



Characters:

Cato

Narrator

Bessie

Harriet Tubman

Cato: (whisper) Bessie, I'm scared.

Bessie: (whisper) I know, Cato. But we're going to be all right. Even better—we're going to be free!

Narrator: Although she tried to sound brave for her little brother's sake, Bessie was actually very frightened. The two slaves had run away from their plantation at dusk. After slogging through miles of marshy land, they were now crouched beneath some bushes, trying to catch their breath.

Cato: Bessie, what will happen to us if we're caught?

Bessie: You know what will happen! They'll beat us and whip us until we can't stand up on our own feet. But I'm not going to let them catch us. I'll die before I'll go back!

Cato: Shh! I hear dogs!

Narrator: Bessie and Cato held their breath and listened to the baying of the hounds. They could hear their owner and the overseer shouting. Were the sounds getting closer? Would the dogs find them? They trembled in terror. At last, the sounds grew quieter and then faded away.

Bessie: I think they've gone away. Praise the Lord!

Cato: Why didn't they find us? Mr. Jim always said his hounds had the best noses in the whole South!

Bessie: Those dogs might have the best noses, but they don't have the best brains! We fooled them by walking up that creek. They couldn't smell our trail in the water. That's why that song about the drinking gourd says, "The river's bank is a mighty good road."

Cato: What will we do now?

Bessie: We're going to do just like the song says and follow the drinking gourd to freedom!

Narrator: Pointing up at the night sky, Bessie showed Cato how to find the constellation that people called the Drinking Gourd.

Bessie: It looks like a big water dipper, see? Look at the two stars that make the front edge of the dipper. Follow the line of those stars until you see another little star, shining all by itself.

- Cato:** I see it, right there!
- Bessie:** That's the North Star. Right now, it's shining on slaves who have already made it north to freedom. And we're going to make it, too. That star is going to shine on us and show us the way.
- Narrator:** All through that long winter night, Cato and Bessie kept heading north, running when they could, walking when they couldn't, and resting only when they had to. They wanted to get as far away as possible. By the time the sky began to lighten, they were exhausted and hungry.
- Cato:** I'm so tired, I can't walk another step.
- Bessie:** Look! There's a house up ahead. Maybe we can get help there.
- Cato:** How do we know they'll help us? What if they tie us up instead and take us back?
- Bessie:** We'll look for a sign. If there's a lantern hanging on a hitching post, that means it's safe.
- Narrator:** Keeping to the shadows of the trees by the road, Bessie and Cato walked closer to the house.
- Bessie:** Do you see a hitching post anywhere?
- Cato:** Yes! There it is—and there's a lantern hanging on it!
- Narrator:** They crept up to the door just as the sun peeked over the horizon. Bessie knocked cautiously, praying that the lantern really was a signal. From inside the house a voice called, "Who's there?" For a moment, Bessie wasn't sure how to answer. Then, she remembered words she had heard in whispered conversations around the slave quarters.
- Bessie:** A friend of a friend!
- Harriet Tubman:** Then come in, friend, and find a friend!
- Narrator:** The door opened to reveal a small black woman. Behind her stood a plainly dressed white man, the owner of the house. Bessie could see from his clothing that he was a member of the Religious Society of Friends, sometimes called Quakers. She had heard that Quakers didn't believe in slavery, and they often tried to help runaway slaves.
- Harriet Tubman:** Come in quickly! Slave catchers often pass this way, and you must not be seen!
- Bessie:** Thank you! My brother and I are very grateful. We only need a little food and a place to take a rest, and then we'll be on our way. We don't want to put you in danger.
- Harriet Tubman:** I'm not afraid of slave catchers! And don't you worry—my train has never gone off track, and I've never lost a passenger yet!
- Narrator:** Bessie and Cato glanced at each other nervously. What was this woman talking about?
- Bessie:** I'm sorry, but I don't understand. What train? What track?
- Harriet Tubman:** Why, I'm talking about the Underground Railroad, of course! I'm your conductor, and you can call me "Moses."
- Narrator:** Cato and Bessie stared at the woman in confusion.
- Cato:** Underground railroad? You mean, there are train tracks beneath this house?
- Harriet Tubman:** (laughing) No, no! There are no tracks here.

Bessie: Wait—I've heard some talk about this! The underground railroad isn't real. It's a code word for people who help runaway slaves.

Harriet Tubman: That's right! Using code words helps us keep the secret. We call safe houses like this one "railway stations," and Friend Griffin here is a "Station Master." Runaways are "parcels" or "passengers." People like me are "conductors."

Cato: Now I understand!

Harriet Tubman: You're a quick one—and a lucky one, too. You see, I'm waiting to conduct four passengers to the Promised Land. They should be here tonight. If you can wait until then, I'll take you along.

Bessie: But, I thought the Promised Land meant "heaven."

Harriet Tubman: The Promised Land is our code for Canada, a country far to the north of here. In Canada, slavery is illegal. Once you get there, you'll be free!

Narrator: Bessie and Cato agreed to wait and join the other passengers on the Underground Railroad. Mr. Griffin gave them food and then took them to the barn where they could hide and rest. They crawled into the sweet-smelling hay and were asleep almost instantly. But it seemed like no time before they were awakened.

Harriet Tubman: Cato, Bessie, wake up! I've brought you some supper. You need to eat now and get ready to go. The others are here, and we'll be leaving at sundown.

Cato: Thank you, Moses.

Bessie: That's not really your name, is it?

Harriet Tubman: No, my real name is Harriet Tubman. I'm called Moses because I lead my people to freedom!

Cato: You must be very brave to come back to the South!

Bessie: Aren't you afraid that you'll be caught? Even though you're free now, a slave catcher could still sell you back into slavery.

Harriet Tubman: No, I'm not afraid. The Lord watches over me and protects me. He tells me what to do! Ever since my skull got broken, I've been able to hear His voice. I know He will keep me safe.

Cato: Your skull got broken? How?

Harriet Tubman: I was just a girl, maybe 12 or 13—I'm not sure just when I was born, so I don't exactly know my age. I was in the store, picking up an order for my master, when a slave came rushing in. He was a runaway! The overseer was right behind him. He shouted, "Grab him! Grab that boy!"

Bessie: What did you do?

Harriet Tubman: I didn't do anything. I wasn't about to help catch that slave. I hoped he would get away.

Bessie: Then what happened?

Harriet Tubman: The overseer grabbed a heavy metal weight from the store counter and threw it at the boy. But it hit me instead, right in the head. It broke my skull and knocked me clean out! I was unconscious for days. They thought I would die for sure.

Cato: But you didn't die!

- Harriet Tubman:** No, I'm mighty strong! And mighty strong-willed, too. After I got well, I began to think about running away myself. I was so tired of being beaten, hungry, and sick. But I was afraid. Then I heard that I was going to be sold to a place farther south. I would be far away from my family, and even further from the possibility of freedom. I made up my mind to go.
- Narrator:** Bessie and Cato nodded. They knew what it was like to be mistreated. That's why they had run away themselves.
- Bessie:** So, how did you escape?
- Harriet Tubman:** The same way you two did. I followed the North Star! Some kind people helped me along the way, but mostly I was on my own. When I finally crossed the border into freedom, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now that I was free. There was such a glory over everything...and I felt like I was in heaven.
- Cato:** That must have been wonderful.
- Harriet Tubman:** It was. But I realized I couldn't really be free while my family were still slaves. I had to go back.
- Narrator:** Harriet Tubman made the dangerous journey back into the South to help her family escape. She rescued her parents and some of her sisters and brothers. But when she tried to rescue her husband, he told her he was married again, and didn't want to leave. So Harriet rescued other slaves instead. After that, she returned many times to lead slaves to freedom.
- Bessie:** You've made so many trips, but you've never been caught! How do you do it?
- Harriet Tubman:** Oh, I have some good tricks! We always leave on a Saturday night, because the runaway notices won't show up in the papers until Monday. And we start by taking the master's horse and buggy. That way, he won't be able to follow us so quickly.
- Cato:** We walked a long way to get here. Will we have to walk all the way to Canada?
- Harriet Tubman:** We'll walk sometimes, and sometimes we'll ride in wagons, hiding under sacks of food or hay. We might even take a real train. If we see slave catchers, we may head south for a while—they never expect runaways to go that direction!
- Bessie:** You're very clever!
- Narrator:** Harriet told Cato and Bessie about a close call she'd once had. She explained that after her head injury, she sometimes had "fits," or seizures, and her eyes would close even though she was awake. Although she appeared to be fast asleep, she could still hear what was happening around her. Once when this happened, she heard men reading a "wanted" poster that offered a reward for her capture.
- Harriet Tubman:** The poster said I was illiterate, which was true—it's against the law to teach a slave to read or write. So as soon as I woke up, I grabbed a newspaper and pretended to read it. When those men saw me reading, they decided I wasn't the woman in the poster after all!
- Cato:** That was quick thinking!
- Harriet Tubman:** Now, that's enough talk. It will be dark soon, and we need to get ready!
- Narrator:** That night, the woman that slaves called Moses once again conducted her passengers safely. Over the next few years, Harriet Tubman made additional trips into the South to lead slaves to freedom. Later, she served with the Union army as a cook, a scout, a nurse, and even a spy! Harriet Tubman continued helping people for the rest of her life. She died in 1913, when she was over 90 years old.