

Blessings

"I'm leaving, Mom." The man called softly from the doorway.

The old woman smiled, seated snugly in her rocking chair. "Come here, son." She called. She heard a sigh from the front door, but in seconds her son was standing in the doorway, his lips upturned in a fond smile. They did this every day; every time her beloved son would leave the house. The woman beckoned him to the foot of her chair, where he knelt in front of her so their eyes were level.

She sat up and cupped her hands around his face. His dark eyes gazed into her black ones, alight with admiration. Just like every day, the old woman looked at him and told him, "Hold your head up high, son."

Her son's smile splayed wider and, like routine, he replied, "Tell me why."
"Because you are mine. As long as your chin is upturned, you will see your goal. Hide your face to the people who will harm you, and open yourself up to those who accept you. Open your eyes, look out for people who will help you."

"Your blessings, mother?"

"My blessings, son."

The woman patted his shoulder and the man stood, tipping his hat and disappearing out the doorway. She heard the front door close softly behind him seconds later.

The old woman closed her eyes and sighed contentedly, her mind drifting into the past, which she, despite her old age, remembered so vividly.

The middle-aged man looked over his shoulder as he left their small cabin for work. He would be going off to the plantation where Tara knew she would meet him later, but she hated

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seeing him go. Her mother placed a hand on her shoulder and lead her away from the door so she herself could get ready for work, which she started later in the day.

The family of five lived on a large plantation, enslaved to lord and lady Burland. Their most common task was cultivating the ground on the field, receiving nothing but stale bread, aching shoulders and a minuscule cabin to rest in as payment for their work.

Taraja and her family slept in a wooden shack on the edge of the field, which was always cold at night and left barely any walking room when all family members were present. "Count your blessings," Her mother always said, "We may not be free, but at least our masters are merciful enough to give us somewhere to sleep and one day of rest. We are very lucky to not have been sold off and split up."

Tara had always agreed, but she did long to be free. As Taraja grew up, the idea became more and more real. Every day, if her father wasn't too tired from the day out on the field, he would take her out behind their small shelter where they could not be seen through the windows of the plantation home. There he would teach her all he knew. She learned how to tread lightly, how to hide in the shadows and blend her tattered dress in with her surroundings. Her mother taught her how to tie her head wrap around her face and neck so she wouldn't be recognized and to distinguish which houses were accepting of black slaves trying to run away.

One afternoon, when Tara was out sowing in the field, another slave began making his way towards her, pretending to be planting seeds at a rapid pace. Suddenly, he began to sing.

"The railroad, oh, the railroad, where train tracks meet town. Tell Howard, tell Howard, how the goose feels. As we work on the fields, watching the wagon's wheels, always the wrench will make us free."

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Tara didn't understand what he was doing or what the song meant, but she knew one thing: Howard was her father's name. Often, they communicated through song, repeating the lyrics across the field as they worked until the code reached its destination. Their masters never noticed, though they always made sure to cover it up by singing traditional songs in the scorching heat, making their work more enjoyable and their messages obscured. From time to time the supervisor would come down and tell them to stop singing and to get back to work, swinging a whip in menace. In that case, messages would be put on hold until no white man was present.

That night Tara ran home as fast as her legs could carry her and recited the song to her father. His eyes widened, immediately grasping the meaning.

"What does it mean, papa?" Taraja asked.

"Many, many things, Tara. The goose means to escape." Tara's heart began to race. Escape? "We follow the geese when they migrate, so we know where to go. The wagon's wheels and the monkey wrench must mean to get ready. Grab your shoes, Taraja. Take this loaf of bread - "

"But what about you? And my sisters and brothers and mama-"

"We'll be fine, Tara. Maybe one day we will follow you and escape too. But first, we want to you go. You leave soon. When night comes."

The girl hugged her mother and siblings goodbye one last time, then followed her father outside. He led her around the back of the building where, only nights prior, they were preparing for this moment. Taraja's heart hammered in her chest, beating in her ears. This was it.

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Her father put his hands on her shoulders and looked straight into her eyes.

"Hold your head up high, Taraja." He said firmly, his eyes glistening with pride and hope.

Despite the adrenaline and fear coursing through her veins, she asked him, "Why, papa? Tell me why."

"Because you are mine, daughter. Mine wherever." He pulled up his sleeve. "See the colour of my skin? It is yours too. That is the reason you are running. Have hope, have faith, and know that I am feeling it with you."

The sky was dark now, Tara noticed. She would be leaving in minutes.

"Look at above us, Taraja. Do you see the smoke rising and clouding out the stars?"

"Yes, papa. I see the smoke."

"Follow it. On the border of the town is a house with quilts hanging on the porch." He took a stick from the ground and drew a square in the dirt. In the square, he drew arrows, positioned as if they were leading around in a circle. "You will see this on the quilts. When you knock on the door, knock three times then wait. If no one answers, tell them your name is Taraja and that you are looking for a ticket to the railroad. The door will open for you. Your hosts will keep you safe and tell you everything you need to know to continue your journey. Take your mask off when you step in their home. Remember what I taught you Tara, and hide your face to those that will hurt you. Every time you leave one of the safehouses you will give them your blessings. Ask them for theirs and you will receive it. I love you, Taraja. Now, go." He took his hands off her shoulders.

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"Do I have your blessings, papa?"

"You have my blessings, Tara. Forever."

With those last words, she turned her back on her father and took off her head wrap, tying it around her face. Then she ran, away from her family, her cabin, and towards the cloud of smoke, toward her path to freedom.

Taraja sighed in her rocking chair, contemplating what she had done that night. Her father's guidance was what had ensured her safety until she reached freedom. On her way, she had hidden temporarily with another family on a different plantation in Maryland, where she met a boy her age named Dylan. Love-struck, he snuck away to run with her. Together, they made it to Ontario, where they married and lived happily in freedom. A few years later, her son was born. When he finished school and left the house for work every day, he would come to her and she would repeat what her father had told her, then he would ask for her blessings. She knew things weren't like they were the first time those words were said. Now, they meant something strong, but in a completely different perspective. And that was okay, Tara guessed, because maybe he wasn't running from *slavery*, but towards his own kind of freedom.