A Time Before Freedom

Middle School Entry

I am so weak the wind could knock me over. My broken arm hangs limply at my side, probably begging for some kind of protection. My head and my stomach ache from the lack of food. But the sound of barking dogs in the distance and the thought of having to go back to that horrible plantation makes me start running again. It is like the nightmare I've had many times before. Gathering up the courage to run away and then getting chased around the woods by shouting men and dogs, only to end up dying or losing hope forever. But this time it is real. This time if I were caught I would really pay with my life.

The dark woods race by as I run, not knowing where I am heading or even caring. The last safe house was supposed to be a mile back, but all it was was a pile of burnt wood. The tears inside my eyes make my vision blurry and I trip over the root of a tree and fall. A sharp pain appears in my ankle and I know I've twisted it. The sounds of barking dogs and men get closer and closer. I know that I cannot run anymore and by tomorrow I will be dead. Death is the punishment for running away on Mr. Dreff's plantation. But I will try to die here before they can find me. I refuse to give them the satisfaction of killing me. It would be better to die then to be a slave on that plantation.

It was a windy October day when I became a slave and scowling white men with guns at their sides had just come below deck. They had begun releasing people from their shackles and pushing them upstairs. One man was bold enough that when they released him, he managed to grab the white man's gun and shoot him. In a minute the rest of the white men had turned on the man and shot him down. He smiled as he died. He would rather die than be a slave. No one tried anything so bold after that.

We were all brought up on deck and then onto land. The sun was dazzling. And since I had not seen the sun since Africa, it was also blinding. One by one, all of us were auctioned off, like sacks of potatoes or horses. Mr. Dreff loaded all his new slaves into a cart and drove off. His plantation was so large I could see it thirty minutes before we reached the perimeter. It was filled with hundreds of slaves with no hats or any kind of protection from the sun. They were all sweating and looked very tired, some with red marks on their cheeks and backs from their beatings. That's when I knew I was not going to spend the rest of my life here. That's when I knew I was going to run. It was also when I knew that I was going to have a very hard time until I did.

My room was a small shack with no fireplace and six other girls living there with me. It had no windows and a dirt floor. There was no furniture except a small stool in the corner and seven beds with thin blankets and empty pillowcases. I had a nice room compared to the other slaves' quarters.

My job was simpler than the other slaves. I still had to work outside, but not in the field with the others, not in the blazing sun. I had to work in Mrs. Dreff's garden, pulling weeds and watering plants. It was in the shade of the big house and right next to the kitchen. All day, smells of fresh food wafted outside to my waiting nose.

But after I was done caring for her garden, I had to go in and wait on Mrs. Dreff herself. She was an absolute monster. If you looked at her at all, she would rap your knuckles. Whenever me or another slave carried her food and she thought it had an odd taste, she would say, "You black maggots contaminated it on the way over!" She never blamed anything on the white servants or the white cook. Everything that went wrong would be blamed on us "black swine" or "filthy brutes". The day when she

dumped a bottle of wine over her server after she claimed it was “disgusting because of your black hands” had been the final straw. That night I had packed up my things and left, making sure I dumped a full chamber pot on her garden before I went inside the kitchen and stole some food.

That had been four days ago. The food had run out on day two.

Hurting and starving, I lay on the ground, listening to the noises of men and dogs getting closer and closer. I remember that this is exactly what happened to Mama and Papa, who’d tried to run away in April. Five days after they left, Mr. Dreff came in with Mama’s shoe and Papa’s hat and threw them on the ground in front of me.

“Your parents are dead. They were caught last night in the woods and killed. Don’t follow in their footsteps or you’ll be dead too.”

Then he spat at my feet and went off. I remember crying late into the night, while everyone else slept. I took a vow saying that one day very soon Mr. Dreff would pay and fell sleeping trying to think up of a way to hurt him almost as badly as he hurt me.

I came up with an idea to get Mr. Dreff back when I found two snapping turtles in the garden the next day. Wrapping them carefully in my apron, I left them in the corner of the kitchen until Mrs. Dreff dismissed me for the day. Then I took the apron and raced up to Mr. Dreff’s room. Taking the chamber pot from underneath the bed, I plunked the two turtles inside. I closed the lid, hoping they wouldn’t suffocate, when I heard someone coming up the stairs. It was the cook, getting ready for bed! If I was to be seen by her she would surely tell the Dreffs and I would get a hard beating. There was no way I could get downstairs without her seeing me.

A breeze came through the open window, giving me an idea that was both dangerous and stupid. Better than any of my other options, though. A big tree stood by and I was hoping to jump out the window and onto it. But instead, when I jumped, my foot caught the clothesline and I went directly into the trunk. I slid down and sat there dazed for a minute. I tasted something foul and touched my lip and my finger came back red. My nose was bleeding. Then I heard a shout.

“You scoundrel! Wait until Mrs. Dreff hears about this!” the cook shouted.

She began to call for her. The cook was shouting from the window I’d jumped out of. She must’ve heard me hitting the tree! I thought I was doomed, until I realized she hadn't seen my face yet. I took off running to the slave houses.

Bursting into my room, I hurriedly tugged off my shoes and slipped into bed. I made my mouth hang open and my eyes close so I’d look like I’d been asleep for a long time. The door burst open and I heard Mr. Dreff come in. He looked around and must’ve decided I wasn’t in there because he grunted and left. I stayed up to hear the satisfying scream which meant the turtle had bitten Mr. Dreff on the bum.

It came around midnight.

The thought, despite my pain, makes me smile. Of course, it still doesn’t make up for what he did, but it was still a victory well earned.

A pain starts in my right arm, the one that isn’t broken; I am laying on it. I roll over and my head goes into a ditch at the base of a tree.

“Oh well,” I think.

But suddenly, I am up and looking at it. The ditch goes into the tree, which has a hole in the bottom.

“Maybe...” I think and knock on the tree trunk with my good arm. It makes a quiet, empty sound. The tree might be hollow! I get an idea. It is a doubtful plan, but I have no choice. I drag myself to the trunk and duck into the hole. It i damp inside but indeed hollow. I vaguely remember mama telling me once that other runaways covered themselves in mud sometimes so that the dogs couldn’t smell them. There has just been a rainstorm last night and mud covers the ground all around me. I pick up a handful of it and start to cover my arms and legs. Then I put some bark and mud at the base of the tree where the hole is. Soon I have closed the gap and am completely sealed inside. Then I wait.

It doesn’t take long. In a couple of minutes, dogs and men surround my tree. I can hear them talking.

“Where is she?”

“The dogs were going wild; she has to be around here somewhere.”

“Well, they don’t seem to be picking anything up now.”

“This is ridiculous,” says a voice belonging to Mr. Dreff, “How could she have disappeared? Her footprints are right here, and now she’s gone away with her scent! We have to catch this one or the slaves will think that running away is easy! First her parents and now her! How do they all escape?”

“If we fail to catch her you can just tell all your slaves what you told her about her parents, that she’s dead. Come on, let’s just go another mile.”

The sound of footsteps and dogs creeps away.

I am overjoyed. It actually worked! But what had they been talking about, about my parents? The sounds of their conversation replay inside my head. “First her

parents and now her!" and "You can just tell all the other slaves what you told her about her parents, that she's dead." Did they mean...

My mind is racing. Did Mr. Dreff lie to me? Mama's shoe and Papa's hat, were they just things Mr. Dreff found on their search for them? Are my parents still alive? I fall asleep thinking about the possibilities. And then I have a strange dream-

I am in the tree. A scratching noise comes from the mud wall covering the hole. It starts to crack and a white man's hand reaches inside for me...

When I wake up, I am in a comfortable bed and a steaming bowl of oatmeal is sitting next to me.

"Where am I?" I wonder as I gulp it down. "Have I been caught? Am I dead? Did I freeze in the tree last night?" A knock at my door silences my thoughts.

A white woman's face appears at the door. "You finished your meal?" she asks. I nod and she takes it out. She comes back with a brush and begins to comb my hair. I open my mouth to ask where I am when she says, "You have hair just like your mama's."

"What?" I ask, confused, "You know her?"

"Ah, yes," says the lady, "Came here in April, with your papa. They had come a long way. They told me all about you over dinner, said you might come yourself, but you were too young to travel then, and were sick with a cold. Didn't want to risk it, they said."

"But... does that mean..." I stutter, my head spinning.

"Yes, Honey, you're at a safe house," the lady says with a smile.

"But how-"

“My husband found you last night, while hunting. A rabbit was trying to get in that tree of yours and when he noticed it was blocked, he was scratching something furious at it. After my husband shot the thing, he was curious and so he broke the mud wall and found you. So he brought you here,” says the lady, putting the brush down. It wasn’t a dream. “I’ll go start a bath for you.” She stands up.

“Wait,” I say, “So are my parents really alive?”

She smiles. “Yes. My husband gave them a ride up to Canada after they’d rested, which is where you’re going tomorrow. I will give you a ride once you’ve had some decent hours of sleep. With some luck, we’ll meet them once we cross the border.” She leaves.

The world is spinning. They’re alive. They’re alive! It seems like a dream. I hope I never wake up. I’m going to see my parents. I’m going to be free.

This last thought pulls me up short. Free. I’ll be free. They’d never go up to Canada looking for me. Free. I smile at the thought.

I’m almost free.