil." The young woman smiled morosely.

A True Fork in the Road



“There, that should do it. In less than a few minutes we’ll have a real good fire roaring here. It’ll hopefully warm you up quickly, and might even make a good start on drying out those trousers that got soaked by the river water. But I was carrying extra dry clothes, so you’ll be alright in any case.” The young man threw another branch onto a large assemblage of scavenged wood that was entering into its flare-up stage as a warming fire.

“Thank God you had some matches.” The shaken young woman stood near the rising flames, rubbing her hands. “But even more, thank God you were here to help me. Those two bastards tricked me, and would have tied me up and taken me back to the farm!”

“Calm, calm, dear Ophelia. We need to get you out of those clothes and into some dry ones. And you can sit by the fire and I’ll massage your legs to get the circulation back as quickly as possible. Alright, yup, that’s it...” The next few minutes involved the peeling off of the soaked and clammy trousers and the bundling up of the girl into a pair of dry pants and thick wool socks.

“Here now, settle down by the warmth. I’m going to search around for some stones to throw into the fire. They’ll be heated over the next few hours and then can be carried in carefully to warm the air under our blankets as we sleep.” The tall lad jumped up quickly and started to root around for fist-sized stones that would be reasonable substitutes for bed warming bricks.

“Peter, I have so many questions to ask you. But first, I have to apologize for not saying good bye. I just couldn’t bring myself to doing it, because I couldn’t muster up the courage. If you knew I was going, you would have talked me out of it, right?” The shivering girl looked up sombrely.

“Yeah, probably so. No hurt feelings, and I’ve had time to think it all through. The love we had, the love we shared, that’s more than I could ever ask for. You came across my path as you were running North, and you were running because of love. So the months you stayed with us were a special gift to me, one I will always treasure. But I get it now, and I want you to be happy. And if that means finishing your journey across that river, so be it.” The young man turned away as he placed another stone into the base of the fire.

“But how did you find me?” Ophelia wrapped a blanket tightly around her neck.

“Those two reprobates came back to the farm, and roughed me up a bit after finding a lock or two of your hair. They took off in fast pursuit, but I packed a bag real quick and followed their tracks. I’m not just a good marksman, I can track and find just about any animal or human. They got into a bit of trouble a few towns up when they tried to steal a horse. But as they came North, I was always just a few steps behind them. Greeves had pulled out of me where you were heading to, so it wasn’t a big puzzle to him that you’d try to cross the river somewhere in these parts. He was a pretty good tracker as well, I suppose.” Peter sounded wistful, and looked out to the hole in the river ice that had been the watery portal for the two corpses.

“I bet they had no idea they were being tracked. Greeves fell like a tree in the forest. The master had a few seconds of time to figure out he probably would be next. He looked over at me, and his eyes were full of fear. It all happened so quick that I wasn’t sure what was going on. But we had a connection right before he fell. And part of me forgave him. For keeping me and Mama as his slaves, for whipping Lucius, for chasing me down all these months. Somehow, I think he felt me forgiving him, before the first shot hit him.” Ophelia also looked outwards towards the river.

“That’s lovely, my dear. He more than deserved to die, but at least you forgave him before his spirit flew. And laying that burden down will help you as you fashion your new life in a new country.” The young man wedged in tight, wrapping his arms around Ophelia’s back and chest.

“Mmmm, you’re making me wonder why I’m trying to get across that river.” The young woman nuzzled the neck of her rescuer.

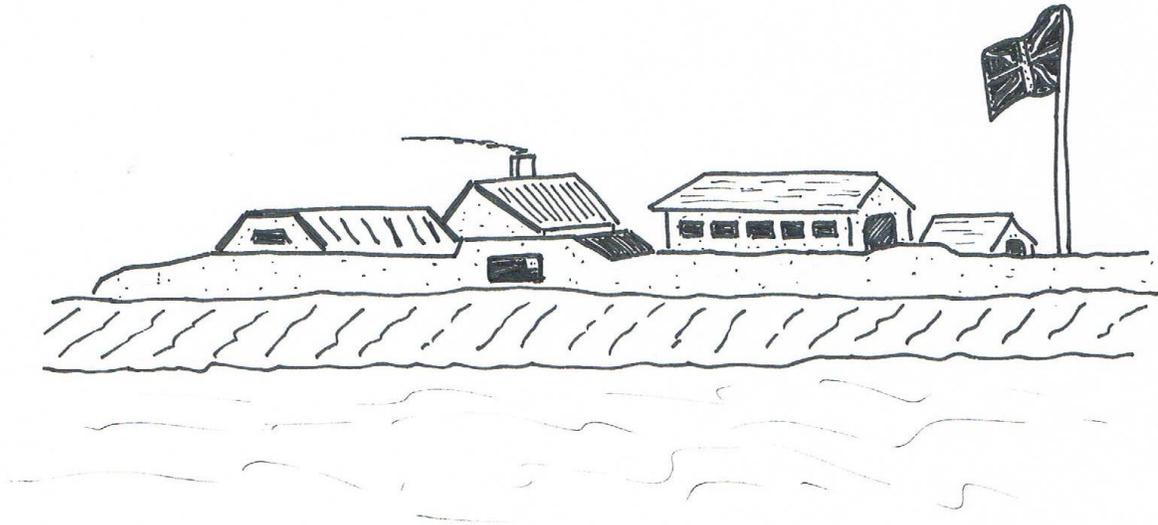
“You need to cross that rive to be free, fully free. And to find your first love. I understand all of that now. You deserve to be happy, and I assuredly want you to be happy.” Small lenses of tears formed at Peter’s eyelids.

“Well, I’m pretty happy right now.” Ophelia chuffed his cheek and smiled broadly.

“We’re going to get you fully warmed, get those stones under a blanket in the cabin, and have a good night’s sleep. At first light we’ll cross over that river, finding a safe route to Amherstburg.” The young man’s face brightened, betraying a sinking feeling in his gut.

“You’re right, that plan makes sense given all of the things leading up to this. But if it will be our last night together, then we can do our best to make it memorable, no?” The lithe young lady slipped her arms around her suitor’s waist, engaging in an amorous embrace

Representatives of the British Crown



The two lovers had lain under two rough woolen blankets on the hard wooden cot inside the refuge cabin, warmed by their own body heat and the warmth radiating from the fire stones. The morning light send shards of muted illumination through the cabin's eastern window, and the girl opened one groggy eye and then burrowed her head back under the warmth of the blankets. This activity caused the boy to stir, and he looked around the modest cabin in an attempt to orient himself and slowly extract himself from a chaotic dreamscape.

"My, I had almost forgotten where I was. Just for a second I thought I was back with you in the attic, snuggled under those quilts of my Ma's?" Peter's mouth was thickened with nighttime residues.

"Almost wish that we were still back there?!" Ophelia blinked open her eyes.

"But we've made our decision, and we move on. Let's get packed up, and get our boots tied up well. We're going to be crossing an icy river today, remember?" The lad flapped back the blankets and winced at the coolness of the ambient air.

Careful packing and tidying of the refuge shelter, along with consumption of some hardtack that Peter had been carrying along on his tracking pursuits, took the better part of two hours. Both of them moved ponderously, enjoying each others' company. This was done to perhaps eke out the last bit of pleasure from their romantic relationship, or alternatively delay the inevitable start of an arduous journey across the ice. But soon enough they were out on the frozen surface of the Detroit River, shouldering their packs and supporting one another as they inched along. Three separate times they faced some degree of ice cracking under their feet, but their patience and perseverance got them through and out of danger each time. And finally after four hours of being out on the ice, with the wind in their face and the experiencing of clenched muscles as they made their tortuous navigation, they stepped onto a gently rising slope covered in brush.

“Lordy, is the river really behind us, or is this just another one of those islands?” Ophelia looked around brightly, a big smile erupting on her face as she finally felt the muscles in her gut relax.

“I’m thinking this is some kind of town. We left Gibraltar on the Michigan side, and walked on a slight angle northward. My map tells me this should be Amherstburg, or its outskirts.” Peter held a tattered piece of paper in his hand.

“So that means we’re in Canada? In the town where my Lucius is living as a free man? And my master and the patroller who was hunting me are lying dead at the bottom of the river? Now that means I am free too! Just like Mr. Walker appealed to all of us slaves, rise up and walk to our freedom! Oh my dear Peter, how can I ever thank you enough?” The young woman broke down and wrapped her arms around her rescuer’s neck.

“You’ve thanked me in so many ways, my dear Ophelia. More than I can say.” The young man leaned in firmly and kissed the girl’s cheeks and forehead.

“Now what kind of town is this? I don’t see any houses, or stores? Just that big building up ahead?” The young woman pointed east towards a large stone edifice.

“Not sure, but maybe they’ll have some hot food inside?” Peter walked in the direction of the complex, picking his steps around brush and rocks.

After a few moments the slope levelled out and they came to a clearing of snow-covered ground. About fifty yards away, near an entry door to the stone edifice, stood three uniformed men with rifles. Upon seeing the young man and woman, one of the building guards walked towards them with military precision.

“Good afternoon, sir and madam. Please state your intended business.” The guard had an impressive moustache, and spoke formally in an accent that was foreign to the ears of the two visitors.

“We are bound for Amherstburg, to reunite this young woman with her fiancé. She was formerly a slave in the State of North Carolina, and she is seeking her freedom.” Peter squared his shoulders and levelled his chin as he spoke.

“And who are you, sir, in relation to this young woman?” The guard’s voice was crisp and curt.

“I am a farmer from Ohio, who gave refuge to her on her journey. I am her friend...yes, a good friend. I have travelled north to assist her with the crossing of the river.” The boy looked nervously sideways, towards Ophelia who was biting her lip.

“On behalf of Queen Victoria, I am most pleased to welcome you to British soil. Young lady, you are now free, according to the Slavery Abolition Act. This is Fort Malden, and its contained troops protect the strategic interests of Amherstburg and the surrounding area of Upper Canada.” The uniformed soldier stood smartly at attention.

“Oh, my, my, my. Canada. I’m not dreaming, am I?” Ophelia gushed this out, smiling broadly.

“No, miss, you look rather wide awake. And somewhat hungry, if I might add. On behalf of the Fort’s governor, I invite both of you to the mess kitchen for some strong coffee and some hearty soup.” The guard smiled kindly and offered a broad hand towards the side gate.

Look for the Steeple



Over an hour later, having had the opportunity to wash up a bit and be fortified with several steaming bowls of white bean soup, the visitors walked slowly out of the front gate of Fort Malden. The head cook, a kindly and portly older woman, had patiently given them directions to the AME church. ‘Go east to Sandwich Street, and mind the wagon traffic when you’re crossing as those horses can go at an almighty fast clip. Two more blocks to King Street, then turn right. Go south along King for a spell, and when you come to Gore Street it’ll only be another half block or so on your left hand side. Nice people in that church, and they take care of a lot of folks who have crossed Jordan to the promised land. Some by boat in the Summer, and some by foot on the ice of Winter. But all are welcomed and helped under the steeple of that church.’

Ophelia and Peter made their way along the quiet streets, until they came up to the commercial thoroughfare of Sandwich Street. Here they saw considerable activity, with a mix of white and black

folks going in and out of stores and taverns, with many horse-drawn conveyances rattling north and south. They crossed safely and entered a relatively quiet residential neighbourhood, coming up to King Street just as the cook had described.

“Ophelia, my dear, this is the street that the church is on. I think that you should go on alone from here. The good folks will direct you to Lucius, and I would feel both awkward and conflicted at witnessing your reunion. I’ve gotten you here safely, please give me my release now. I’ll step back into town and perhaps find another meal to fortify myself before trying to get back to the cabin before nightfall.” The young man smiled tersely, with his jaw set in a straight line.

“Oh, Peter, please...at least get me to the church. What if there’s been some kind of mix-up, and Lucius is nowhere in these parts? They will be able to tell me one way or another, and I would have your support up to that knowing? And besides, I want your company for just a few more moments, to walk arm in arm with you on these quiet streets? Is that terrible of me to take advantage of your kindness like that?” Ophelia leaned in to her suitor, holding his left arm with both of her hands.

“No, it’s certainly not terrible in any way. Quite the opposite, actually. We’ve spent the last six months pretty much together, what’s a few minutes more? It’s just, oh, I don’t really know how to put it into words.” The young man grimaced in an agonizing fashion, and looked away.

“What is it, my dear? Tell me. Tell me anything.” Ophelia stopped sharply and reached out to caress Peter’s cheek.

“I simply need to ask you one last time. Might we turn a sharp right up here at Gore Street, and just keep on going? Who knows where, but we’d be going there together? No one’s chasing you anymore, m’dear. My parents will be reasonably alright without me. We could just go, find someplace to call home for the rest of our lives. What do you say?” Peter blinked hard, his lower lip trembling with emotion.

“Oh, my darling, my darling Peter. You have loved me so. But Lucius is expecting me. I gave my heart to him that night of the master’s birthday party. We had seen each other grow up. As much as I feel torn, as much as it breaks my heart to say, I’ve got to keep going to that church up yonder, where he asked me to come find him. This journey has been too long, the obstacles have been too many, to give up on what moved me to start this journey. I know I’m disappointing you, but I hope over time you will understand?” The young woman leaned in and kissed Peter’s cheek.

They walked on at a deliberately slow pace, reveling in each other’s energy and enjoying the tactile contact of their bodies. Sooner than either would have liked, they came to a solid stone house of worship, with a number of black folks working in the side and rear yards. A grizzled old man with a shock of grey hair gave them a beaming smile and waved them over.

Simple Directions



“How can I help you folks? If you don’t mind me saying, you both look a little worse for the wear! Did you just cross that icy expanse of Jordan?” The older man’s eyes danced as he reached out to pump the hands of both of his visitors.

“Sure enough, kind sir. The young lady tried to cross by herself yesterday but encountered a bit of trouble in the middle of the river. Luckily, I was around to help and we came across uneventfully today. The good folks down at the fort gave us some hospitality, and accurate directions here to the church. And so here we are.” Peter said this briskly, working hard to keep his emotions in check.

“Sister, welcome. I suspect you will have many stories to share with your children and grandchildren of your journey to freedom. Come on in to the church and I will introduce you to some folks who will help you settle in comfortably.” The man beckoned with a huge mitt of a hand.

“Sir, I thank you kindly for the warm welcome. But I ran from my farm with a specific goal in mind. Would you know of a young man named Lucius?” Ophelia’s eyes glistened brightly.

“Lucius, Lucius...I believe I do. Yes indeed, a tall and handsome young man from down Carolina way. Bright smile, and a good worker. Eager to please...” The gentleman smiled in a slightly forced way.

“Lord, that describes him to a tee! Where is he at?” The young woman bounced excitedly on her heels.

“Uh, Lucius lives just down the street, at the rear of Miss Gertrude’s home at number 293. It’s getting on in the day, so he should be back home from his gardening work.” The older chap pointed to his left, and shot a slightly nervous look towards Peter.

“Oh good, we’ll walk over there right now. I can’t wait to surprise my Lucius boy.” The young woman shivered palpably with excitement and grabbed the arm of her companion as they walked away from the front of the AME church.

“Let’s see, number 289, does that mean we’re getting close?” Ophelia was beyond giddy, and pulled at Peter’s elbow.

“Ophelia, hold up for just a second.” The young man planted his feet firmly on the pebbly surface of the roadway.

“C’mon, time’s a’wasting! I can’t wait to introduce you to Lucius. He’ll be so thankful to you for helping me get across that river.” Ophelia smiled broadly, leaning forward.

“I can’t...can’t go any further. You’ll be safe from here on in. But you have to go on alone. I’m sorry, I don’t feel as if I can meet Lucius. I hope you’ll understand.” The young man gave a lingering hug to the girl, then turned quickly and walked northward on King Street, with a heavy heart and red-rimmed eyes glistening with tears.

Been Chopping Wood a Long Time



Ophelia stood and watched Peter's back recede, and felt a twinge of remorse as he turned left onto Gore Street and disappeared out of sight. She had been hoping that he might look back, even just once, but that wish went unrewarded. So she took a deep breath, turned around sharply, and hitched up her travelling bag on her right shoulder. She walked slowly southwards until she came to number 293, and waked up a dusty driveway to a modest looking lean-to attached to the rear of the home. With a boundless sense of anticipation, she knocked firmly on the wooden door, and took a half step back while bearing a wide grin. The door opened momentarily, with a loud squeaking sound and the release of cooking aromas from an interior kitchen.

"Hello, how may I help you?" The young woman standing on the stoop was friendly enough in tone, but a furrowed brow quickly balanced out the offered greeting. Ophelia instantly saw the similarity to herself, most notably the mountain of hair piled up on top of her head and a striking figure evident under a billowy white cotton dress.

"Yes, miss. I, uh, I am hoping you might be able to tell me where I might find Lucius." Ophelia smiled broadly, and nodded perhaps a bit too vigourously.

“Lucius? That boy’s out back chopping wood for the stove in the kitchen. You’re lucky though, he just got back no more than five minutes ago from his paid outdoor work. He just stuck his head in the door for a moment before he picked up his axe and went back to the chopping block.” The young woman reached down to touch her gently curving belly.

“Would it be alright if I went around and let him know I’m here? I just crossed the river today and I’m anxious to tell him that I’ve finally arrived here in Amherstburg.” Ophelia spilled this out almost bashfully.

“Sure, go ahead, I’m just going to go back to the supper preparations. But listen, honey, tell me again how you know Lucius?” The other young woman’s eyes narrowed imperceptibly.

“Oh, uh, we used to be workers down on the same tobacco farm in Carolina. Lucius was in the field, me in the house. We all missed him real bad when he took off north. So, I’m just hoping to, uh, hoping to reconnect, y’know?” The fatigued young woman shrugged affably.

“Sure, sure, makes sense. A farm’s workers become like a big family. Lucius! There’s someone here to say hello!” The young woman’s voice bordered on harshness.

A muffled voice emanated from around the corner of the lean-to structure. Ophelia stepped briskly and turned, seeing her young man bending down to pick up two pieces of recently cleaved wood. He was even more handsome than she remembered, and she stopped abruptly to savour the long anticipated moment of reconnection.

“Ophelia? Lordy lordy, girl, how long has it been?” The young man dropped the wood and his axe, dumbfounded.

“Far too many days, boyfriend. And far too many miles to catch up with you, but here I am!” The young woman dropped her bag and ran towards Lucius, jumping from a yard away to wrap her arms and legs around his muscular body. He spun awkwardly, and seemed to hold her partially at arms’ length.

“Give me a big kiss, you handsome fool! I’ve been dreaming of this moment for months!” She leaned in open mouthed and passionately, but the young man gave her a brief peck on her upper lip and then consciously strained his neck backwards.

“That’s not a real kiss, mister! Has the cold weather frozen you up, or are you just out of practice?” The young woman puckered up again and dramatically closed her eyes.

“Ophelia, there’s something I have to tell you. Not sure how to best go about it, and I’m still a bit shocked to see you here in the flesh. But...” The young man grimaced and looked away momentarily.

“What’s going on here? This is not the greeting I was expecting, not after all I’ve been through to get here! Tell me straight, boy.” The girl flared her nostrils angrily.

"I know I wrote you that letter to run away, to come up here to join me in Amherstburg. But so many months went by, with so much water under the bridge. I suppose I was weak, and I didn't have the strength or patience to wait." The young man's eyes moistened quickly.

"But none of that matters. I'm here now. We can build our lives together, from this day on. We're both free now, free to do as we please." Ophelia came in close, circling her arms around his waist.

"But things have changed over the past while. I didn't think you would make it, and another young lady appeared. The gal who directed you back here just now. We hit it off right away. She was a slave off a farm in southern Virginia. She had a man by the name of Clay, who I had actually crossed paths with on my journey north. He and I had tussled with a few nasty dogs, and then he went back for his girl. Turns out his overseer shot Clay dead, but the girl was able to slip away during the commotion." Lucius' bottom lip trembled.

"So Clay's girlfriend has become your girlfriend. How terribly sweet that all sounds. But I'm your original girlfriend, Lucius, the one you coaxed to follow you north!" Ophelia's eyes flashed fire. "So I'm going to go inside and tell her to shove off!"

"Ophelia, my dear, I am so very sorry. But I'm engaged to marry Missy next month. I sort of lost my head, thought maybe my letter didn't get through. Or that you wouldn't be able to get all this way." The young man had his chin down, speaking softly.

"So you're not yet married. So I'm still in luck, if you just march in there and tell her the wedding's off because your real girlfriend has just arrived in town. If you don't have the backbone to do this, then I'll have to roll up my sleeves and go do it!" The young woman pivoted angrily.

"Ophelia, please wait." Lucius grabbed her right elbow. "There's something you need to know. She's with child. We're expecting our first baby in five months' time."

"Lucius! Lucius? Supper's ready, my man." Missy's voice trilled out the side door.

"Ophelia, I loved you so. We could have had a good life together. But events seemed to work against that coming to fruition. I am very sorry, my dear, more than I can say." Lucius held the young woman tightly to his breast, until the second call for dinner caused him to unwillingly release his embrace.

Against All Hope



Ophelia waked briskly down the dusty driveway, her head held high but with tears streaming down her burning cheeks. She turned right onto King Street, and in under a minute she was back in front of the Nazrey AME church. Several young men loitered in its side yard, and a couple of them called out a friendly greeting to the winsome stranger. She hesitated for just a second, looking over at them intently, but then an inner voice propelled her to keep going. The shock of receiving Lucius' news had not yet fully sunk in, after the many months of holding him in mind as a symbol of achieving her freedom. And here she was, free at last, but not destined to be with her dream-held Lucius. She knew intuitively she could easily stay in or around the church and one of these young men would inevitably become her suitor, but some alternate future was quickly forming itself within her consciousness.

She turned left onto Gore Street, and fairly flew down the two blocks to the busyness of Sandwich Street. Looking this way and that, she safely crossed the active thoroughfare and picked up her running pace again, covering the three long blocks down to Dalhousie Street at the river's edge. Ophelia mentally calculated the number of minutes that she had been heatedly conversing with Lucius, and surmised that if Peter had gone directly to cross the river he would not even be a quarter-way across the expanse of ice to the refuge on Sugar Island. The young woman dashed down a gap between two buildings and stood by the river's edge, scanning her eyes up and down for the familiar figure of the lanky farm boy.

The ice surface was quiet and desolate, with no human figure evident. Panic rose up quickly in her throat, and her stomach churned as a cold wind picked up. But then the thought came to her slowly but steadily, that her dear companion had stopped somewhere in Amherstburg for food or drink before starting his return journey across the ice. Perhaps he had gone back to the known hospitality of Fort

Malden, or to one of the public houses in town. The uncertainty of her situation overwhelmed her momentarily, then the visual image of Mama telling her to always hold her back straight came to her and nudged her to return to Dalhousie Street.

She walked in the direction of the fort, with the notion that she would head into any tea house or tavern that she would pass on the way. Daylight was fading, and the wind from the west picked up once more, so she buttoned up her jacket and walked briskly northward.

After one block she came to Murray Street, and crossed over to the east side as she could see a building at the mid-block with the sign 'Bullock's Tavern'. Its windows were heavily draped, and the substantial wooden front door was a bit of a challenge to open as another blast of wind blew up sharply. The foyer of the hotel was quiet and musty, but she pulled open another door, providing her entry to the ground floor of the tavern. A wave of warm air hit her, with aromas of hearty food and the guttural laughter of fifty or more men being conveyed to the new visitor. Ophelia stood there awkwardly, as everyone in the establishment seemed to be white, and a number of its patrons were visually inspecting her journey-weary appearance.

"Young sir, what's your pleasure? Food, drink, or both?" A sharp-eyed barmaid, in her forties with some girth, came up to Ophelia while wiping her hands on a towel.

"Uh, ma'am, I'm looking for a young man who might have arrived here in the last twenty minutes or so. Tall, blond hair, open face. Have you seen anyone like that?" Ophelia kept her voice low and husky, realizing her shorn head disguise was still having its effect.

"Hmmm, as you can see, it's a busy place. But a stranger did come in a quarter hour back that might fit that description. He's sitting just around that column, right by the fire, waiting for his dinner." The woman extended a broad hand towards a roaring fireplace.

Ophelia took eight quick steps, and peeked around the edge of a roughly-hewn timber column. Her heart exploded with joy when she saw her Ohio farm boy, sitting alone at a table for two, staring glumly towards the flaming logs in the hearth.

"Can I give you some company, sir? Or are you expecting your lady to join you soon?" The young woman re-calibrated her voice as she rushed up to the table and tightly grabbed the young man's arm.

"Ophelia! Am I seeing a ghost? Or might I be dreaming?" The lad's face exploded with joy. "What are you doing here?"

"Let's just say that things didn't work out as planned. My lengthy stay at a certain farm in Ohio proved too long for Lucius to wait. So he now has another gal, and they're soon to be married with a little one on the way." Ophelia raised her eyebrows theatrically while sitting down.

"Oh my, you poor dear! He was why you ran away, and why you came here to Amherstburg. That just doesn't seem fair." The young man extended his hands across the table.

“But God works in mysterious ways. I was meant to cross paths with you, and to linger on your farm. Because with that, we fell in love. And because of that love, you followed my two trackers north until they caught up with me. As long as they were alive, I would never be free. But now I am free, Peter. Free in all ways. And free to ask you some important questions.” The young woman paused for effect.

“Absolutely, go ahead, ask anything.” A well of saliva rose up in the young man’s throat.

“After all we’ve gone through, over the last six months, and especially over the last day or two...will you take me back? So that we’ll never leave each other’s side, so we can build a life together?” Ophelia’s face started to stream with tears halfway through.

“Yes, yes, yes! This is my answer to prayer!” The young man rounded the table and swept his girl up into his arms.

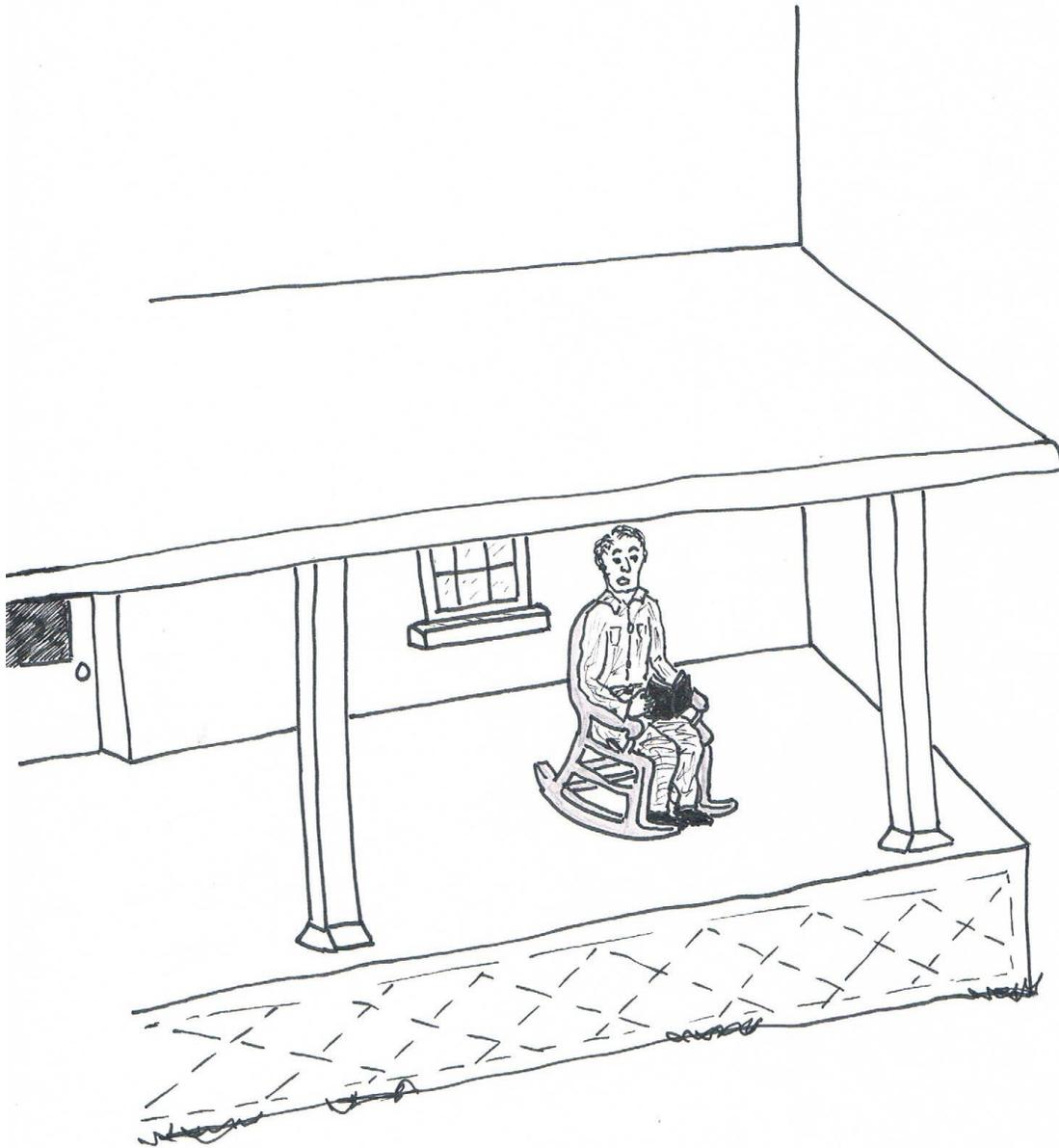
“Oh, Peter dear...my prayers have been answered as well!! We can cross the river tomorrow, and start our journey down to the Oklahoma Territory.” Ophelia hugged her beau tight and rocked him boisterously.

“No, I have an even better idea. We will stay here, on this side of Jordan. It’s not been long, but I really like it over here. The air seems lighter, the people seem calmer. I overheard some folks at the next table talking about a little village north of here, on what is called the River Canard. They said that means River of Ducks, in French. So we’ll go there, get a little plot of land, do some farming. What do you say?” The young man was beaming.

“River Canard. I like it. Sounds like home to me.” The young woman’s face was aglow as she hugged her paramour.

“Alright then, here’s a hearty carving of roast beef, with potatoes and gravy. Plenty for two, I believe.” The plump barmaid bore out a large platter, looking a bit askance at the image of two young men locked in a deep embrace.

A New Alliance



The wagon wheels rolled up the farm lane at an intermediate pace, with the conveyance being driven by an affable neighbour just across the Alamance County line. Henry the overseer had been reading a book on the veranda on a fine late November afternoon, taking it a bit easier after the conclusion of a busy planting and harvesting season. He blinked his eyes a bit, partially from surprise and partially from disbelief, when the mistress minced off of the wagon's bench seat in an attractive burgundy travel outfit and waited for her bag to be offloaded.

"Henry, nice to see you. I had to make a run down to the Moncure station to pick up a parcel off the train, and the mistress here was just getting off the steamer." The tall man with a ready grin nodded in the direction of Marie while he shook hands with the overseer.

“Joseph, much obliged. Marie, welcome home, and a nice surprise to see you return in one piece after all of this time.” Henry reached out for her bag and touched the mistress’ arm, feeling some kind of current pass between them. “C’mon in and get freshened up. Mama will have a tasty dinner ready soon for all of us to enjoy.”

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“Sit down, Marie, and take a load off after all of that travel. Mama will have the food out soon enough, but we’ve got plenty to talk about in the meantime.” Henry motioned for the young woman to sit down to his right, from where he sat at the head of the dining table.

“Yes, it feels strange to be back, but comfortable. Like a well-worn slipper that you haven’t put on in a while.” Marie had let her long auburn hair down after getting changed into a striking blue dress with black gingham trim.

“Will Master John and Ophelia be returning separately?’ Henry said this in a neutral tone.

“I simply do not know! Henry, there’s so much to tell you, I simply don’t know where to start.” The mistress’ eyes were wide open and a bit wild.

“Start slow. Did you make it in time for your sister, and is she in good health now?”

“After a grueling wagon trip, we did get there in time, but just barely. Within a mere few days of us arriving, she slipped away in a raging fever. I stayed on, to help my brother-in-law with the care of the twin infants. They almost became like my own, but I had to leave. My brother-in-law is an unkind man, and he started to make ...certain advances.” The young woman sniffled a bit and looked down.

“I am sorry for the loss of your sister, truly.” Henry reached out and grasped one of her hands. “But was Master John unable to tell him to curtail his undesirable behaviour?”

“No, because he insisted on taking off to find Ophelia!” The mistress’ face contorted in rage.

“Oh no, Ophelia ran away?!” The overseer looked nervously in the direction of Mama, who was working at the stove amidst a number of pots of steaming food.

“She ran away the first night we got to my sister’s! Poisoned four dogs and disappeared without a trace! John became so angry he couldn’t spit, and jumped on a horse to try to track her down. He told me he would catch her and return to the farm. I waited and waited, taking care of the little ones. Weeks went by, months went by. But he never came back! So I journeyed home by train, thinking they must have returned here directly. But they’re not here, are they?!” She looked around the room dramatically.

“No, ma’am. We’ve just been keeping our nose to the grindstone. The matron passed away a few months back, after feeling poorly for some time. So it’s just been me and Mama, holding down the fort. The field workers have been real fine, working hard, and we had a very good harvest this year. But we haven’t seen hide nor hair of any of you three folks, up until today at least.” Henry nodded kindly to

Mama as she bore over a number of aromatic platters of food and sat down to the left of Henry, directly across from the mistress.

“Mama, you’re going to be eating with us, instead of eating afterwards like normal?” The mistress’ voice hit a strident note, but the cook simply smiled warmly and helped herself off one of the platters.

“Marie, a number of things have changed around here. Mama has shouldered the full burden of running the house and the kitchen, and we’ve been getting along real fine. To recognize all of that, she’s been joining me at mealtimes. With you home, I don’t think that should change one small bit. This food tastes right delicious, Mama.” He offered a tight smile towards the mistress.

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“Henry, I need some help to move some furniture up in the bedroom. Who knows if the master will ever come back, so I’ve decided to move out of the anteroom and sleep in the master bedroom. But the dresser needs to be shifted.” The mistress had come down to Henry as he sat in the parlour after dinner.

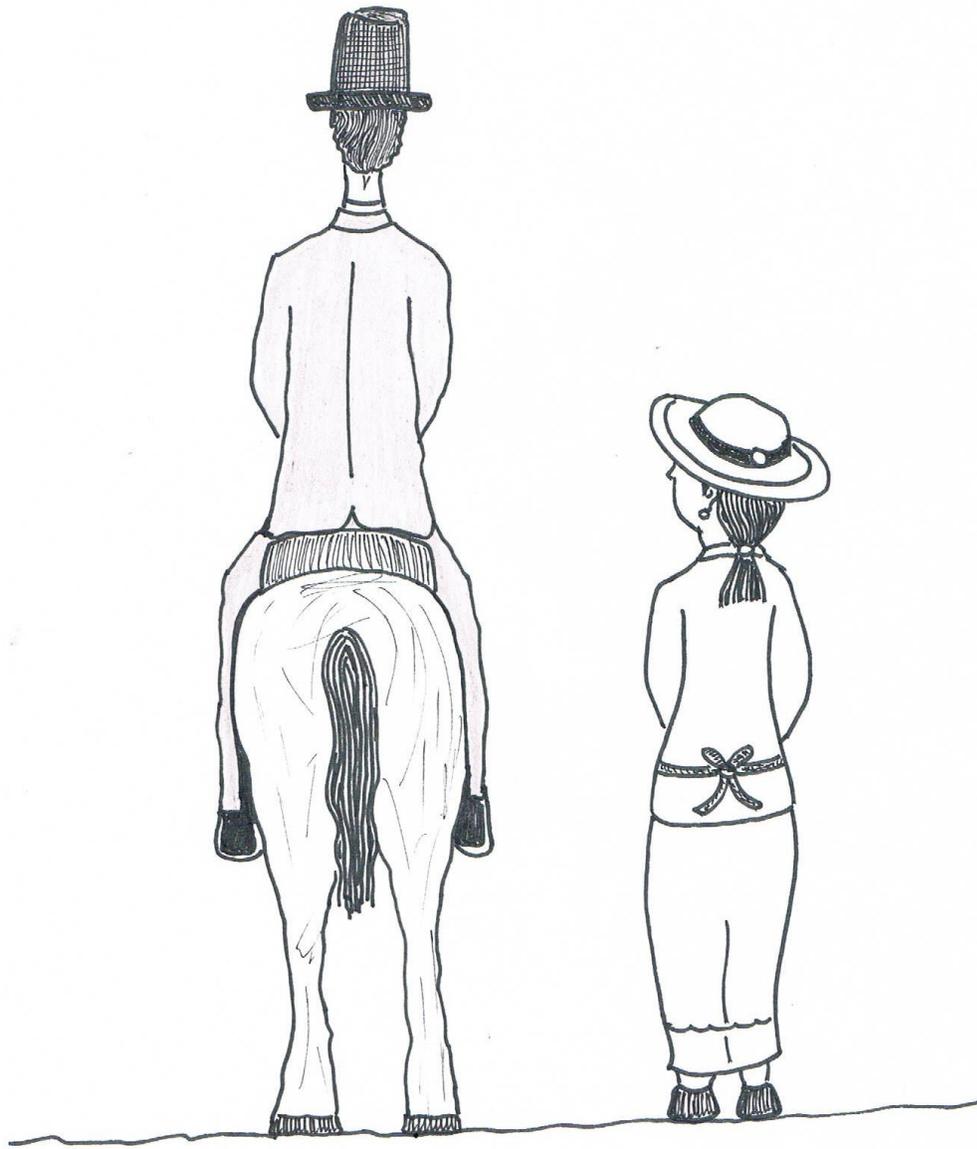
“Yes, ma’am. Happy to oblige.” The two mounted the stairs and walked the corridor towards the sleeping quarters.

“I’d like the dresser shifted all the way to the corner, freeing up some more space to move around the bed. Can you put your shoulder into it, as it’s very heavy.” The young woman’s voice took on a coquettish tone.

“Yes, ma’am. Easy enough.” The strong chap bent down and pushed in three pulses, grunting each time. “Now how else can I be of service?”

“Perhaps take off your trousers, and join me over here.” The young woman had slipped off her dress and undergarments in a few seconds, and reclined sensually on a lovely quilt. “It looks like my husband’s never coming back, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to sleep alone in this big ol’ bed.”

Frenzied Dreams of the Future



The mistress settled back into the new rhythms of the altered household relatively seamlessly. No mention of Ophelia was ever made to her Mama, and this was reciprocated back with a knowing that this would be better for all parties involved. The younger woman stepped in to do a portion of the household tasks—cleaning, food preparation, laundry, sewing—that had been too onerous for just one woman to do in the absence of Ophelia and with the loss of the matron. This seemed to be positive overall for the mistress as part of her earlier discontent had centered around a lack of purpose and the absence of any real contribution to the successful running of the farm. She still had time for a lengthy walk down to the river each day to take in the birdsong, and she would always wave in a friendly way to each of the field workers that she crossed paths with. And evenings and night-times were spent in the

strong arms of the overseer, who had no apparent reservations about sleeping in the master's bed or the regular sampling of the considerable carnal delights enthusiastically offered up by the master's wife.

The young woman was prone to richly constructed and complex dreams, about herself and her original family, her new domestic situation, or the world in general. She would dream often of her husband, with her conscious mind often wondering when and if he might drive up the farm's laneway, with or without the hunted Ophelia. Often these dreams would end with an image of him lying face down in a morass of mucky sediment, either by the side of a river or in a cove with stagnant water flow. These dreams would agitate her considerably during their experiencing, but afterwards upon some reflection she wondered if they were communicating to her that she was now free of her marital bonds.

One night, as turbulent winds swept across the Piedmont, she slipped into a dream state that would reveal many troubling images. She saw large battalions of troops massing on either side of a vast plain, one army dressed in dark blue uniforms and the other in light grey uniforms. The battle ensued, with considerable loss of life on both sides. Her dream vision allowed her to observe handsome and gallant young men, dying agonizing deaths as they took their last breath on the mud of the battlefield. She saw masses of black slaves running to the safety being offered by the blue uniformed army, and even saw young black men in blue uniforms bearing rifles and preparing for the next skirmish. The mistress whirled and swirled across a wide region, seeing provisions being delivered in fast moving trains, and the raging of mass fires that would engulf entire cities. And near the end of this chaotic and terrifying montage of dream scenes, she walked along a quiet road beside a horse and its rider. A tall, lean man wearing an unkempt black suit and a black top hat sat atop his steed, clip-clopping steadily towards his duty of inspecting a coterie of blue-uniformed soldiers. The rider, gaunt in form and weary of face, turned towards the dreamscape Marie and chivalrously tipped his hat in her direction. He cleared his throat and said the following... 'Ma'am, I want you to know, that all of this misery could have been avoided. If only people had made different choices.' And with that he turned away on his mount, and the young woman's consciousness hurled itself back into her sleeping body.

"Henry, wake up! I've just had the most frightening dream of my life! I need to tell you what I just experienced, and what I just heard." The mistress shook her head sideways and leaned over to tap her bedmate on his chest as he slept deeply.

"Mmmph, what's that? Can't it wait until morning, darling?" The overseer snorted heavily and rolled onto his right side, offering his warm back to the young woman. She wove her left arm into the curve of his waist and snuggled into the emanating body heat, but stayed awake the rest of the night, contemplating the mind-seared images from her troubling dream.

A New Way of Being



“Sit down in the sunshine, my dear. Take a mouthful of your coffee and try to settle a bit. While we were eating our breakfast you looked near to bursting with some kind of excitement.” Henry pulled up another rocking chair close to his out on the porch, in a lens of lovely and warming morning sunshine.

“It’s just that I didn’t want Mama to hear me while she was puttering around in the kitchen. Depending on your reaction to what I have to say, I didn’t want to enflame her passions!” The young woman drew the steaming cup of fluid to her lips.

“Well, you certainly know how to incite curiosity in a person! We’re both here, no one else is around, so go ahead and unleash what’s bottled up inside of you.” The overseer briefly smiled, arching one eyebrow.

“Fine, this feeling goes back a long ways to when I was a child, but I had a dream last night that brought everything into focus. I hope it wasn’t a truly prophetic dream, as I saw images of a horrific war. Many people dying, buildings being burned, and it all seemed to be very real. As if it could happen right here, tomorrow. It shook me to my core, and I woke up shivering in fear. That’s when I woke you up.” The mistress’ face was reflectively tense as she looked towards her confidant.

“Darling, a dream is only a dream. And sometimes they turn into a nightmare. Don’t take all of what you saw so seriously.” Henry smiled reassuringly and patted her knee.

“But my dear, it was so vivid and realistic! I saw battalions of soldiers coming into plantations and farms, and the slaves rushing to join their side. Henry, the northern states don’t want the slavery we have down here. What if a war broke out between the two ways of thinking, a war over slavery?” The young woman leaned forward, her face an intense mask.

"It's possible, I suppose. Never really gave it much thought. We didn't have slaves when I was a kid growing up, but other farms did. I guess I've just accepted it as a fact of life." The overseer turned reflective, and cast a glance in the direction of the fields.

"Well, we had a few slaves, but my Mama and I always resisted the idea. We were French by our roots, so we believe in liberty, equality and the brotherhood of man. But my Papa made the decisions for our household, and he believed owning slaves was necessary to achieve financial stability for his farming operation. It was his decision, his choice, but what if it was the wrong way to think?" Marie's eyes glistened.

"Maybe you're right, but maybe your Papa was right? One could argue it either way." Henry smiled ruefully.

"But then I come back to my dream, to its dramatic ending. I was walking alongside a tall man on a horse. He was very thoughtful, very soulful, with sadness filling every one of his pores. Carnage was all around him as he rode out to inspect his troops. And he turned to me, looked right into my interior, and told me that all of it could have been avoided. If only we had made different choices." The young mistress reached out for Henry's hands, gripping them tightly.

"What does all that mean?" Henry's voice became child-like.

"I've mulled it over and over in my mind since I woke up from the dream. I don't think Master John is going to return home after all of these months, as he must have met some foul play on his hunt for that impudent girl. So as mistress of this farm, I've decided on what I must do." The young woman paused for emphasis.

"Which is?" The overseer cocked another eyebrow.

"Free our slaves." The mistress pursed her lips firmly and defiantly.

"Marie...we're running a tobacco farm here. We need many hands in the field over a long and arduous season." Henry's face broke out in to a theatrical grimace.

"I believe the formal term is manumission of slaves. I will go into Pittsboro and consult with a sympathetic lawyer as to what I need to do in a legal sense to expedite this. I know some of our neighbours will be upset, but I simply do not care. Others may follow our example, it's up to them to look into their own hearts and perhaps interpret their own dreams. But it's what I want to do, and I will need your support." The young woman's eyes took on a steely tone.

"But where will that leave us?" The overseer's eyes looked haunted.

"We will continue to live on this farm. Some of the slaves may leave, as free men and women. Others will choose to stay, as paid workers. All of us staying on this land will work hard together, to make an honest living. We can grow food to feed us all, and grow a bit of tobacco to bring some cash into our operation to pay taxes and improve the housing for the workers. There will be a period of adjustment,

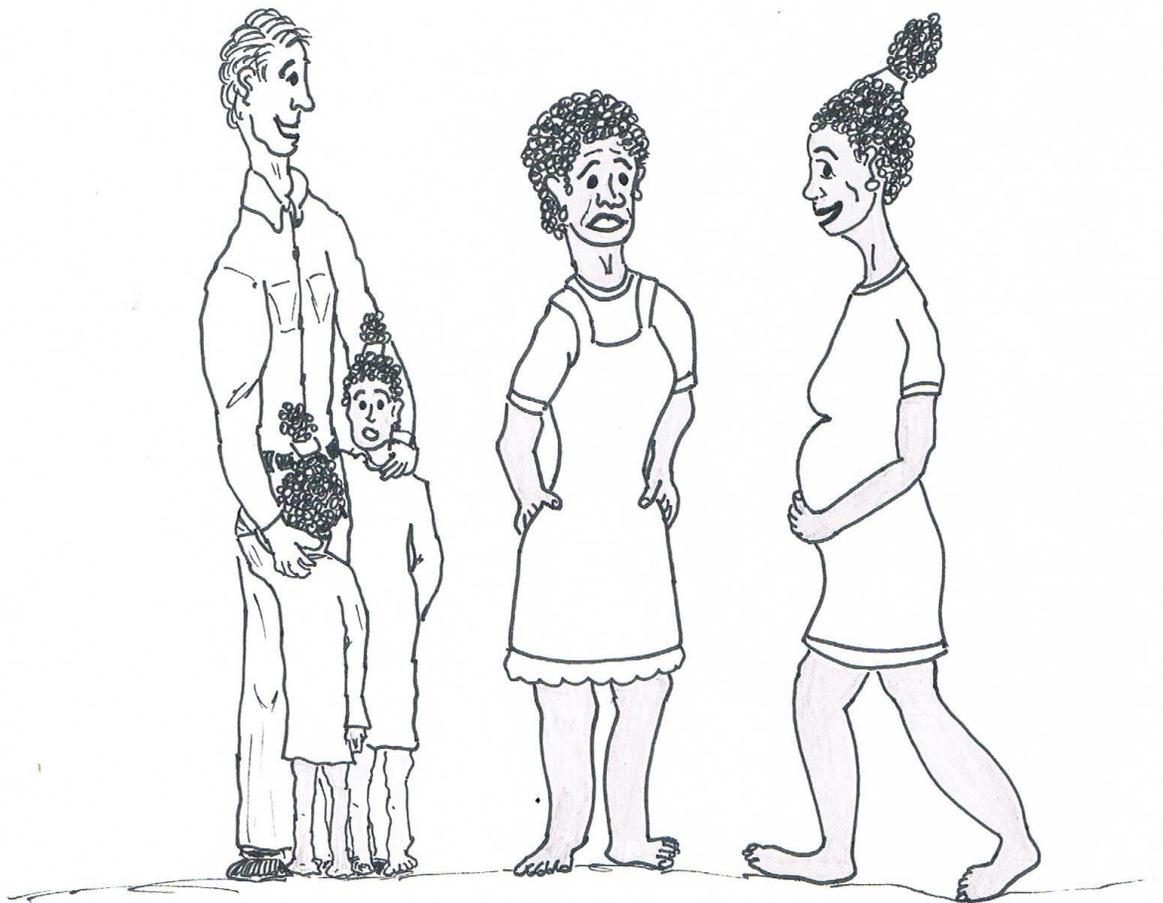
but we will figure things out in the end. But from now on, everyone here will be free. Not just you and me, but Mama and all the field workers as well. Do you hear me sir?" A slight hint of humour flooded the mistress' face.

"What do you want me to do to expedite?" The overseer sat upright, ready for action.

"Tell Mama and all the field workers that we will have a meeting by the garden in one hour. I will tell them that they will all soon be free, with the appropriate papers to show that status. And I will offer them all employment here on the farm, for anyone who chooses to take up that offer, at a salary to be determined by the fruits of our collective labour. I'm going to go upstairs and spruce up a bit for this momentous occasion." The young woman smiled even more warmly as she rose from her rocking chair.

"Looks like I can throw away my whip for good!" Henry reached out and playfully stroked her back as she glided past.

Dreams Do Come True



Seven years later...

She loved walking near the River Canard. It wasn't a large river, but a mid-sized watercourse that tumbled by slowly but surely on a flat tidal plain. On this lovely early Spring day she felt free and unencumbered, with a lightness of heart that she had wondrously accepted as her normal state since moving to this quiet place. She looked off to the trees in the distance, recognizing they were different than any flora she had experienced in her childhood Carolina. Birds flew overhead, and she projected herself into their winged forms, gliding with the thermal currents and fully enjoying the panorama unfolding below. She felt free, truly free, and her spirit luxuriated in that knowing for several lovely moments.

And then she was back in her body, feeling its strength and flexibility and litheness. But there was a fullness to her form, a ripeness, that pleased her immensely. She reached down to feel the distinct curve of her belly underneath her cotton sheath, and she could sense the baby shift inside of her, making small adjustments to get comfortable in its aqueous sac and prepare for its imminent entry into the outside world.

And as if on cue, two youngsters ran out of a nearby cabin. Both were girls, with mountains of curly tresses piled up askew on their beautiful little heads. Scampering in a colt-like fashion towards Ophelia, they grinned goofily and playfully elbowed one another to see who could be first to wrap themselves around her sturdy legs.

"Mama, we were looking for you but you were nowhere to be found! Papa will be coming soon and Grandma is getting food ready for supper. Let us help you, please?!" Ophelia walked slowly back to the open door of the cabin, with her two daughters clinging to her and looking up with their adoring eyes.

"Mama, do you need help from us to get supper on the table?" Ophelia peered inside the tidy living space in the direction of the kitchen.

"No, I'm good, girl. You're heavy with child, my dear, you need to put those feet up more." A still-lithe Mama came out to the stoop, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

"Grandma, how'd you learn to cook so good?" The oldest girl sidled in for a hug from her grandmother.

"I've been cooking all my life, honey child. Ran that kitchen down on that tobacco farm in Carolina, and thought I'd be there forever. But the mistress gave me my freedom papers one fine day, and a bit later I got a letter delivered by Daniel the store clerk, telling me where I could find y'all. And so here we all are, and I'm back to my cooking!" The older woman rocked the child gently on her hip.

"Hmmm, what a lovely man that Daniel is! Taught me to read and write, and read me Walker's Appeal over and over. And he brought me a letter too, that gave me the push to run from that farm." Ophelia smiled tightly.

"We need to hear more stories about what life was like, back on that farm." The six year old daughter piped up while tugging on her grandmother's skirts.

“Maybe when you’re older, we’ll see.” Ophelia reached out teasingly to her eldest daughter.

“Daddy!” The four year old spied her father coming up the lane to the cabin.

“Hello there, my little sweetheart!” The lanky form of the Ohio-raised farm boy reached down to envelope his daughter, before he strode purposefully to the cabin door to embrace his wife, mother-in-law and eldest daughter.

“How were things in the village?” Mama’s eyes glowed in the direction of her son-in-law.

“Good, good. Picked up some supplies and a copy of the Detroit Daily News. The paper’s two days old, but the headlines are more than interesting. One predicts the end of the war is coming soon! And another concerns a Confederate spy ring in Montreal that got broken up by a Canadian doctor, Dr. Alexander Ross.” The young man whipped a bag off his shoulder and pulled out a newspaper.

“Dr. Ross? The Bird Man? Mama, he’s the good doctor who came to visit our farm!” Ophelia grabbed the newspaper with gusto, frantically scanning the headlines.

“I surely remember. He was a good fellow. And a fine looking young man, too.” Mama smiled conspiratorially.

“Says in the article that he was feted for his undercover work, with President Lincoln hosting a banquet at the White House in his honour.” Peter pointed excitedly to the related article.

“Who’s President Lincoln?” The six year old asked this question while playfully poking her sister in the ribs.

“Girl, Mr. Lincoln is the President of the United States of America. He set all black people free by signing the Emancipation Proclamation. Because all men and women, all boys and girls, deserve to be free.” Mama’s face glowed brightly. “Now, who’s ready for some supper?”

~The End~

About the Author and Illustrator



Brian Wilson Baetz is a proud son of Walkerton, Ontario, a small town that is the seat of Bruce County and a willing host to the mighty Saugeen River. He has earned civil engineering degrees from the University of Toronto and Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Previously he served as Professor and Chair of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and has also served as Professor and Chair of the Department of Civil Engineering at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Brian is a registered Professional Engineer in the Province of Ontario and is a Fellow of the Canadian Society of Civil Engineers.

He lives with his family in Dundas, Ontario, a town of considerable charm and historical significance, not to mention its enviable amounts of green space.