

# Halfway to Freedom

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and the Chicago History Museum

Loose straw hissed across the floor as the door opened. Hannah held her breath. From her hiding place in the hay, she couldn't see who slipped from the black night into the dark stable. She heard the horses snuffle then sigh as they recognized a familiar scent. The mare rumbled a low greeting. In reply, a deep humming flowed through the stable.

That tune was the signal! Hannah tried to answer; but during the long day in the dusty hay, her vocal cords had toughened into a dry knot. She swallowed. She managed to squeak five notes, the notes that mattered most: "Wade in the wa-ter."

The humming glided toward her. "Come," a male voice whispered. All she could see was a thickening of the darkness. From the height of his voice above her and the pitch of his humming,

she guessed he was tall and, like herself, in his late teens.

Hannah stood and took two tottering steps before falling against him. Lowering her to the mound of hay, he rubbed her cold, cramped legs. All the while he kept humming. "Hurry now," he urged as he pulled her to her feet again.

Outside, heavy snowflakes were falling. At that late hour, the city lay dark and hushed. Rather than risk meeting someone on the streets, however, he guided her through back lots and alleyways. "How many other fugitive slaves has he taken to safety?" Hannah wondered silently. "Probably hundreds. He knows the route so well he doesn't need a lantern."

At last they reached the back door of a two-story house. There they waited until a black maid came and swept the shivering runaway

inside. When Hannah turned to thank her guide, he had already disappeared into the storm.

In the stranger's kitchen, Hannah accepted a bowl of soup and a slice of toasted bread with a grateful nod to the maid, who sat beside her at the table while she ate. In the weak light from the fire, Hannah could see the wooden floor and the polished stove. This was the house of a well-to-do family. Compared to the rough farm house where she'd grown up, this house looked like a mansion. Suddenly she felt very uncomfortable; she didn't belong here. Her clothes were torn. She was dirty, and her hair smelled like the stable. She wanted to cry.

Noticing Hannah's distress, the maid lifted a fresh quilt from a bedroll beside the stove and draped it over the girl's shaking shoulders. Then, taking Hannah's face in both hands, she looked into her eyes and smiled with gentle sympathy.

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Hannah expected to spend the next day waiting in a woodshed until darkness returned, and she could continue the journey to Canada. As a child, when she heard whispers about the Underground Railroad, she'd imagined a train chugging through a long cave, carrying runaway slaves to the Land of Freedom. She never thought she would run away because she considered herself lucky—that is, as lucky as a slave could be.

One of three slaves on a large farm in Missouri, Hannah had lived in the master's house. While the master and his sons labored on the land side by side with the other slaves, Hannah helped his wife. During the spring planting and the fall harvest, everyone worked in

the fields. During the slow seasons, though, when the master could run the farm himself, he hired out the other two slaves. The master's wife would never allow him to hire out Hannah. Consequently, he regarded the girl as a luxury and, when he couldn't pay his debts, he decided to sell her. Warned of his plans and fearful of an unknown future, Hannah fled.

How Hannah wished the Underground Railroad really was a safe, cozy train under the ground! But no, *underground* meant secretive, illegal, and very dangerous. She was a smuggler, running away with her own body. At night she traveled furtively through rough country. During the day, she huddled in a barn or a cellar; sometimes she hid in the woods. When the maid greeted her the next morning, though, Hannah saw this day was going to be different.

"Good morning! How did you sleep?" the maid asked. "My name's Mary. Mary Jane Richardson Jones. It looks as though you'll be staying 'til the snow melts. Who guessed we'd have such a blizzard in April? But this is Chicago, after all." Mary began mixing biscuit batter. "Breakfast won't be ready for a bit, so you have time to wash, if you'd like."

"Yes, please," Hannah answered.

Lifting a kettle from the stove, Mary led the way to a curtained corner with a marble-topped washstand. She poured hot water into the porcelain washbowl. "I've a dress that might fit you. I'll go get it."

The dress fit, and the dark green wool felt wonderful. "Just being clean feels wonderful," Hannah thought, as she returned to the kitchen. "Please give my thanks to the lady of the house," she said to the maid.

Mary laughed mischievously. “You’re welcome in my house.”

“Your house? You’re the lady of the house?” Hannah blurted in surprise. Could this rich man’s house really belong to a black family? Then, blushing with embarrassment, she recovered her manners. “I thought you’re the maid. I’m so sorry.”

Mary laughed again. “Yes, I’m the lady of the house. But I’m the maid, too, when I have a special visitor.” Hannah knew she meant a runaway. Giving shelter to a slave was a crime, and Mary probably didn’t want to risk the possibility that her maid might discover a fugitive slave.

“Mama!” A petite girl with pigtails tied with blue ribbons bounced into the kitchen. “Look at the snow! Where’s Papa?”

“Papa went to his shop on Dearborn Street early this morning. You will do your lessons at home today because of the snow,” Mary replied. She gestured toward Hannah. “She’s our special visitor. You remember the rules about our special visitors?”

The child nodded solemnly.

“Very good. Lavinia Jones, please meet our visitor,” Mary introduced Hannah. “Dear friend, please meet my daughter, Lavinia Jones.”

During breakfast, the seven-year-old chattered merrily. Lavinia was in second grade, and, apparently, she was a good student. She described the schoolhouse, her teacher, and her lessons. Then she talked about her friends. “Rachel lives near the river because her father’s a sailor. Amanda has a pet kitten; her father’s a waiter at the hotel. My very, very best friend is Sarah. Her papa’s a barber. I wish my papa was

a barber,” Lavinia added. “He’s a good tailor, though. He has his own shop where he cleans and repairs clothes for the important men of Chicago.”

“My other friend is Sarah’s older brother, Shepherd. He’s sixteen,” Lavinia continued. “He takes care of the horses at the hotel, but his mama named him ‘Shepherd’ so he’d be a minister and take care of God’s sheep.” Lavinia turned to her mother. “Will he come tonight?”

“Maybe,” Mary answered, as she handed Lavinia a *McGuffey Reader*.

The world Lavinia described sounded unbelievable to Hannah. Slavery was not allowed in the state of Illinois, she knew. She had heard several free blacks lived in Chicago. A city where black men ran businesses, black children went to school, and black Christians had their own churches must be a marvelous place! Hannah

felt like a stranger, standing outside a window, peering into a beautiful house where she could never live.

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Late that evening, after Lavinia’s bedtime, Shepherd came to visit. Hannah immediately recognized him as the guide who had brought her to the house. Lavinia was right: he was handsome, despite the white streak of a scar on his neck. By listening quietly to his conversation with John Jones as they sat around the kitchen stove, Hannah soon learned more about the young man.

In addition to his job at the stable, Shepherd worked as a messenger, carrying letters and delivering packages throughout the city. This second job gave him many

opportunities to spread information to the supporters of the Underground Railroad. At the barbershop, Shepherd's father gathered news from his customers. Meanwhile, the waiter at the hotel reported any suspicious-looking travelers. Together, these three black men formed a sort of defensive spy network. They'd been especially busy since the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave slave owners permission to pursue alleged runaways in free states and ordered the cooperation of local authorities. Chicago's City Council refused to enforce the law, while the leaders of the city's black community and several white abolitionists banded together to resist the slave hunters.

Shepherd was proud of his role in the resistance movement. That night, he brought good news: the hunters prowling the Chicago region for the past month had gone. "As soon as

the snow melts," he promised Hannah, "we'll get you on your way again."

"Please be careful, Shepherd," Mary warned. "Those hunters don't like to go home empty-handed. If they don't find some poor fugitive, they'll capture any man—even a man with freedom papers."

"Just let them try to put me in chains!" Shepherd growled. "Some day, I swear, I'll free my brothers!" An angry fire gleamed in his eyes as he spoke.

"I hope we can end slavery without bloodshed!" Mary exclaimed. "Some of the wisest, most respected men in our nation today are abolitionists. Both white men like William Lloyd Garrison and black men like Frederick Douglass, who was once a slave himself, are speaking out against slavery. Abolitionist societies are writing petitions to congressmen,

senators, governors, and the President of the United States.”

“Speeches and petitions won’t end slavery! It’s time for action! How long can we wait for freedom?” Shepherd questioned. “With all due respect Mrs. Jones, how long can *you* wait ?”

“Shepherd’s right. No black person can be free until every slave is free,” John agreed. He turned to Hannah. “My wife’s parents weren’t slaves; neither were my parents. But, because we’re ‘persons of color’ we need papers to prove we aren’t slaves.”

“Ending slavery is only the first step! After abolition, what happens then?” Shepherd demanded. “Will we be treated as citizens?”

“I don’t understand,” Hannah said, puzzled. “Aren’t you free? Aren’t you citizens now?”

Mary smiled sadly. “Not really. The Black Laws of the state of Illinois say if you’re a person

of color, you can’t hold a political office. You can’t testify against a white person in court. You can’t join the militia. And you can’t vote.”

“We’re not free!” Shepherd’s voice quivered with suppressed anger. “We’re only half free!”

John paused before he responded with quiet determination. “Soon we will win freedom—all of it!”

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Hannah stayed in Chicago for three more days while the snow melted. Shepherd offered to find another hiding place, but Mary Jones insisted upon keeping the young woman. Hannah was grateful. She cherished Mary’s friendship, and, after the dark hours of shivering alone in fear, playing with Lavinia restored

Hannah's spirit. After dinner, she listened attentively while John told her about blacks who fought in the American Revolution. Best of all, Shepherd stopped by whenever his errands brought him to the neighborhood. He came so frequently, during the day as well as in the evening, that Hannah suspected he invented excuses to call at the house.

On the fifth night, a small noise outside the back door woke Hannah. The sound was so soft she probably wouldn't have heard it, even if she had been awake, but it was the signal her ears were trained to detect—the tune of "Wade in the Water." She padded to the door. Pressing her cheek to the wood, she hummed the five-note reply. The humming on the other side got stronger. She opened the door just enough for Shepherd to slip inside.

"Quick! Hide!" he whispered urgently the moment she closed the door again.

Before Hannah could ask questions, Mary appeared. Taking Hannah by the hand, she guided her to a tall closet and helped her inside. Hannah heard the back door close as Shepherd went out and light footfalls on the stairs as Mary returned to her bedroom. Hannah waited in the dark, tense and alert.

"Open up!" a rough voice shouted. Heavy fists banged on the front door. Overhead, Hannah heard whispers. Someone walked across the floor, paused for a few moments, then descended the stairs. From the heavy steps, Hannah guessed John was coming.

"Open up or we'll bust down yer door!" another harsh voice demanded.

"One moment please, gentlemen, while I light the lamp," John answered. When the light

flamed, Hannah realized the kitchen closet in which she hid was actually a hollow space in the partition wall. Through the cracks between the strips of narrow paneling, she could see into the parlor. She watched as John led two husky men into the room. They wore pistol holsters and shackles on their belts. Mary, dressed as though she were entertaining guests, invited them to sit down.

“Ferget the fancy talk,” the bearded man replied, “We’re huntin’ a runaway. You seen this young man?” The man waved a reward notice in John’s face.

“Hey,” the other man interrupted. “How d’we know he ain’t a runaway hisself?”

John turned to his wife, “Mrs. Jones, please show these gentlemen our freedom certificates.” Mary went to the writing desk, unlocked the front panel, and pulled two

documents from a cubicle. She handed them to the bearded man, who read them with a frown.

The other slave hunter was looking around the parlor. Two portraits, one of John and one of Mary, caught his attention. “They’s had their pictures painted. These darkies think they’s pretty important. And look at these silver forks lyin’ on the table! Where’d they come from, Mr. Jones? You take ’em from your boss?” he asked. Despite her fear, Hannah’s anger flashed at the rude taunt.

Mary, however, remained calm. “The forks are a gift from our good friend Frederick Douglass,” she answered politely. “He even had them engraved. See?” She picked up the forks and traced the lettering with her finger as she read: “Frederick to Mary.”

While his partner was gawking at the forks, the bearded man had been rummaging

through the desk. Now he held up a handful of pamphlets. “You shouldn’t be readin’ this abolitionist lit’rature, Mr. Jones. It’ll give ya high-flutin’ ideas—make ya too proud fer yer own good. You’s only a tailor after all.” A wicked grin came over his face. “I found this newspaper advertisement and a notice in the city directory for yer shop here in yer desk. I’ll just take ‘em with me in case I need any sewin’ or washin’.”

“A customer is always welcome at my shop, but I can’t assist you tonight,” John replied. “Perhaps you will be on your way?”

“We’ll be goin’ along,” the bearded man answered, “but you’ll be seein’ us again.” He called to his partner, “C’mon, Jake. Let’s go catch that runaway.”

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Shepherd didn’t return the next morning. He didn’t visit that afternoon either. Despite her eagerness to see him, Hannah wasn’t anxious. She had no real reason to expect him. “Maybe,” she thought, “he’s keeping away in order not to draw attention to the Jones’s house.”

John came home late, bringing bad news. At the barbershop that morning, Shepherd’s father mentioned the young man hadn’t come home the previous night. It wasn’t unusual for Shepherd to spend the night at the hotel, however, and the family didn’t fret. Then, early that afternoon, the hotel waiter came to the tailor shop to tell John that Shepherd hadn’t reported to work.

Leaving his assistant in charge of the shop, John immediately called on one of his white friends, a Chicago attorney known for his advocacy of black people’s rights. The attorney

told John slave hunters had delivered a young man to the sheriff's office, claiming he was a fugitive. Together, John and the attorney walked to the jailhouse.

"As I feared," John finished, "the young man brought in by the slave hunters is Shepherd."

"But Shepherd isn't a runaway," Mary protested. "All he has to do is show the sheriff his freedom certificate."

"That's what I thought, too," John answered, "until I spoke with his father. You must never repeat what I'm going to tell you now! The family came here three years ago, remember? We assumed Shepherd was a natural son, but it turns out he's a foster son. No one will admit he's a fugitive, of course, but it certainly looks that way. He doesn't have freedom papers. Remember the reward notice the hunters had

last night? Shepherd has a scar on the right side of his neck, but otherwise the description fits him."

Hannah suddenly remembered one of the slaves on the farm in Missouri. He had a scar on his neck—a scar exactly like Shepherd's—made by an overseer's whip that missed its mark. Why hadn't she figured out she and Shepherd shared the same past? Would he be sent back to slavery again?

"What can we do?" Mary asked.

"Tomorrow the hunters will present their evidence against Shepherd before the judge. Of course, Shepherd won't be allowed in the courtroom to defend himself. The abolitionists of Chicago are organizing a protest during the hearing." John paused, as if deciding whether or not he could say more.

When she was certain her husband had finished speaking, Mary touched Hannah's arm. "Dear girl, I don't know what will happen to Shepherd. But with the hunters standing in the courtroom and the protesters marching outside, you'll have the perfect opportunity to escape." She turned to John, "Don't you agree?"

"A wonderful idea! The superintendent of the main railroad line has joined our cause. He might be able to get her aboard a train, if she doesn't mind a seat in a freight car."

"No sir, Mr. Jones," Hannah replied, "I don't mind, as long as that train is bound for the Land of Freedom."

The next afternoon, Hannah crouched among sacks of wheat in a dark freight car. She would've been excited about her first train ride, but all she could think about was Shepherd sitting on a jail bench, waiting for the judge to

decide his fate. Suddenly the car's latch clanked. The door rolled open, and a figure passed through the crack of daylight, then the door rolled shut again. Hannah shrank deeper into her hideaway.

"Wade in the wa-ter" came five notes from a tenor voice.

Hannah started. Was it the signal? Or was it a trick to make her reveal herself? She waited. The notes sounded again. She waited. Once again those notes came, closer this time. That voice! Could it be?

She decided to take the chance. "Wade in the wa-ter," she hummed very softly in reply. A familiar hand reached out of the darkness to find her, then someone sat down beside her. They waited in silence until the train was roaring northward.

Hannah spoke first, "Welcome aboard."

“Thank you, Miss. I’m headed for Canada.  
And you, sweet lady, where are you going this  
fine afternoon?”

“All the way to Freedom!”

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