2

Decisions: To Be Harriet, Keeping Still While Moving

> *"There are two things I've got a right to, and these are Liberty or Death—one or the other I mean to have. No one will take me back alive."* —HARRIET TUBMAN

THOUGH MINTY ROSS, LATER HARRIET TUBMAN, would suffer from a form of epilepsy for the rest of her life, her physical strength improved so much that she was hired out as a teenager to Madison shipbuilder, merchant, and slave owner John T. Stewart (the son of Joseph Stewart and brother of James A. Stewart). Minty did work that was normally done by men, lugging barges down canals and pulling plows like oxen. Working alongside slaves as well as free men, she became part of a quiet network that had been made up exclusively of black males. This network included freedmen, slaves, and black mariners who exchanged information about (or from) distant families, the successful slave uprising against Napoleon's colonial forces in Saint Domingue (Haiti), and other news. There was always word of runaways, some successful and many not.

Marriage and the Call of Freedom

The expansion of industry and commerce on the Eastern Shore of Maryland often lent itself to hiring help rather than purchasing and housing slaves. With slave owners in the area making more money by hiring out their slaves, they had to trust their human chattel to travel sometimes long distances, stay for periods of days or weeks at a time, and then return. To build trust, as we have seen, many slaveholders made a promise of manumission by a certain age. Thus, as industry grew in southeastern Maryland, so did the number of free blacks. It was working within this network that brought Minty Ross into contact with John Tubman, a tall, dark mulatto born free to free parents in Dorchester County. He lived and worked in an area known as Peter's Neck, not far from where Minty's own father lived and worked.

In Tubman's time as a slave, it was not uncommon for a free man to marry an enslaved woman. The danger to such a family would be in bearing children, as any of their offspring would take on the status of the mother. Thus, when Minty Ross married John Tubman, a free man, they both knew that any children they had would belong to Edward Brodess. And so, during their five-year marriage, they had no children.

It was about the time of their marriage in 1844, when Minty changed her name to Harriet Tubman. Some believe she changed her name in honor of her mother, Harriet. Others believe the new name was part of a larger spiritual conversion. Either way, Harriet embraced a change in identity, focusing on freedom for her and her family. Her father, Ben, had been manumitted about four years before Harriet's marriage. Obviously he was a favorite of his owner, as he was granted ten acres of land for life as well as exclusive rights to all timber on the land. Such an arrangement was almost unheard of at the time, but Ben's wife Rit and his children remained enslaved!

Harriet Tubman, for her part, worked out a deal to pay Brodess an annual fee for the privilege of hiring herself out to landowners and

businessmen of her choosing—by now a common practice on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Harriet made enough extra money to buy a pair of steers and hired herself out in off times for plowing, carting, and other heavy labor. In 1848–1849, however, illness prevented Harriet from working as often as she had, and the $50 or $60 she was paying Brodess per year was not enough. Brodess was running deeper into financial difficulty, and everyone on his plantation could feel the stress.

Fears and Prayers

All the while, the fear of being sold farther south hung over Harriet and the other slaves. Now it was becoming real. Two of Harriet's sisters, Linah and Soph, were set to be freed at the age of 45 according to their previous owner's will. Without real fear of consequences, however, Brodess illegally listed Linah and Soph as slaves for life and sold them out of state. Linah left behind two children, Kizziah (Kessiah) and Harriet, Tubman's nieces. It was only a matter of time before they and she, too, would be hoisted onto an auction block, sold, chained, and transported out of state. Harriet prayed constantly for Edward Brodess's heart to change.

I prayed all night long for master, till the first of March; and all the time he was bringing people to look at me, and trying to sell me. Then we hear that some us was going to be sold to go with the chain-gang down to the cotton and rice fields, and they said I was going and my brother and sisters.[1]

At that point, it was Harriet's prayer that changed:

> *Oh Lord, If you ain't never going to change that man's heart, kill him, Lord and take him out of the way.*[2]

And that prayer was soon answered. On March 7, 1849, Edward Brodess was dead at the age of 47. Tubman was shaken by the suddenness of his passing. As she later recounted to biographer Sarah Bradford,

> *Next thing I heard old master was dead, and he died just as he lived. Oh, then, it appeared like I'd give all the world full of gold, if I had it, to bring that poor soul back. But I couldn't pray for him no longer.*[3]

As it turned out, the death of Edward Brodess only escalated the very changes that Tubman feared most. He left all of his possessions except the slaves to his wife Eliza. In spite of his promise to set them free for good behavior, he bequeathed all of the slaves to his children, with no provision for manumission. The widow Eliza, financially strapped, petitioned the Dorchester County Orphans Court to sell some of the slaves to pay off the family debts.

In the meantime, not long after marrying, Harriet had hired an attorney for $5 to inquire into the will of her mother's former master, Atthow Pattison. Now the lawyer's findings may have prevented, or at least postponed, the immediate sale of Harriet and her other siblings. For it was discovered that Rit, Harriet's mother, had been set to be manumitted at the age of 45, as were any children bequeathed to Pattison's heirs. By the time of Edward Brodess's death, however, Rit was more than 60 years old and, under Maryland law, had passed the age that manumission was allowed. Because Edward Brodess, Atthow Pattison's great-grandson, had not abided by the terms of the will, Rit and her children were cheated out of the freedom that was promised them.

But Tubman's inquiry into the status of her mother also opened the door for a lawsuit by the Pattison family. In July 1849, soon after Brodess's death, the Pattison family sued his widow, Eliza, claiming ownership of Rit and any of her children over the age of 45; the lawsuit included a claim for any money earned from Rit's labor beginning at age 45. The upshot for Harriet and her siblings, at least for the time being, was that the case made it impossible for Eliza to sell any of Rit's children until the matter had been settled.

Not that these proceedings prevented Eliza from trying time and again. In August 1849, she and the estate administrator advertised the sale of Kizziah Bowley, Harriet's 25-year-old niece. Kizziah's husband John, a free black man who worked as a ship's carpenter, and his brother tried to work out a deal to buy her and won a temporary reprieve. Soon two of Tubman's other nieces went on the auction block, and this sale went through for $375 to a local merchant. Then a few weeks later, Eliza sold yet another slave from the family estate, Dawes Keene. Harriet saw the writing on the wall. She had to flee, even though it was against her husband's will and he refused to go with her.

Escape

Harriet and two of her brothers, Henry and Benjamin, fled the Caroline County plantation of Dr. Anthony C. Thompson on September 17, 1849. She had saved money by hiring out her labor and had established contacts in the Underground Railroad. The auction block was imminent, she had faith in God, and she yearned for freedom. On October 3, an ad appeared in the *Cambridge Democrat* offering $300 for the capture of the three runaways. Days later, Henry and Benjamin decided it was too much of a risk, especially with Benjamin having recently married and become a father. They decided to turn back, believing they would have a better chance of being sold locally rather than down South. Harriet returned with them but escaped again shortly thereafter, on her own.

Her exact route is not known, but she traveled at night—by the North Star like so many others—to elude slave catchers. A woman, believed to be Quaker, helped on the initial leg of her journey, perhaps northeast along the Choptank River toward Delaware, and directed Harriet to other families that were part of the Underground Railroad. Ironically, one of the stations to which she was directed may have been the home of a Quaker family named Leverton, whose daughter Mary Elizabeth had married a grandson of Anthony Thompson.

Forging into the future by following the North Star

> *"I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now that I was free. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."*
>
> —HARRIET TUBMAN

With the help of white and black operatives along the clandestine support network on the journey north, Harriet eventually landed in Philadelphia. She was free, but everyone she held dear—her husband, mother, father, brothers, nieces, and nephews—were back in Maryland. True happiness for Tubman would be the ability to share the freedom she was experiencing with the rest of her family. As she later told Bradford,

> *I was free and they should be free. I would make a home in the North and bring them there, God helping me. Oh, how I prayed then.*[4]

Harriet found domestic work in hotels and private homes between Philadelphia and Cape May, New Jersey, all the while planning to return to Maryland to bring back her family. With that mission ever in mind, it would not be long before she met William Still, a leading organizer, conductor, and chronicler of the Underground Railroad, as well as other colleagues of his in the City of Brotherly Love.

Harriet's niece, Kizziah, and her children on the auction block