May 7th, 1835

Sam and I are running through a beautiful green field. Just us, the wind and the sun shining down on our faces. Sam, my boy, so fast now he catches me. I love my 9 year old Sam with all my heart. Seeing him grin so wide makes me want to throw my arms around him and never let go. But then I wake up and the dream is over. “MARIAN!” Master shouts my name every morning at 6am to start the first meal. I swear that all of North Carolina can hear him. I must go before I get punished for not responding to his calls.

Today was like every other, I made first meal, and then Sam and I shined masters’ shoes. Then we had our soup and I shaved masters’ face while Sam started the supper. Master knows we can’t say no to him. What he does not know is that we will never forgive him for what he did to Sam’s father and my man, Adam. Tomorrow is Sunday, our off day. Also known as exactly one year since Adam passed.

Adam was my everything. A caring father to Sam, a loving husband, and a brave man. He sacrificed his life a year ago in attempt to escape us to a free state. It was May 8th 1834, Adam had a plan. He said he was going to sneak out that night at 10pm with the help of one of his old friends that owned a horse. He claimed that his friend would get him to a spot where someone else would come with more hidden transportation and that his friend would be back for Sam and me at 11:30 pm. He didn’t know where we would be going but he said that we would meet the next day somewhere safer. Sam and I dressed warm and went outside at 11:30 to wait for Adam’s friend. By 11:36, the friend had still not shown up. Two more minutes had passed when we heard a yelling coming from the edge of the forest. Out from the forest emerged Adam and master, Adam almost falling to his knees and master holding his punishment weapon. Master half dragged Adam until they were 5 feet in from of us, I held Sam tightly, he was crying. Master threw his arm back and swung at Adam once, twice, seven times, Adam gasping for mercy. He then stopped and Adam looked up at Sam and I with a hint of hope in his eye. Out of the corner of my eye I saw master reach into his pocket and he ripped out his gun and fired at Adam before I could stop it. We were starved for the next 4 days after that but that didn’t amount to the pain I felt that night.

May 8th, 1835

I sleep in until 7am this morning, so does Sam. We walked outside to see Sarah, Emily, and Richard sitting at the edge of the forest talking. Sam and I join them. “Good you’re both up” says Emily. “What’s going on?” I ask. “We have a plan” claims Richard. “Have you heard of the Underground Railroad Marian?” asks Sarah. “Yes I have and I believe that it’s all a lie,” I explain. “Maybe not” says Emily. “It’s not as risky as people make it out to be, there are safe houses along the way” Richard explains. “Are you three forgetting about Adam exactly one year ago today? Haven’t you learned from that?” I ask. “We’re meeting here at 11pm tonight, master will be asleep. Come if you change your mind.” Says Emily. “This isn’t a plan, it’s a suicide mission.” I firmly state, then walk off to our hut. Half an hour later, Sam walks in and hugs me. All he says is “Daddy would have wanted us to leave this place.”

11pm

We arrive at the edge of the forest to see Emily and Richard but no Sarah yet. I suppose Emily and Richard will get a chance at a happy life. I suppose we all will. “Where is my little sister?” asks Emily. As soon as she says it Sarah closes her hut door and walks toward us. We say bye to our small town outside Asheville, North Carolina, though we won’t miss it. Then we are off. The three of them know of a man that will be on the other side of the forest with transportation for us. So we walk through the night staying silent as possible. Sam is tired, his eyes drooping and his legs collapsing in each step. I suppose we will be on the other side by sunrise.

What seems like a full week passes and we are finally through the forest on the edge of a dirt path. “He should be here soon” Emily states. We are lying silently on a patch of moss 5 feet from the path. I let Sam sleep until the man shows up, for he might not get another chance anytime soon. An hour passes, I am getting worried. Master will have realized that we are missing by now and has probably sent out people on horses given money to find us. A while more goes by and we hear the clicking of a horse down the road. We all get down and all I can think of is that I should have listened to myself that this was a suicide mission. I think about what master will do to punish us this time. Since he still needs us he will probably make us suffer a while, extra chores, maybe even take away our off day. The horse stops right on the forest edge. A man jumps off the horse onto the path. I dare to look up. He is a white man, tall and blond, with a kind look on his face. Master must have picked wisely in that this man could easily be believable and trick us in to going with him. Suddenly Sarah stands up! “Are you William?” she asks. “Are you Sarah?” he responds. Sarah hurries us up and out to the path where we see that the horse is towing a small carriage with a fabric shelter. “Hello I’m William, I will be taking you 5 to Montreal, Canada where I live. There are others there also. We must hurry and get to the first safe house before dark. Climb in and stay quiet” he announces. I do not fully trust this man but I see no other option besides going somewhere by foot and not knowing where, so I climb in with Sam and lie down in the small wooden carriage.

I wake up to the sudden stop of the carriage. The day went by fast, it is already dark. I hear William jump to the ground and walk farther away. I am not sure if we are supposed to get out or not. “Hello Robert” I hear William say. “5 more?” the man asks. “Always. Thanks Rob, we’ll be out by sunrise” says William. I hear his footsteps walk over to us in the carriage. “Come on out” he commands. The five of us jump out of the carriage and follow William and the man. The man is white also, brown haired though and seems to be older than William. We follow the two of them to a small barn beside the man’s house. He opens the door and we walk in to see a stack of clothes on the ground beside 6 beds. I have never slept in a bed before. Sam runs in and jumps on it, laughs, and then plops down and pulls the covers over himself. I smile and say thank you to the man named Robert. He leaves and shuts the door behind him. William says that he will wake us up early and we will be on our way again. I walk over to the bed beside Sam. It is soft. I press my hand down onto the mattress and it sinks a little. I climb in and close my eyes.

William wakes us up. It’s still dark but it was the best sleep I’ve had in a while. We put on the clean warm clothes that Robert left for us and we leave the barn just to see that it is pouring rain outside. We are already soaked through the clothes. William says we will be at the train station by mid-afternoon. We start walking through the forest. “I’m cold” Sam says. “I know Sam, here” I give him my overcoat, though I am freezing myself.

My shoes are drenched and have puddles inside. William says it’s not much farther. In the distance I can hear branches cracking and I start to wonder if the others hear it also. The steps are getting louder and William whispers “Run!” I grab Sam’s hand and follow behind William. Richard, Emily and Sarah close behind us. William points to a little burrow covered with moss to hide in. I jump down then grab Sam and pull him in beside me. William jumps in and grabs Emily’s hand, then Sarah’s and there is barely any space left. We hear a horse galloping maybe only 20 feet away and Richard runs away from the tunnel. I cover Emily’s mouth so the man doesn’t hear her scream for him. The horse jumps right over the burrow and chases Richard. We hear him yelling in pain now. Emily cries and Sarah hugs her. He gave us another chance.

We hide in the burrow for about an hour until we are sure that the man is gone. Now we have to run the rest of the way to make it to the train station on time. So we run and run and run until we can’t run anymore and I’m almost ready to turn myself in to master. But then I start to hear trains and I know we must only be 10 minutes away.

We arrive at the station. There are only white people here. I am nervous, what is William’s plan, how is he going to get four of us on a train? He walks right on to the train and turns to us and says in a firm voice “hurry up or I’ll force you on”. So we don’t say a word, we follow William to the back of the train. A man in the row in front of asks William “what are you doing with these Negros?” “Selling them off in Virginia” William answers. “What?!” Sam pleads. “Shhh Sam” I whisper, “he’s lying”. William tells us to get comfy and that we will be on this train until tomorrow afternoon. Sam likes the train. He likes the whistle that goes off when we start moving. He falls asleep on my shoulder but I don’t dare close my eyes. We aren’t fully safe on this train, surrounded by people that own slaves themselves. So I keep my eyes open and watch people walk up and down the aisle giving the 4 of us dirty looks. I wonder why we’ve grown to accept this.

The train comes to a halt. I wake Sam up and William tells us to stay until everyone’s gone. “Just in case we get separated this is where you have to go” he says as he hands me and Emily each a map showing us our transportation route to Canada. I throw my arms around William and thank him. I forget we are still on the train. The conductor walks by and sees. William backs off of me and says “what makes you think you can show affection to me you slave?!” The conductor starts walking over and yells “I heard you are helping them, you liar!” “RUN!” William shouts. We run through the aisle and down the steps of the train. I look back and see in the window of the train the conductor holding a gun to William. I turn and keep running, Sam tagging along. We hear a gunshot and Sam starts crying.

We stop when we think no one is around. I pull out the map. It says we have to walk to the next safe house to spend the night there. I put the map away. “We have to make it to Canada, William did this for us.” I wonder about Emily, I wonder if she regrets this journey, I wonder if she would have rather just stayed in our small town outside of Asheville, North Carolina.

A long day of walking and we’ve finally reached what seems to be the safe house. It’s a cute little house but I’m w0ndering where we will sleep since there is no barn like Robert’s house. We walk up to the door and knock. Three locks click and the door opens to a black woman probably in her 40s with a big smile on her face. “Hi, we are friends of Williams. He sent us here.” I say. “Yes, yes come in” she replies. The four of us walk in to see two kids chasing each other around the table, they don’t seem much younger than Sam. “My name is Katherine. And these are my twin children, Joseph and Kate.” She explains. “I am Marian and this is my son, Sam, and this is Emily and her sister Sarah” I reply. “Where’s William?” Katherine asks. I tell her what happened earlier today and a tear runs down her cheek. “He died doing what he loved.” She states. I ask her about William and how long he has been helping people for. “He has been doing it for years, each time bringing over 5 slaves to freedom. He comes here to me for a new haircut and clothes each time so he can keep going for more. You are welcome to rest here for as long as you need, is a free state, you are safe.” She states. “Thank you very much, goodnight” I answer and take Sam down the hall to a small room with one bed and a sofa. I tuck him in the bed, kiss him on the forehead, and lie on the couch, falling into a deep sleep.

I wake up to someone shaking me up. I open my eyes to see Katherine. She whispers quickly in my ear, “2 men are outside, they are your masters’ men, they are looking for you. You must take your son and 2 friends down the hallway there is a trap door under the rug. A small hiding space is under it and you must stay there until they leave the house, understand?” I nod my head, grab Sam’s hand and softly run to the next room where Emily and Sarah are. I bring them down the hallway and find the rug. I lift it and swiftly get everyone inside and close it over us. We are in a tight space, meant for only one person most likely. I hear the door open. “How may I help you gentlemen?” Katherine asks. “We are here looking for 4 slaves by the names of Emily, Sarah, Sam, and Marian. Cooperate or we’ll arrest you and separate you from your children.” One of the men command. “I know of no slaves in the area, I’m afraid you are looking in the wrong area. Good day gentlemen.” Katherine responds. A sudden gunshot fires and a body hits the floor boards. Children start crying in pain. Angry footsteps walk every inch of the house, but don’t think to lift up the rug. One of the men curses loudly and they leave slamming the door shut behind them. We wait 2 more minutes and slowly climb out of the hiding spot. I run over to the corner of the kitchen where the twins are crying and hugging each other. I lift them up and tell them to come with us. “We need to get out of here now” I tell them. I gather everyone and leave through the back door. We run as fast as possible through the open field to the edge of the forest where I check on everyone and pull out the map from William. Just past this forest is where there will be a small boat at the edge of the water for us. There will be a man there and we must say “friends of William” for him to let us use it.

The last walk, the most emotional one too. Almost every person that has helped us on this journey has died.

We reach the boat. A strong looking man guarding it. “Friends of William” Emily says and just like that we squish into it. We must just cross this water and find the compound and we will be “free”. I’m not sure if I will ever trust I am fully safe again.

Emily and I take turns paddling the boat along. After a few hours of it, we see the land in which is Canada. We dock the boat and another strong looking man helps everyone off. “Walk through this small patch of trees and you are now free.” The three kids run ahead and into the trees. We emerge from the trees to see a small village. A church, a few stores, and at least 10 small houses and more being built. There are people outside laughing, children playing tag, and the church bell ringing to welcome us 6. We made it, we are free.