

BLACKBURN

(Enter man and woman dressed in finery as Lucie and Thornton Blackburn)

LUCIE: Just keep goin' they said. Don't stop. Don't turn around.

THORNTON: We knew it was twice as dangerous for two people to run as it was for one, but I knew I wasn't going nowhere without you.

LUCIE: At first we was just gonna stay where we was. We didn't see no other way.

THORNTON: Then one day Mr Oldham said he sold my Lucie to a Mr. McKnight, and Mr McKnight would be taking her down the river, away from me.

LUCIE: As bad as it was to be a slave in Kentucky, "down river," what they called way down South, was ten times worse. Sometimes they beat their slaves just for sport down there! I knew right then we had to get away from Kentucky and Oldham and McKnight.

THORNTON: Folks told us we was crazy for trying to escape. "They just gonna bring y'all right back," they said. And we saw what happened to slaves that got brought back. They was whipped nearly to death in front of all the slaves to teach us a lesson. One man who tried to run away three times got his foot cut off to stop him. But we had to try, so I came up with a plan.

LUCIE: What made the plan so crazy is we ran in the middle of the day. Most people who escaped went at night because it would be harder to find you at night. Thornton's plan was, first, we dressed up in some fancy clothes I stole from the house and we had forged papers that said we were free. We had to trust that them papers said the right thing because neither of us could read or write.

THORNTON: We were lucky as far escaping slaves go. We was in Kentucky, closest slave state to the North, and Louisville was right on the Ohio River. Mr. Oldham hired me out to a store on 4th and Main, so I was able to study what times the steamboats came in and out, and I knew when we should go down and try to sneak on one of 'em. We made it all the way down to the dock without anybody stopping us, but we knew the hardest test was yet to come. The boat I chose was the *Versailles*. It was a boat with a new captain and crew, so they didn't know who was supposed to be coming and going on boats yet.

LUCIE: But we couldn't get on that boat right away. We had to get on a ferry across to Indiana and get on over there. They would sure stop any black folks trying to get on a steamboat in Kentucky. Getting on the ferry was frightening enough to me. What if they know our papers ain't real? What if somebody recognizes this dress I stole?

THORTON: But we got that ferry with no problems. The *Versailles* was gonna be tougher. We handed our papers to a clerk named Bayless and tried to look like we belonged there. He kept looking at us then at the papers. then at us again, for what seemed like forever. I could tell Lucie was getting more and more scared 'cause her hand was getting tighter and tighter on my arm.

LUCIE: Then, after all that eyeing up and down, he still had to go ask the captain, Monroe Quarrier, if it was alright to take us. Well he came down and asked all kinds of questions. "Where y'all from?" "Where you going?" "What was your business in Louisville?" Then he kept looking at me in a way I didn't appreciate!

THORNTON: I didn't appreciate it neither, but I knew if I got upset that would ruin everything we had worked so hard for, so I swallowed my tongue and my pride. Finally, praise Jesus, they let us on that boat.

LUCIE: No matter if you was a slave, or free, or pretending to be free--if you was black you had to ride down below all together. It was horrible! It smelled so bad, and it was so hot! And we was penned up in there for twenty-four hours! Plus we were always so afraid somebody would ask about who we were and we would be found out. I looked at all them slaves we was down there with and thought, "Please God don't let us be one of them anymore." When that boat finally touched up against the Ohio shore, it was all I could do not to kiss the ground!

THORNTON: I thought we could just stay in Ohio. Cincinnati had a lot of Quakers and Presbyterians and Methodists that would help escaped slaves be free. There was even free black folks who had always been living in Ohio. I told Lucie, maybe we could blend in.

LUCIE: And I said maybe we should go all the way to Michigan. The further North we get the better. When we got off the boat in Ohio, we had one more part of Thornton's plan to do. We got a stagecoach

to Detroit, where we were safe—or so we thought. Because of the Fugitive Slave Law, even if you made it to a free state, the slave catchers could still take you back to your master. Sometimes them slave catchers took free black folks and wasn't nothing they could do about it. Them slave catchers didn't need any papers or permission from a judge or anything!

THORNTON: In 1833, the slave catchers came way up to Detroit looking for escaped slaves and they found us. They grabbed my poor Lucie and me and dragged us to jail, where we would stay till they could carry us back to Kentucky. They chained and shackled me so I couldn't run.

LUCIE: They didn't chain me, which is why I was able to escape. A free black woman, Caroline French, came to visit me and exchanged clothes with me so I could just walk out of the jail, while she stayed! Caroline got arrested and she was threatened with being sent back to slavery in my place, but they never sent her.

THORNTON: On the day I was supposed to be sent back to Kentucky, 400 free blacks started what came to be known as the "Blackburn Riots." They was so mad I was gonna have to go back to slavery after living free all those years, they started setting fires and shooting and carrying on. One sheriff got shot and killed in the midst of all that. During all the craziness, somebody came and rescued me and got me into a wagon that took me to Canada.

LUCIE: We was reunited in Toronto, where we lived--free!--for the rest of our lives. For fifteen years, McKnight and Oldham tried to get us back, but the Canadians wouldn't let them take us back to Michigan to stand trial.

THORNTON: In 1836 we started a hansom cab service—first one ever in Toronto.

LUCIE: We were lucky. A lot of other people were not. We heard about Margaret and Robert Garner and her four children who escaped from a Richmond Kentucky farm in 1856. They walked across the frozen Ohio River to Cincinnati with a bunch of other runaways, and hid with Joe Kite, Margaret's uncle. Mr. Kite went to ask Levi Coffin, a white man who hated slavery and helped free slaves, what he should do next.

THORNTON: By the time Mr Kite got back to his house, the slave catchers had found the Garners.

Robert shot at the slave catchers and US Marshals to keep ‘em away. Meanwhile Margaret was making a decision.

LUCIE: She didn’t want slavery for her children. When the white men finally got into the house, they found Mary, the Garner’s two-year-old daughter, lying on the floor. Dead. Margaret took her daughter’s life rather than have her grow up a slave.

BOTH : (Singing) Oh Freedom. Oh Freedom. Oh Freedom over me. And before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free.