

Silent Night

“By the time you hear this story, it might not be exactly as it happened, but, if you are reading it in my own handwriting, then you are holding the true story.”

That is what Moll Johnson wrote in the year 1848 and this is her original story written in her own hand. You may be wondering just how it was that I came to have this in my possession. Well, my great-great Aunt Sally saved Moll’s story and it has been carefully secured in my family’s history down to this day.

First I’ll read the newspaper clipping that was in the envelope:

RAN AWAY ON THE 30TH OF SEPTEMBER LAST, FROM THE SUBSCRIBER, LIVING IN HANOVER COUNTY, TWO NEGROES, *VIDELICET*: ROGER, A NEGRO MAN, BORN AT ANGOLA, A PRETTY TALL, WELL SET FELLOW, ABOUT 30 YEARS OLD. HE HAS ON, WHEN HE WENT AWAY, A NEW OZNABRIG SHIRT, AND AN OLD COTTON WAISTCOAT, A PAIR OF VIRGINIA CLOTH BREECHES, STRIPED BLACK AND WHITE, AND A PAIR OF COUNTRY-MADE SHOES. MOLL, ABOUT 18 YEARS OLD, IS WIFE TO THE ABOVE-NAMED ROGER, AND IS VERY BIG WITH CHILD. SHE HAD ON, AN OLD OZNABRIG SHIFT, AND AN OLD COTTON WAISTCOAT AND PETTICOAT. THEY BOTH SPEAK TOLERABLE GOOD ENGLISH, WHOEVER WILL BRING THE SAID NEGROES TO ME, AT MY HOUSE, IN HANOVER COUNTY,

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SHALL HAVE A PISTOLE REWARD FOR EACH OF THEM,
BESIDES WHAT THE LAW ALLOWS.

Since the language is archaic in that advertisement, let me clarify a few words before we go on. “Oznabrig” is an unbleached linen, rather coarse in nature. Lest you think that “Pistole” refers to a hand gun, it was a gold coin of European origin in use from the Middle Ages to the mid-19th century.

Now let’s get on with Moll Johnson’s story in her own words:

When we escaped from Covey’s plantation that night, we had no idea just where we were going or how would we would get there. All we could do was follow the “Drinking Gourd” which was the Freedom Train’s term for the constellation known as the Big Dipper, which includes the North Star. If the stars weren’t out, we’d been told, “The dead will show you the way” which meant that moss grows on the North side of dead trees.

We wouldn’t have known any of this, if it weren’t for Peg Leg Joe. Ol’ Peg Leg used to be a sailor but then became a carpenter. He was a white man who wanted to help slaves escape to freedom. He worked all through the South on as many plantations as he could. He taught us songs that had code words imbedded in the lyrics. Words like, “Moses”, which denoted a conductor on the Underground Railroad; “Shepherds”

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were people who escorted some of us; “Parcels” were fugitives to be expected; “Stockholder” was one who donated money, clothing or food. Throughout our journey, Roger and I came across many kind and generous “stockholders” who gave us extra attention because of my condition.

Peg Leg also made trails for us. “Left Foot, Peg Foot” was the outline of a human left foot and a round circle in place of the right foot. It was easy to trace these paths since no animal or human made tracks that looked like that!

That first night, we went as far as we could. If I hadn’t been so heavy with child, we might have gotten farther, but Roger didn’t want me to push it. Peg Leg had said that “The river bank makes a mighty good road” because the dogs can’t pick up the scent that way. So, that’s just what we did. We walked until near daybreak in the backwoods streams swollen from the spring rains. The rocks were slippery and my lack of good balance made for some missteps, but Roger kept a hold on me.

In the still before sunrise we heard a strange sound coming from the upper bank. Instantly our hearts stopped. We knew we were goners. A raspy whisper broke the silence, “Shepherd, up here.” We looked up and there stood a figure in the pale light of the morn beckoning us to his side. “He’s an escort,” Roger whispered, “an angel in our midst.” We scrambled up the bank to his outreached hands. Without so much as

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snapping a twig on our way, we followed behind him on the trail till it opened onto the road. A team of horses snortin' in the morning dew pawed at the dirt like they were telling us to hurry up and jump in the wagon.

“We’ve got a load of potatoes,” our shepherd said to the driver. Before I could even see his face, I was lifted into the back of the wagon, then Roger crawled in. They covered us under mounds of cabbages, beets and greens. The fresh-picked vegetables with the dirt still covering their roots filled my nostrils with the smell of freedom.

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After a time that I couldn't measure, the constant jostling of the wagon came to a halt. We couldn't hear anything from the outside. Roger squeezed my hand. Gradually the light of day came seeping through the layer of vegetables as the weight of them receded.

“Give me the lady’s hand.” Roger pulled my arm upward. Two hands reached each side of me and I was lifted out. I must say that I was greatly relieved to be standing on still ground. I was worried that the rough ride might have sent me into labor. Before I could take a deep breath of fresh air, we were whisked to a wagon right ahead of us.

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It proved to be fortuitous that I took in that gulp of fresh air because I had barely exhaled when we were tossed into a wagon full of manure! Well, not actually tossed into it, rather we were stuffed into a box behind the driver with manure piled high over it. The fresh vegetables that we had been feasting on suddenly were replaced with a stench that easily seeped through the porous pine wood of the box. Mercifully, that leg of our journey only lasted a few hours.

It was a circus of all things that picked us up after that. I don't think they minded how stinky we were. We were put in a secret stall behind the monkey cages. We sure didn't get any rest on that link of the Freedom Train. Those monkeys kept shrieking and hollering all night long. I was hoping that they'd quiet down for the day, but no such thing. Lord knows if they ever slept!

Exhaustion overtook us and we started to wonder if we should have ever left the plantation in the first place. Roger was plenty worried that our baby would come too early what with all this movin' around. Our minds began to play tricks. I said that maybe life as a slave really wasn't that bad. Roger said that at least we had a couple of meals a day and a place to rest our heads.

The monkeys settled down the next night and we got some good rest. Before daybreak someone tapped on our stall and slipped us corn pones with a big jar of fresh cold milk. I will never forget dippin' those pones

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into that milk and suckin' 'em down. From that point onward, Roger and I felt so foolish for doin' all that complainin'.

I don't remember how many times we were jostled from one wagon to another. Days rumbled into nights. Sometimes we were taken to a farm and put up in a barn. Those were times of real relief for me. The best sleep I ever had was while nestled in that sweet-smelling hay. The farm families were so good to us. Soon as they found out I was with child, they all went out of their way to take care of me. We had some of the best chicken, biscuits and gravy I ever did have and the sugary corn pudding settled my stomach. I think the baby liked it, too, cuz he sure kicked up a storm about it!

My baby might have jostled his way right out of the womb if it weren't for the Indians we met up with along the way. Word must have spread that a woman near term was traveling on the Freedom Train. They gave me all sorts of potions to help with my pregnancy. Blue cohosh root and red raspberry leaves, they said, would strengthen my womb for the grueling journey. Squaw vine would ease the pain of childbirth. When we were at a farm, we'd ask for hot water to make the leaves into tea. When we couldn't do that, an old Indian squaw had showed me how to roll the leaves into a paste that I could chew. Thankfully none of it tasted too bad.

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A conductor along the way had told Roger about a camp in northern Ohio where we could stay a few days. I prayed that we'd get there before the baby came. The Lord heard my prayers. We arrived in Hudson not a day too soon. Steady contractions had started that morning. It took Roger and two other men to lift me out of the casket in the back of the funeral wagon that I had been riding in for the previous two days. It hadn't been too uncomfortable, though, the coffin was all lined in puffs of satin with a pillow for my head!

The station master, a Mr. Frederick Brown and his wife, Juliette, came out to greet us with a supper fit for royalty. I had barely eaten for those two days in that coffin. I certainly needed some nourishment. The birth pains were comin' on and I knew I'd need energy for the labor. The Browns said that they had heard about me makin' such a journey in my condition, and wanted to do all they could to help. I was overwhelmed with gratitude. Their oldest daughter, Jane, appeared with extra blankets and a kettle of hot water from the house seeing how we couldn't have built a fire in the camp.

Two Indian squaws stepped out of the shadows. I learned later that Chief Ogontz had sent them. Seems there was a lady in Hudson named, Eunice Oviatt, who had befriended the neighboring tribes so much so that they were beholdin' to her. Mrs. Oviatt had heard earlier in the day that a "wind was blowing from the South" meaning that "baggage" on the Freedom Train was to arrive that evening. The local Indians who had

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been tracking us through this part of Ohio and had let Mrs. Oviatt know that this “baggage” soon to come had a very special small “bag” inside.

There were about a half-dozen Freedom Seekers at the camp that night. I was the only woman among them. The men were wide-eyed that I had had the strength to make such a trip. I told them that it wasn't my own strength that I was relying on, that the Good Lord had sent his angels to carry me along.

When the moon got high enough to peek over the treetops, my labor pains grew closer together in greater intensity. The Indian squaws moved me so I could lean against one of the trees. They said the tree would steady me as I squatted for birth. One squaw stood each side of me and gently pushed downward on my belly. I thought that it might hurt, but it felt good to have help like that. I was lucky in that Mrs. Brown was the town's midwife. She knew just what to do and instructed me on everything. The pains got real bad there at the end, but I didn't make so much as a whimper.

When Moses was born that night, it seemed that every star was reflected in his eyes. All of us were silent as events unfolded. Moses kept quiet, too. I'm sure he knew that the silence was sacred and meant our very lives. Everyone formed a circle around us, holding one another's hands skyward. With the moonlight directly overhead, I could see hope shining on their faces - the same hope that I felt rising in my heart.