

Escape From Slavery

By Madelyn Staley

Blinking as the sunlight pours through the crack in our teepee, I slowly rub my eyes and take a deep breath of the fresh air. Every morning has been the same all the ten years of my life, but it always starts a new and unpredictable day. I smell the corn cooking outside and smile in anticipation. But since I am older now, I must work before I am served my daily portion. Cheerily, I jump out of my straw bed and skip into the morning sun. As I sprint through the forest to draw water from the river, my dark hair bounces and streams merrily behind me.

When I return with my burden, I am told to go to the stream to bathe. Proud to be trusted to go alone this time, I trot off. Moving smoothly and silently through the forest as my father has taught me, I travel to the stream. Suddenly, there is a thunderous noise and an unfamiliar shout. The cheer of the day vanishes, and I am frozen. Men are standing in front of me with shiny, brown sticks from which the noise has come. Their backs are to me but I can still see their skin which is an unbelievable color of the pale heather flowers. Finally, finding that I can move, I scurry to shelter behind a tree. Who are these strange men? The men should again. Again the sticks fire. I jump and the leaves stir noisily around me. I catch my breath but relax when I hear nothing moving toward me. Startled, I feel something cold and hard pressed against my temple. I open my mouth to scream, but my call for help is muffled as a dry cloth is shoved into my mouth. Complete terror overwhelms me. Everything tumbles. I feel nothing.

I can't breathe. Every part of my body is cold and the iciness runs into my mouth and nose. I open my mouth to scream, but I choke. The coldness against my body knocks the breath out of me as well.

Suddenly light pierces through the darkness that I had been unconsciously enduring. After coughing up a good amount of water, I glance around. Standing above me is a strange man with a red, bushy beard carrying a bucket which I bitterly presume is now empty. But it isn't the beard or the strange gold ring he wears hanging from his left ear that scares me. The skin. I remember now the cold against my temple and the booming sticks and shouting men. This is a white man too.

Turning around, the man who was standing over me shouts something. The loud noise startles me out of my thoughts and I scream as my head starts to throb. Surprised by my cry, the man whips back around. More men appear about me. Feeling like a mouse under the cold, ruthless stare of the owl, I squirm in terror.

A commanding shout startles the men, and they turn to face the man who is obviously their chief. He has long black hair that falls around his shoulders. His cape twists in the wind, making him look fierce and powerful. Sweeping over his surroundings, his narrowed eyes finally come to rest on me as I cower on the cold deck. Obviously pleased, the chief shouts his approval to his now gloating men. Before I know what's happening, he has fastened a chain around my wrists and is leading me down several creaking stairs. We enter a dark room illuminated by a small window from which I can see my old home. Frantically, I point to the window, hoping he will understand. He just shakes his head, grinning rather wolfishly. I'm shoved farther into the dark room and the chief disappears back through the door. I hear the click of a lock.

I collapse in pain and confusion, pulling in vain at my chains.

The following morning, Red-beard drags me up the creaking stairs. After so many hours in darkness, the sun temporarily blinds me. When I finally regain my sight, I

timidly glance around the sunlit setting. I rest my eyes on the rugged men who suddenly pause in their tasks, watching me. I feel a few drops of sweat trickle down the back of my neck. Quivering, I look down and let myself be lead to the chief.

The chief glances at me with satisfied eyes, and shouts something to his men. Hurriedly, they resume their work. He mumbles something to Red-beard who unfastens my chains. Immediately, I dart to the edge of the ship and throw myself overboard. I close my eyes, preparing for the water to hit me.

But the air is knocked out of me when I feel strong arms wrapped around my waist. I cough as I am thrown back on deck. Looking up, I meet the chief's furious gaze. I glare back defiantly, working up some spit to aim at his shiny black boots. Seeming unconcerned, he looks back up at his men and proceeds to give them a speech. As I watch the way he points down at me every once in a while, I assume his long speech is about me.

To avoid having to listen to his incomprehensible rambling I look out towards my homeland. Where is it? Panicked, I search in all directions but find nothing but the blue of the open water. It is gone, my family, my tribe, my life. I look up at the chief, to find he and his men are absorbed in his lecture. Slowly I turn to face the edge of the ship once again, my mouth set in a grim line. Ignoring the bewildered shouts of the chief and his men, I lunge in the direction of the side. As I launch myself overboard, I allow a scream of exhilaration. This time the water, cold and hard, crashes into me. Feeling myself sink downward, I close my eyes. My last coherent thought is our tribe's final farewell as well as my own: *I command my body to the sea and my soul to Mother Nature. See you soon, Mother, Father, Chief.*