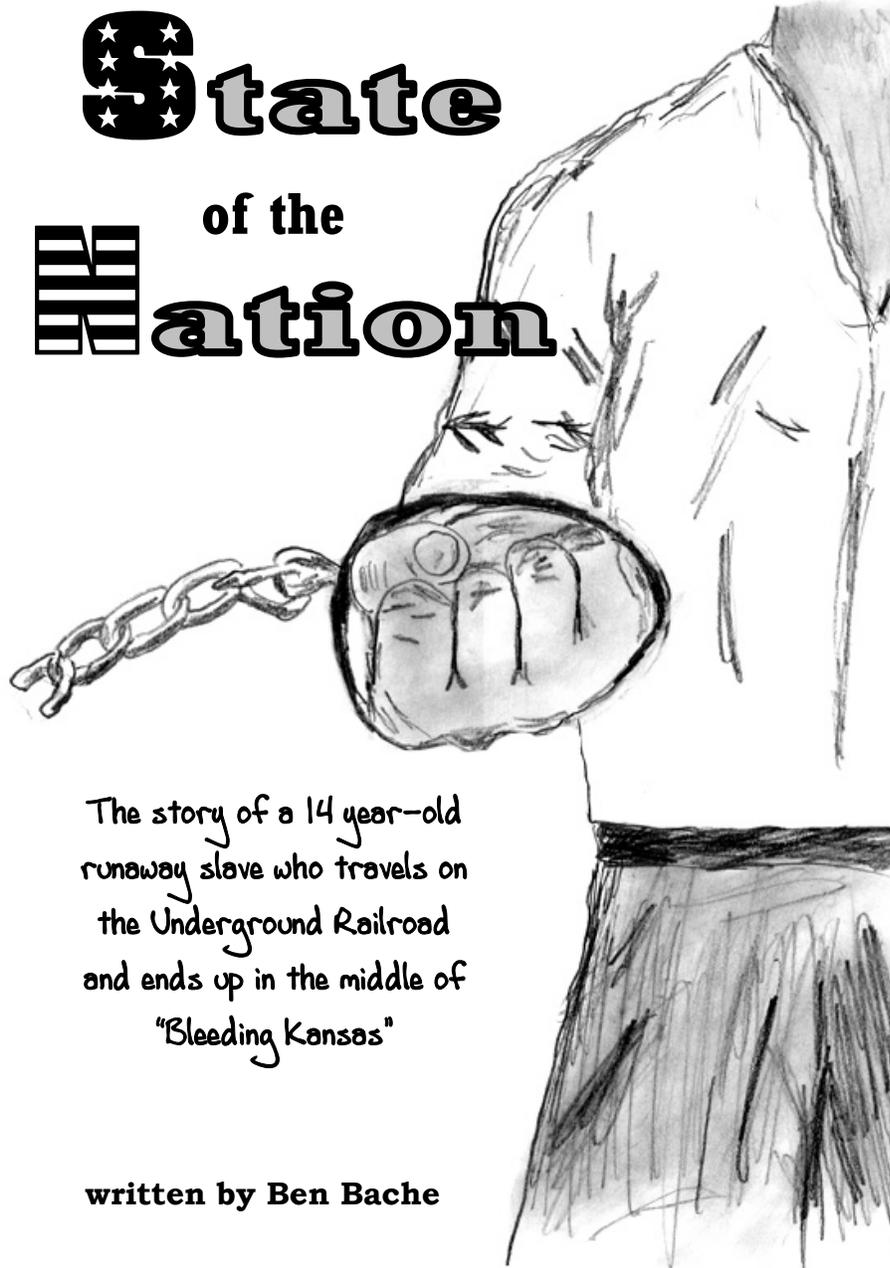


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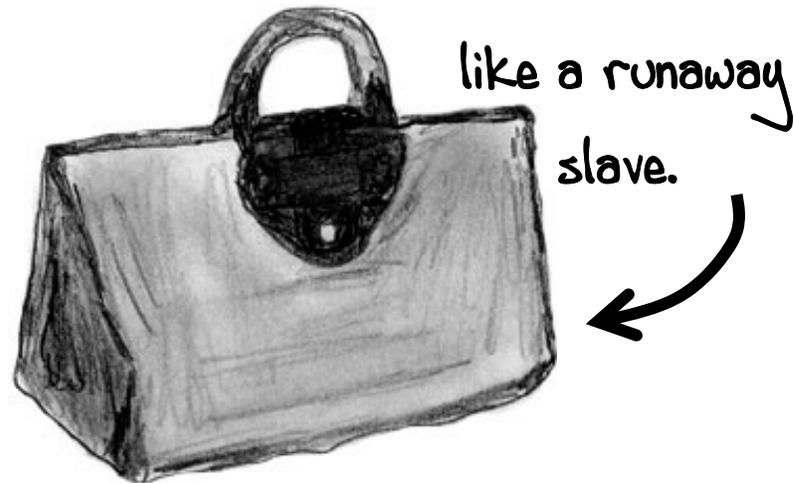
The story of a 14 year-old
runaway slave who travels on
the Underground Railroad
and ends up in the middle of
"Bleeding Kansas"

written by Ben Bache

Homecourt  Publishers

■ Greenville, SC

Mr. Milton gave me a handbag full of clothes that made me look less



4 – The Underground Railroad

I was starting to get used to not knowing where I was or where I was going. I sat beside Mr. Milton in the back of a carriage that he had rented. I had no idea where the driver was heading.

Mr. Milton had gotten me up before sunrise. He gave me a handbag full of clothes that were way too big for me, but still managed to make me look less like a runaway slave.

He had left the room again, and brought back some biscuits and bacon, which I ate quickly

despite the large meal I had been fed the night before. Then we went outside of the inn, and the carriage arrived. We climbed into the back, and we were on our way.

I didn't ask any questions because I felt like Mr. Milton knew what to do better than I did. Besides, he would tell me what I needed to know.

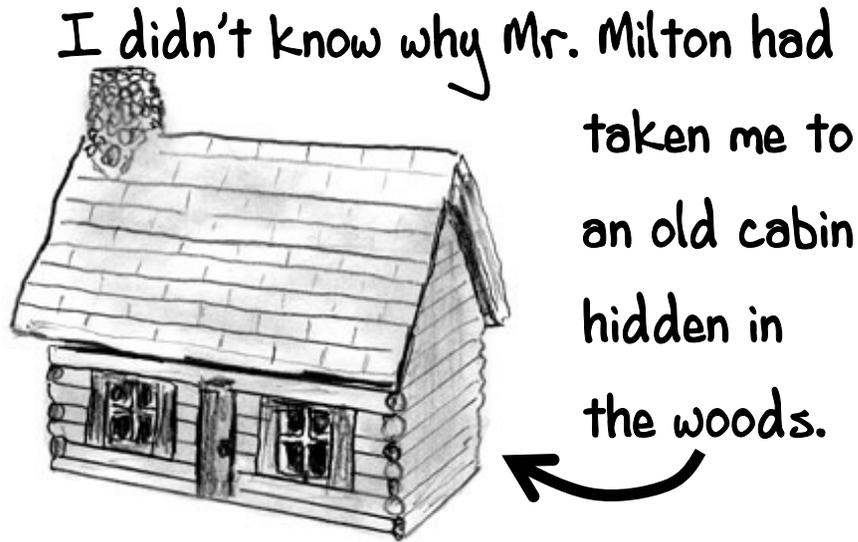
We had been riding for over an hour when Mr. Milton finally said, "What do you know about the Underground Railroad?"

I didn't answer right away. I had heard the term mentioned by other slaves on the plantation. They were always saying that the Underground Railroad had taken so-and-so to freedom (although I had never known anyone to take it).

In my mind, I always pictured the Underground Railroad as an actual train that ran under the ground. Somehow, that seemed silly to me right now, so I didn't mention it to Mr. Milton. I just shrugged my shoulders.

Mr. Milton nodded at my response, but he didn't bother to explain what the Underground Railroad really was. I had a feeling that I was going to find out soon enough.

The carriage stopped at what seemed to be the middle of nowhere. I followed Mr. Milton as



he got off of the carriage, walked to the edge of the road, and then right into the heavy woods.

I was starting to get very confused as we made our way through the brush. Then I realized that we were standing right in front of an old decaying house. It had no driveway connecting it to the road, and it was so covered with weeds and vines that you had to get within feet of it before you realized that it was even there at all.

A man opened a side door as we approached. Like Mr. Milton, he was also a large black man, but he wore raggedy overalls instead of a nice suit.

Mr. Milton raised his hand to tell me to stop. He walked up to the man and talked quietly while I just stood and waited. Mr. Milton handed the old man an envelope, and shook his hand. Finally, he motioned for me to join them.

“They’ll take care of you from here,” was all that Mr. Milton said. He turned around and walked the way we had come, through the brush, and back onto the street. Although I couldn’t see it, I heard the footsteps of the horses once again setting the carriage in motion.

Nathaniel Milton was gone, and I wasn’t sure who he was referring to when he said *“They’ll take care of you...”*

At this point, though, I had little choice but to follow orders and hope they didn’t get me into trouble. The old man waved for me to enter the rotting house.

The forgotten outside of the house was just an illusion. Inside, it was very much alive.

There were dozens of people packed into a couple of rooms. Even though I had never seen a single one of them before, I knew instantly who they were — runaway slaves.

Like me, they all had a look of confusion, fear, exhaustion, and excitement all rolled into one.

I started to realize that I was a
passenger on the Underground
Railroad.



(which, despite what
I had thought,
wasn't really
underground or a
railroad line).

There were old men and women, young men and women, and children scattered throughout. Most were very dark and black, although a few had lighter brown skin and may have been mulattos.

As I entered the room, all eyes fell on me. Strangely, though, I felt more at home here than I had at any other time since I left the slave quarters on the plantation.

It began to sink in that I had become a passenger on the Underground Railroad – like it or not. I remained in the house for the rest of the day. Most of the people were napping on the floor, and I

was still so exhausted that I had no trouble finding a spot and doing the same.

In the middle of the afternoon a man started going around the room, tapping everyone on the shoulder and saying, “Get ready, we’re leaving as soon as it gets dark. That’s three hours from now.”

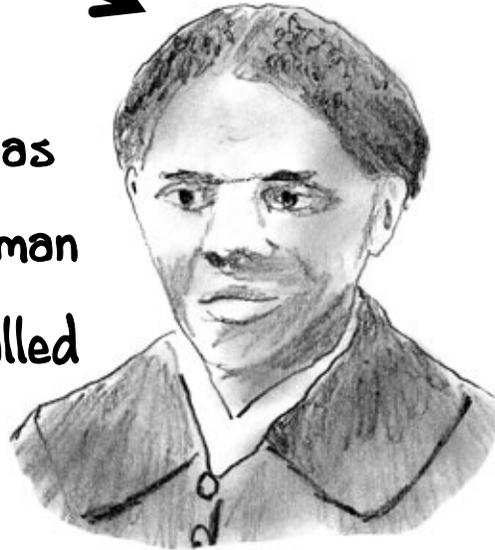
As if he was working on a precise schedule, the man came around three hours later and said, “Time to go.” We all lined up at the door and followed him into the dark woods. He was our “conductor”, and he guided us through the night.

I had run on my own through the forest only two nights earlier, but this time there was no panic. We all stuck together, and the conductor seemed to be a confident guide. We moved slowly because there were so many of us, and we stayed off of the trail to keep from being followed. We stopped frequently and passed around a canteen of water.

It took us about eight hours to travel fifteen miles. Finally, while it was still dark outside, we came to a small shack. It was hidden in the woods just like the house had been that we left earlier in the day.

The conductor told everyone that the shack was to be our hiding place for the day. “Go in and get some sleep,” he said. “We’ll be leaving again as soon as it gets dark.”

One of our
conductors was
Harriett Tubman
— but they called
her “Moses”.



That’s the way it went for the next few nights. We would leave as a group whenever it got dark, making our way through the woods for fifteen or twenty miles before stopping again.

Sometimes we stopped at a farm house; sometimes it was a barn; and sometimes it was an abandoned shed. I don’t know how they found it, but our conductors always knew exactly where to go.

The conductors changed from night to night. One night, there was a woman leading us. “That’s Moses,” I heard one of the slaves say. I wasn’t an expert on the Bible, but I was pretty sure that Moses was a man. Somebody standing near me must have seen the confusion in my face, because he said, “Moses ain’t her real name. She’s Harriett

Tubman. You ain't never heard that name before? She's leading us to the *Promised Land*. The white folks got a \$50,000 reward on her head."

Fortunately, nobody captured her that night. Harriet Tubman (a name that I had never heard before that night) led us twenty miles to our hideout in an abandoned farmhouse.

During the day, as we hid and rested, I sometimes talked with the other runaway slaves. Their stories were all very similar, and they weren't too different than mine. All of the stories began with a daring escape, followed by a couple of days of fear and confusion. They usually ended with a little bit of luck and a little bit of help to get them to the Underground Railroad.

Of course, none of us really knew how our story was going to end. We were all still runaway slaves, and most of us had some plantation owner who was offering a nice reward if we were captured.

On the sixth night we traveled a long twenty-five miles and finally arrived at what looked like an old mill. It had been rough terrain, and I was looking forward to catching up on some sleep during the day. The conductors had other plans for me.



Someone grabbed
my shoulder, and
I got scared
when I saw it
was a white man.

“George,” someone said, grabbing me hard on the shoulder. I turned around angrily, but then froze in my tracks when I saw that it was a white man.

“Is your name George? Are you the boy who came in with Nathaniel Milton?” I looked around in confusion. I had not seen a single white man in six days, and I was certain that Master Harris had somehow found me.

Then I noticed that this man was standing here in the middle of all of these runaway slaves, and nobody seemed to mind. As strange as it seemed, I quickly decided that he had to be on our side.

When I didn't respond, the man repeated, "Are you George? Did you come here with Nathaniel Milton?" I finally was able to nod.

"It's your lucky day," the white man said. He whistled across the room and then yelled the name, "Frederick!" Within seconds a young man appeared who didn't look much older than me.

"Frederick," said the white man, "This is George. You know what you're supposed to do."

Frederick nodded. Like everyone else, he seemed to know much more about what was going on than I did. The white man started to leave, and then said, "You're in good hands, George. Frederick looks young, but he's actually eighteen years old, and he's one of our best conductors. He'll get you to where you need to go." Once again, I had no choice but to go along and hope for the best.

I followed Frederick out of the mill, through the woods, and onto a nearby trail. It was clear that I wasn't going to get any rest after a long night of traveling.

As we walked in silence, I had a feeling that Frederick wasn't going to say anything unless I asked. I started with the first question on my mind, "Who was that white man?"

“He’s on our side,” Frederick said, almost like he was expecting the question. “He’s an abolitionist, have you ever heard that word?” I shook my head.

“That white man is helping us runaway slaves,” Frederick said. “He’s the station master at the mill. You best be thankful to people like him. He sees to it that we ain’t caught and strung up.”

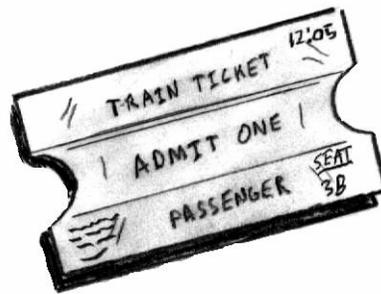
I jumped a little at the image. Since we were talking, I asked another obvious question, “Where are we going?”

Again, Frederick was ready with an answer. “There’s a railroad stop a few miles up this trail, and you’ve got yourself a ticket for the train.” He pulled an envelope out of his pocket. “You got lucky when you bumped into Nathaniel Milton. He wants to make sure that you make a clean getaway. You’re going to ride across the Mason-Dixon Line while everyone else has to walk.”

I remembered that Jim had mentioned the “Mason-Dixon Line” while we were still on the plantation. I still didn’t know what it was, but I had a feeling that it was good for a runaway slave to get across it.

I suddenly felt a little guilty. I felt guilty that Jim had been left with a bullet in his leg while I had run to safety. I felt guilty that I bumped into

I realized how lucky I was to have a train ticket in my hand. It also made me feel a little guilty.



Nathaniel Milton, and he had safely taken me to the Underground Railroad. And, now, I felt guilty that I was going to take a train to the north while everyone else had to get there one night at a time through the dark woods.

I had been lucky – that was the only way to explain it. Otherwise, I would have never made it this far without Jim’s help.

“You ever been on a train before?” Frederick asked, breaking my train of thought.

“No,” I answered, and then suddenly I felt a little bit of panic. “Am I going by *myself*?”

“I got orders to make sure that you get to Massachusetts,” Frederick said. “I ain’t gonna’ let you out of my sight until you get there.”

I was able to let out a breath that I didn’t realize I had been holding.

Even with Frederick by my side, I couldn’t keep my hands from shaking as I held my ticket and stood in line.

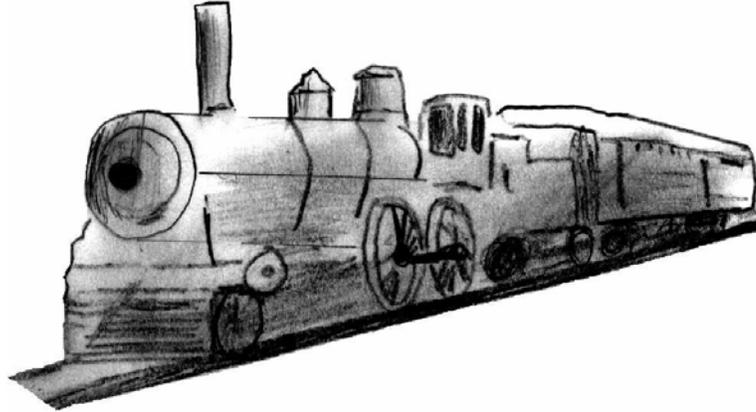
There was a man standing at the train door and marking everyone’s ticket as they climbed on board. Frederick and I were the only colored folks in the line.

I sheepishly handed the man my ticket when we made it to the front of the line. He didn’t mark it. He just looked at Frederick and me and said, “I’ve never seen two colored boys as young as you riding on a train alone. Especially one that heads so far to the north. Are you sure you’re in the right place?”

There was no doubt in my mind that we were caught. My runaway days were over, and I would soon be sent back to Master Harris’s plantation (where I was certain that I would get ‘strung up’ like Frederick had described).

Luckily, Frederick had told me not to say *anything* to *anyone* – he would do all of the talking.

I let Frederick do the talking
as we boarded the train.



“Sir, we are two brothers who traveled South to visit our grandfather near Charleston.” I was amazed that Frederick had changed his voice so that it sounded similar to Master Harris’s young sons, who all had private tutors and spoke perfect English. He continued, “We are now returning to our boarding school in Massachusetts.”

The man marked our ticket. I think he still had his doubts, but from the way Frederick talked it was clear (or at least it seemed clear) that we weren’t runaway slaves.

Frederick guided me to the separate “colored car” where all of the black folks sat. There were several black folks in the seats, but they all seemed

to be fairly wealthy. I was pretty sure that I was the only runaway slave using this train to make my escape.

We sat on the train through the day and through the night. The next morning, Frederick told me we had to get off the train and wait for another one. He had to pull a similar routine with the man taking tickets on that one, too.

I stuck by Frederick's side. Only a few times did he leave me in the seat alone so that he could go buy us some sandwiches.

"Paid for by your friend Nathaniel Milton," he would say when he returned with the food. I didn't really understand it, but I smiled anyway.

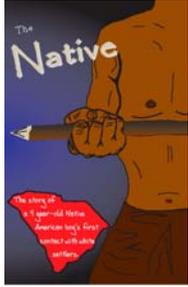
I was drifting off to sleep when the train finally stopped late in the afternoon of the second day. I quickly woke up, though, when Frederick tapped me on the shoulder and said, "This is it."



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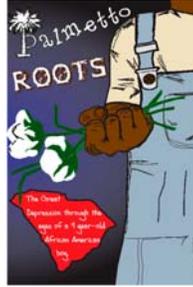
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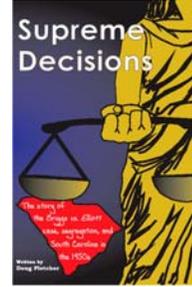
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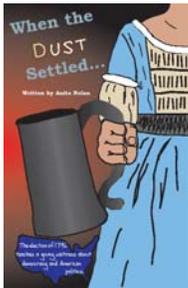
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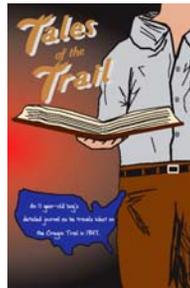
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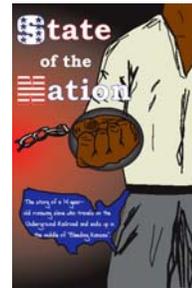
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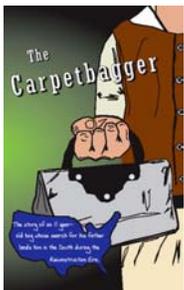
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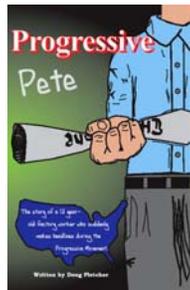
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