

Excerpt from *Harriet Tubman* by Ann Petry

Whenever Harriet Tubman saw any of these newly escaped slaves, she never failed to think how miraculous it was that a group of people, sometimes only one, sometimes two or three, or four, should have the courage to start for an unknown destination without food or money or friends, with only the burning desire for freedom to keep them going. Anyone who saw them would know they were fugitives. Their clothes were torn and snagged by briars, burrs were clinging to them. They were either barefoot or their shoes were literally worn out from walking, the soles flapping, the uppers held on by string. They were startled by any unexpected sound. If there were footsteps on the long flight of stairs, or a door closed suddenly, they jumped up, trembling, nostrils distended, eyes wide open.

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One quiet night there, in the loft, William Still was talking to J Miller McKim, and to Harriet, when a stranger entered the office. He nodded to Harriet, and then went over to the desk, where he carried on a low conversation with Still and McKim.

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Suddenly Still beckoned to Harriet. "Maybe you can help us find a woman to—" Then he interrupted himself. "There's a man named—" Even though no outsider could have overheard him, he lowered his voice. "Named John Bowley—"

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"Bowley?" Harriet said. "John Bowley? Where's he from?"

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"From Cambridge, Maryland. And—"

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"Why that's my brother-in-law," she said, excitement in her voice. "He's married to my sister Mary—and—why he's a free man. What's the trouble?"

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"Yes, he's free," said Still. "But his wife and children are slaves. And they are about to be sold. We know how to get them to Baltimore. But we've got to find someone to guide them from Baltimore to Philadelphia, preferably a woman, because there's another baby and child. We thought you might know of a woman who would—"

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"I will," she said promptly.

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But Mr. Still shook his head. He said that it would be difficult for free Negroes with all their papers in order to leave Baltimore. For her to attempt to bring them out when she would be a fugitive herself was an impossibility. They would be weighed, measured, at the railroad station or at the dock, and this information would be compared with the descriptions of all other known runaways. Even if this family bore no resemblance to any other fugitives, they could still not leave until they had obtained a bond signed by two well-known residents.

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Harriet laughed. "Mr. Still, you're trying to scare me. And I don't scare easy. Besides, I know enough about the Underground Railroad now so that I know you don't have to go through any weighing and measuring to get a group of people through Baltimore. That's my sister and her husband and her children and I'm the one who's going to Baltimore to get them."

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William Still threw up his hands. "All right," he said, "but please, please be careful."

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Petry, Ann. *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*. New York: HarperCollins, 1955  
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