

Never Give Up!

Ama's Journey to Freedom on the Underground Railroad

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AFRICAN VILLAGE

My name is Ama, which means "Saturday." I'm thirteen years old and am tall for my age.

In this, my wonderful village I see—thatched roofs, fragrant mango trees, and goats who will eat anything. I hear—children laughing, noisy weaverbirds and vibrant talking drums.

I feel—happy that my morning chores are done but tired from the effort. There's always something that needs doing!

My parents work hard, too. Among other things, my father Kofi weaves kente cloth, which is used in special ceremonies, and my mother Siisi makes beautiful pottery.

Today I get to make a pot, but it's difficult to shape the clay so that it holds together.

I really want to learn but I can't help it — I protest about how very hard this is. Mother only says what she always says when I'm having trouble with anything. "No matter what, never give up!"

Mother's voice repeats: "No matter what, never give up!"

AFRICAN ABDUCTION

Wait! Something is happening!

An explosion. Dust swirling. A smell that burns the air.

Strange men, some of them with pale white skin, rush at us—armed with spears and guns.

What are you doing? Stop! Mother help me! I scratch the face and bite the hand of the man who dares to grab me, but he quickly binds my wrists and throws me — hard — over his back like I'm a sack of grain.

MIDDLE PASSAGE JUMPING OFF SHIP

Mother! Mother! Are you still alive? I try to jump off the ship and swim back to my village, back to her, but a man on deck pulls me back. In my sorrow and desperation I struggle to imagine her saying to me, "No matter what, never give up!"

Echo of mother's voice: No matter what, never give up.

MIDDLE PASSAGE RED SHIRT

Yesterday while a man on deck was being whipped, the sailor with the red shirt grabbed hold of me. His hot breath felt like flames. I bit his ear, hard. He hit me but let me go, then laughed. I'm still shaking with disgust. And panicked that he may return.

And that's when the real nightmare began. (sound of whip)

PLANTATION COTTON FIELD

I, Ama, freeborn in Africa, a slave in South Carolina. I'm sixteen now. For three years I've survived the misery of slavery here on the plantation. What a hard time I've had these past years! Most days I'm hungry, and I'm always tired. We work in the cotton fields from sunup to sundown, even if it's raining. Thorns from the cotton bushes cut our hands. The blood stains the cotton with our pain.

My heart breaks when I think of my family and my village back home. What keeps me going are my friends, and the hope of being free again some day.

My very best friend here is dear sweet Ben who works in the same field as me, although we don't have much chance to talk with the overseer watching.

Who we talk to, what we wear, the food we eat — every part of our lives is controlled. I would like to learn how to read and write, but if I was caught I'd be whipped, or sold away from my friends here. I've already suffered the loss of my beloved family.

Stop it! Leave her alone!! These words I think but dare not speak. Master Johnson just shouted for Suki—he forces himself on her almost every day. I tried in the past to stop him from taking her, but all he did was yell, "Stay back," and made as if to hit me. It makes my blood boil! I'm so upset that I can't help Suki, or anyone!

I'd like to pick extra cotton to help Henrietta who gets terrible headaches, but I can barely pick what I'm supposed to pick each day. When we fall short we get whipped!

One bullwhip sound

When I'm not scared to death, I'm angry.

Two bullwhip sounds

FIRE-SETTING

How can the master believe that our skin color makes us less than human? How can he not know that we can think and feel just like anybody else?

Brown as earth or black as night, we're all worthy, though he treats Ben and me — all of us — like animals.

So I fight back by working slower than I'm supposed to, burying farm tools, stealing food. But, no matter what I do, nothing ever changes except that I have lived one more day in bondage.

So I will do more. I'll try again! I won't give up! I am Ama, daughter of Kofi and Siisi from the Ashanti tribe of Africa.

If I do nothing about the way I'm treated than I feel that I am nothing. But I do matter and I will fight back! I might just burst if I don't express my rage at this injustice.

*Tonight, although we'll be whipped, or worse, if we're caught, Ben and I will burn the master's shed. Light a fire to protest our miserable lives, and offer **hope**, — for all the slaves to see.*

LEAVE-TAKING

We were caught soon after and suffered thirty lashes each. A month has passed since then. My back still hurts from the whipping, and the scars will be with me forever.

During tonight's full moon Ben and I will try and escape this nightmare. We've been told there are dangerous river-crossings and slave-catchers who will be looking for us. But freedom calls me. I'll reach freedom, or die trying.

I'm glad that Ben and I are leaving together. He's beginning to feel like much more than a very good friend. If only Ben's uncle could come with us. He's the only family Ben has and he's been like a father to me, but there's no way he could make it.

My friend Jane is the cook for the Big House. Her children are too young to travel. I'll miss them, too. Especially little Josie. Miss them, but not miss the misery of slavery. We'll start out by crossing the river, then head north on the deer trail. We've heard the Underground Railroad's out there somewhere.

ESCAPE

After our teary good-byes we leave quietly, although my heart beats loud as drums. We must escape before the master realizes we're missing. I hope we make it!

Gasp! The dogs! The master will be awake and after us. Either the dogs heard us or someone has betrayed us and told him about us. If we're caught we'll be whipped, if those dogs don't tear us up first.

Faster Ben! Mother help us find someone to guide us.

LUCRETIA MOTT'S PORCH

Our guide left us a mile back to look for more runaways to help, although I bid him to come away with us. By staying in these parts he risks being captured and enslaved again! His courage and compassion inspire me.

Before saying goodbye, he told us to look for the big quilt on Lucretia Mott's porch just ahead.

This appears to be her home. What grief might come to us if this is not!

Are you, are you, Lucretia Mott with the Underground Railroad? We saw the quilt outside. My friend needs help. His foot is injured and the slave-catchers might be near.

LUCRETIA MOTT'S HOUSE

After miles of walking, I'm warm and nourished in the home of Lucretia Mott, the Quaker woman who has taken us in.

Despite my every experience with white people before now, I can see that some of them are good. Lucretia Mott is kindness itself! I appreciate her and I trust her!

I'm trusting myself, too. I'm strong in ways that I never realized before. My mother's words, "No matter what, never give up" are truly a part of me now.

Ben never gives up either. He hurt his foot scrambling to help me when I tripped on a rock. But no matter his pain, he never slowed down.

Ben sometimes looks so sweetly at me and my heart flutters. I feel good inside. And, he supports me in all manner of ways, yet demands nothing in return.

Ben sometimes tries to do too much. Now and again I must remind him that I am as strong as he, in my own way, and I can — and want — to do my part.

Sigh. Mostly I just appreciate his kindheartedness and love him. I think he may love me. At the moment we're too desperate to talk of our feelings for one another. Soon we'll leave this safe house, hopeful and afraid.

WOODS

A week has passed. The clouds are blocking the North Star and we don't know which way to go. We've gotten lost several times already, passed the same lake twice now.

It's freezing cold. A wolf! I hope our campfire keeps it away. It's scary out here in the dark but there are tender moments, too. Earlier tonight Ben told me that he loves me.

Ben's foot has healed. That's good news, too. And he caught us some fish so we won't starve, either.

The shadowy mist hides the campfire smoke from the slave catchers so we can enjoy hot

food. Finding good things to think about in difficult times gives me strength and hope but, brrrr...I'm still shivering from the cold.

Sound of bloodhounds: Gasp!

CATHERINE HARRIS

I'm relieved to have made it to the home of Catherine Harris, but I'm still scared. Although, we're warm and comfortable with our bellies full...

Knock! Knock! Sound of Dutch door opening

Oh, thank goodness! It's just a farmer helping out.

I hate the Fugitive Slave Act! Any minute the slave-catchers could barge in looking for us, even this far North.

Miss Harris has already sent a runner to alert the next safe house that we're coming. We must travel quickly before we're caught.

Miss Harris is at risk too. She and the other abolitionists risk fines and imprisonment to help strangers like us. I admire her courage and commitment.

When I'm free and can finally learn how to read and write, I want to read the anti-slavery "North Star" newspaper that Miss Harris showed us. Tonight, out in the dark, Ben and I must try again to find the real North Star.

One year later...Ama is 17

CANADA FENCE

We are overjoyed, overwhelmed, stunned. Ben and I finally reached freedom in Canada, our last stop on the Underground Railroad!

We live in a black settlement outside the town of Chatham. I found a job doing cooking and cleaning at a boardinghouse. Ben farms a small plot of land nearby. At last we are paid for the work we do for others!

Some white Canadians accept us, even help us, though others look away when we pass by on the street and overcharge us for supplies we need to buy in the town stores. But I love being here. I love being free. There's so much I want to think about, and so much that I want to do!

Which is why I surprised myself and said "not yet" to Ben when he asked me to marry him, although I love him very dearly. We talked about the reason for my decision and he has agreed to wait.

CANADA WILDFLOWERS

I want to be on my own for a little while. Make all my own decisions now that I am in charge of myself. Find out what I like, what I don't like.

I might even try making pottery again, like my mother. It would help me to remember her.

Yet despite the joy of having new opportunities, I feel sad when I think about the many people still enslaved. Especially those I know. I was distressed to hear that Master Johnson sold Jane to a traveler who fancied the way she baked pies.

Little Josie and the baby were left behind.

CANADA GROUP

The eight months I spent on my own was absolutely worth it. And trying new things like hatmaking to make extra money was exciting. Even though my braiding usually comes undone, it's truly wonderful to have the freedom to try something new! It's also a pleasure to be able to read the North Star newspaper and to write announcements about abolition meetings for my church.

And, teaching reading and writing to those who want to learn is a real joy.

Ben is building a town meeting hall with some of his friends. Everyone in the community helps out as they are able.

In his spare time Ben writes me poetry. In his loveliest poem, which he read out loud to me yesterday, he asked me once again to marry him. This time — with tears in my eyes and a big smile on my face — I said, "Yes."

CANADA SOLO

I sometimes get nightmares about my life back on the plantation, but my days here in Canada always feel like miracles. I, not a master, am in control of my life.

I, Ama, daughter of Kofi and Siisi, from the Ashanti tribe in Africa, am once again free.

Free to love and create and grow.

I feel safe and happy. Simple joys are plentiful like gathering wildflowers and Ben's hand reaching out for mine.

I appreciate the many people who've helped me get here, and now I can encourage others.

No matter what, never give up on yourself!

You are important. I know of what I speak. Those in power said I was less than nothing, but I, Ama, believed in myself. You must believe in yourself, too.

Never give up on helping others.

Each kind act on the Underground Railroad was needed to help guide us north and each one of your kind acts — no matter how small — counts as well. More than you might ever know.

We all have an important part to play — gifts to share that move us forward to ensure equality and freedom for everyone.