



Chapter I

Moe's Escape

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I

Moe's Escape

In 1825, Moe turned ten-years-old, his birthday fell on a Sunday. Jeb's colored and white slaves worked side by side in the sugarcane fields. To him they were the same, Jeb simply believed that poor people were better off being a slave, after all, they had housing, a job, and food. One day Jeb said to himself as he galloped from the sugarcane field to home, "what more could a slave want. On my land, I give them everything," he said out loud before entering his house.

Jeb had twelve slaves working at the shoe factory. Moe was one of Jeb's trusted slaves that could work in the factory. In the sugarcane fields, the twelve slaves worked from five o'clock in the morning to noon, then walked to town to work in the shoe factory for five hours. At the end of the month, the slaves were paid three dollars. Out of their hard-earned money, Jeb gave them a nickel and kept the rest. The slaves received the nickel due to the manager insisting that Jeb pay his property for their work.

Moe was happy, he saved his nickels over the years in a small tin can, that he buried in the woods at the base of a tree. He had worked at the factory for twenty-eight months, Moe said to himself, "I's rich."

However, out of the twelve, only Moe worked on Sunday's. On his birthday, Moe entered the factory doors just before it started raining. Buckets of rain poured out of the sky, giving Moe a reason to stay the night. Moe said to himself, "perfect." He asked the manager if he could stay all night in the factory and be back on the plantation in the morning.

The manager said, "yes, you may stay."

To make time go faster Moe swept, mopped, took all the trash out back, dumped it in the pit, set it on fire, went back inside, and straighten up. The guard that stayed there in the evenings saw Moe working hard, he said, "my wife packed extra food, would you like to eat with me?"

Moe had hard bread he'd stolen from his mom, the guard had fresh bread and meat, "yes Sir." Moe's eyes shined as the guard unwrapped the food, he even had a big piece of cake. Moe got two tin cups sitting on a nearby table, he said, "I's gits' us some water." He ran out back and filled the cups from the well. The two sat talking and laughing, Moe wished the man was his father.

At 11:00 PM, Moe was in that great big factory with only the guard who after they ate, stayed to himself. Moe thought, "I need more food to take with me."

Moe had planned to escape his Massa and mom; he was running away. He remembered the company's owner always had nuts, candy, and cookies in his office. He entered the manager's office and saw a half-eaten cake, dried beef, and other snacks. As Moe wrapped the food in a newspaper that was lying on the desk, he saw sitting in a corner his boss black business case leaning against the wall. Moe smiled as he put the food in the case, he went out back and filled his flask.

He looked around the shoe factory, everything was clean and in place, he was ready to head north. He looked at the clock, it read 11:15. For two years, Moe had returned to the plantation in the dark all by himself. At that time, he was going to a familiar place. Fright encased Moe's nerves, he was running away from what and who he knew, he was going alone to an unknown. Moe stepped outside into the dark, it had stopped raining, the frogs and crickets sounded louder than normal, the dark was darker, the sky blacker, his heartbeat so hard it felt like it was trying to escape his chest. When the door closed the latch click echoed in the night, the noise startled Moe. Then Moe had an idea, he thought, maybe I'll go home and tomorrow escape with my brothers. He took off running fast as he could, then quick as a wink stopped.

It was as if he ran into a wall of flashbacks. Moe stood frozen, remembering earlier that day.

Instead of getting cake and ice-cream for his birthday, that morning, Moe's mother was drunk and in a fussing mood. She lied yelling that she had saved money to get a shack for them, and no longer work for their Massa. She told Moe that it was his fault that their Massa swapped his brother and sister, Bo and Jo, for a slave cook. His mom ranted and raved for hours. Moe's brothers ran out the slave shack, since this time it wasn't one of them that she chose to beat with her vocals. That morning, it was their little brother's turn.

Moe's mom walked towards him with her fist balled up and punched him in his face. Moe stumbled back towards the door, she grabbed him, bent low to his level, held him close to her face as she spouted, "Massa be giben' me yo' nickel from da' shoe factree," she heaved Moe towards the door, he fell to the floor with a loud thump.

He mumbled under his breath as he got off the floor, but loud enough for her to hear, "you's be an evil bugger."

She slapped Moe hard.

Moe kicked at his mom but missed, she yanked the door open and pushed him out, he fell on his back partially on the stoop and ground. As she closed the door she said looking down at Moe, "I's git yo' nickel, it be da' end of da' month."

Normally on Sundays, Moe would leave early going to the shoe factory, he would take his time and play along the way. But not on his tenth birthday, Moe had a plan.

Picking himself off the ground, Moe watched her disappear out of sight. He ran back in the shack and grabbed his quilt, his other pair of pants and shirt. He looked around the room for anything else he could take. On the table was a big piece of bread Massa had given his mom, he took it, and wrapped it in his dirty handkerchief. Hanging on the wall was his father's flask with a strap, he grabbed that as well. When realizing there was nothing more to take, Moe put everything in the middle of the quilt and tied the four corners together. He had seen pictures of runaways with a makeshift pack, tied together with a stick going through the top. He quickly went outside and found a long stick. The quilt and stick were too big and heavy for him to carry. He put the quilt and flask over his head and shoulder like a crossover purse. Moe went deep into the woods; at the base of a tree he had buried his nickels for the past two years in a small tin can.

Every Sunday, Moe had to be at work by one o'clock. On that morning, he was going to visit Elijah an old slave that was in his nineties. Oftentimes, he had saved Moe and his brothers from their drunken mom.

Moe remembered a conversation he had with Elijah. Two months before his birthday, Elijah said, "I's know you's be leavin'." He looked at the little boy sitting on the stoop of his shack, and said, "da' moss and moon can be mighty confusin,' dis here pantation' ain't fer' from da' ocean. West be Massa house, you's gotta' go throw he's land, and piece way from dat' be's da ocean, den' go right ta' norf."

Elijah taught Moe how to run and be free. It normally took Moe not quite an hour to walk to the shoe factory. Moe said to himself, "plenty of time." He ran to say goodbye to Elijah, he found the man sitting in his shabby chair, in front of his shack, Moe sat on the stoop where he normally sat.

Without looking at Moe, Elijah asked, "ta'night?"

The two sat a few minutes with knowing peaceful smiles on their faces. Moe asked, "how'd ja' know?"

"Well," Elijah began, "yo' mama' was round here sayin' she gets yo' money." He looked at Moe, and nodded before saying, "good thang' you's keep it, she'd drank it up. You be ten-year-old, dat' be old nuff' ta' go."

"I's leavin' from da' factory ta' night."

"I's know son, I's know. You's big nuff' ta' make it whars' ya goin. Git' free foe' both of us, while you still be alive, I's gonna' be free soon."

Moe asked, "whad' ja' mean, you be free?"

"I's old, ain't got long ta' lib." By this time Elijah was ninety-two.

Moe began crying, the old man reached for the young boy. Moe sat on Elijah's lap and cried. He rocked Moe and told him his story. He shared with the ten-year-old, that their Massa was his little brother. He told Moe that when he was a boy, his mama was a maid in Massa house.

Elijah explained, "mama had deep brown skin, big bright eyes, long white teeth, and thick black hair down to her shoulders." He smiled as the memory of his mother flashed before him. He mumbled, "I's ain't thank bout' her foe' a long time."

Moe buried his head on Elijah's chest as the old slave talked, he said, "when I turned six Massa put me in da' field, he had a son dat' be older dan' me, he teach' me ta' read, writs', and cipher' numba'. He told me not to tell cause' it be agin' da' law. Mercy me child, we had fun breakin' da' law, he teach me fo' five years, and den' he be gone. I's neva' seed' him again, my learnin' stopped." Sharing his past with Moe brought back memories of his mother and the days of long ago. Sadness filled Elijah as he thought about old Massa first son left, and now little

Moe going to a new life. Elijah said, "Naw son, I won't be round long." Lonesomeness and gut-wrenching sadness caused a few tears to roll down Elijah's cheeks. He wiped his face with one hand as he squeezed Moe a little closer with the other.

Moe sat up and said, "you's teach me ta' write and read, whys it agin' da' law?"

"Massa all ova' say, slave or servant git uppity, and start thankin' when dey' git learnin'."

"How's Massa yo' brother? He be white - you ain't."

"Well Moe," Elijah began, "Massa did somethin' bad to my mama, den' I's be born. I's be pert' near' forty when Massa married a young wild gal' dat' git's wid' child, and gib' life to our Massa, Massa and me got da' same daddy."

"Life be hard foe' us. Did ja' run?" Moe asked.

"Yep, Massa sold my mama, I took off runnin' behind he's' house. I didn't wanna' be here wid' out my mama."

Elijah's mama saw her son running with an overseer on horseback going after him. Seeing her child in trouble, she jumped down off the cart and ran trying to save him from the overseer's. The man that purchased her had a gun, he shot her in the back as she was running. She died instantly. He tried to sue her previous Massa, but the judge said, "you didn't have to shoot."

Elijah paused, he was deep in thought before saying, "I's knows we's close to da' ocean cause I's seed' it, da' sky and water met."

He looked at Moe and smiled, he held up his right hand, his thumb was missing. "Massa cut my thumb off foe' running, cause he's thanks I's right hand, I's be left hand. I's memba' da' pain, I should run right foe' norf.' All I's do is stand der,' dat' ocean, stars, moon be da' prettiest thang' I's eva' seed. I's shoulda' kept runnin, but I's stopped." He looked down at Moe sitting on his lap and said, "don't stop, keep runnin."

Elijah sent Moe in his slave shack to get a box and bring it out to him, Moe obeyed, when he returned, he handed Elijah the box. Inside were black shoes perfect for working in the fields and factory. The shoes were a little too big for Moe. It didn't matter, they were his first pair of shoes. Moe hugged Elijah tight and said, "thank you, dad, thank you."

Elijah said, "happy birthday, son."

Moe cried, he had never received a gift, and Elijah was the only one that remembered Moe's birthday.

Elijah looked up and saw Moe's mom coming their way, he said, "son, trouble be a' comin,' when I's run, I be twelve, nobody tells' me what's ta' do. You child, do as I tells' ya." He stood next to Moe.

Moe said, "thank you foe' eva'thang." He watched his mother totter towards them, looking at her dirty wide feet, Moe said, "mom ain't got no shoes." He looked down at Elijah's feet and smiled, he said, "you always be' wearin' shoes."

Elijah bent down to Moe's level, turned the boy to face him, he cradled Moe's head in his hands and whispered, "out da' factory doe,' go left foe' long while, straight down through da' woods to da' Ocean, den' go right. Dat' take yah' norf."

His mother grabbed Moe by the ear and pushed him in the direction of the shoe factory, "git ta' work, ta' night yous' git's paid, Massa already gib' me yo' nickel." She looked at Elijah, "you's stop fillin' he's head wid' foolishness." She saw the shoes Moe was holding, she continued, "put dem' on my bed, I's be sellin' dem', whad' you need shoes fer?"

Moe turned facing Elijah, he ran to him and gave Elijah a hug, and then took off running. His mother did not follow, instead, she stopped to talk with a friend that was sitting on his stoop drinking. She showed him her shiny nickel.

Elijah stood watching Moe run. He went to his chair, sat, looked down at the stoop where Moe always sat. He looked up and saw Moe waving, he waved back. Moe turned and ran, he watched Moe leave, Elijah wept as the little boy he called, "son," disappeared out of his sight. Sadness was so strong in Elijah that the pit of his stomach felt like it was tied in knots. He tried to stand, but his heart was too heavy with grief, he flopped back down in his chair. He cried hard and squeezed his stomach to end the pain of sorrow.

Moe got his things out the woods, put his shoes in the quilt. As he was on the path to work, the realization that he may never see Elijah again, made him cry, he fell on his knees and wept.

Whenever Moe thought of Elijah, he felt sadness from his stomach traveling up to his heart, escaping out as tears that rolled down his cheeks. Moe stood to ponder whether to return to the plantation or run, a memory of his older brother and sister, Bo and Jo, were sold for a young cook. He remembered Betsy the old cook telling him and Elijah that she had cooked for Massa daddy when she was a teen, but now she was old and tired.

Moe liked Betsy, but he missed Bo and Jo, so much so, he got sick. Even though he was ill, his mom made

him go to the sugarcane field in the hot sun. While working he fainted, an overseer thought Moe had fallen asleep, he ran and got Jeb, who ran in the field, using his whip, Jeb hit the child twice. Moe did not move. Jeb had the overseer to check Moe, who was still lying on the ground, the overseer said, "Sir, the boy is sick."

Jeb said pointing at Moe's mom, "fifteen lashes."

Elijah had Moe to stay in his cabin, he knew Moe's mom was not fit to care for a cockroach. It took three overseers to tie Moe's mom to a tree, she kicked, spit, twisted, scratched, and clawed. She received ten lashes on top of the fifteen, the slaves stopped work to watch the spectacle. The overseers were irritated and tired from dealing with the wild woman.

Moe's flashbacks ended. He looked around at the factory and faced his dilemma. He slumped when he realized that the supervisor of the shoe factory had not paid him. The thought of his mom getting his money, pushing him down, punching, and slapping him around, jackknifed in his head. Moe stilled his storm and repeated Elijah, out da' factory doe,' go left foe' long while, straight down through da' woods to da' Ocean, den' go right. Dat' take you norf."

He turned and ran back to the factory, the doors were locked, so he stood in front of the door and went left. He followed Elijah's instructions. Once he reached the ocean, it was just as Elijah had said, the sky and Ocean met. The blackness of the sky made the moon look like it was sitting on top of the ocean, the stars sparkled on the water like floating diamonds. Moe stood in admiration of the view. He was tired and hungry, he sat on the bank and ate a piece of the cake, some of the dried beef, and took a sip of water. An additional recollection popped in Moe's memory, his older brother Bo told him that early one morning before sunrise, their dad woke up and left his kids and wife, with a young slave girl. Before their dad left, he was the one that fed and bathe his kids, at the time, Moe was only a few months old. With their dad gone, Bo and Jo, the eldest of the children became parents to their younger siblings. Moe said to himself, "he left us, he was nothin' but another' useless person in my life."

One last time, Moe stared at the ocean and its beauty, he heard Elijah's words, "do not stop."

Moe slow jogged north, stopping periodically to catch his breath.

On the plantation, Moe's mom anger surged, her youngest child had not returned. She tried to hide from her Massa among the tall sugarcane. Her anger subsided, and fright took over when he was near her. She stood immobilized when Jeb said, "git over here," then asked, "what happened to the boys?"

Her eyes followed where Jeb was looking, then back at Jeb and said about her sons, Toe and So, "dey' be clean."

Elijah and Betsy had cleaned the boys. Betsy had the house slave, to give Toe and So something to wear from the teenagers that had outgrown their clothes. Fortunately, for the boy's sake, their cuts, black eyes, and bruises were more prevalent due to their cleanliness.

Jeb asked a second time, "what happened, to my property?" He nodded towards the boys.

Their mom looked at her sons and had a flashback of the evening before. The memory slapped her in the head so hard she almost fainted. The woman had spent the nickel on booze and gave her friend the penny for a piece of meat. She remembered entering the shack seeing her sons eating vegetables. She snatched their food, most of it fell on the floor, she said, "pick dat' up, eat it."

She began eating their vegetable with her meat, Toe and So ignored her and was leaving, she grabbed an iron rod from the fireplace and beat them both. Her older son ran to the door, she grabbed him by the hair. She yanked him so hard that a big clump of his hair came out with pieces of his scalp. Blood splattered all over his face and clothes. Out of breath their mom stopped and looked around the room, the straw in their mattress was coming out, the table and food had spilled on the floor. She threw her son's clump of hair on the floor, it landed by the food. She swung the iron rod at the boys again, this time they were quicker than their mom, the oldest boy opened the door and ran fast with the younger brother close behind. They made it to Elijah's shack, huffing and puffing and bleeding.

Jeb was waiting for their mother to answer his question, the oldest boy said, "Massa," he pointed to his mom, "she did dis' ta' us. Unk Lijah clean us up."

"I want my nickel back by days end," Jeb said to the boy's mom, then asked, "where's Moe?"

Moe's mom quickly answered, "he be at Lijah's shack all da' time."

The older boy said, "Massa, Lijah don't know whars' Moe be gone," he pointed to his brother and said, "afta' mom beat us, we's sleep in he's' shack."

Jeb said, "you will stay with him from now own. Never go back to her."

"Yaw, Sir," both boys said in unison.

Jeb glanced at the older boy and said, "you old enough to work with the animals, go now and talk with my slave that take care of my animals."

The boy was excited, he said, "thank yous' Sir." He ran to the animal farm.

Jeb studied the boy's mother before he said, "I want you to experience what living with you feel like."

When Jeb left, Moe's mom said to her son, "you's thank Massa punish me, he ain't, we be sleepin ta'gather. I's kill yah' ta' night. I's hate ja' both."

Her son replied, "we's stay wid' you' no mo,' Massa says."

Jeb went to Elijah's, who was sitting in the raggedy chair in front of his shack. Jeb asked Elijah if he had seen Moe. Elijah answered, "Yes'day' I's seed him, he be on he's' way to dat' fac'tree."

"He did not come home last night; do you know where he went?" Jeb asked.

Elijah lied as he answered, "Moe talk bout' boats, iffen' he ain't at da' fac'tree dat's whars' he be goin', south ta' git on a boat. Dat' boy loves boats, Massa Jeb."

"Has he ever seen a boat?"

"Naw Sir, Moe say, one of yo' friend tells him bout boats. Ever since den,' dat' boy talk bout' boat"

Betsy was sitting outside in front of her shack talking with Elijah when Jeb stopped by. She said, "mornin' Massa."

Jeb nodded towards her, he said to Elijah, "those boys that stayed with you last night, is moving in."

Elijah smiled and waved to Jeb as he left.

Since Jeb had put his old cook in the slave quarters to die, she occupied her days by preparing Elijah's meals and extra for the children he fed. She joined the little band of Christians, they didn't have a church building to worship in, so they gathered around an old oak tree. A great number of the coloreds attended the service with only a few whites worshipping with them. The slaves sang, prayed, Elijah preached.

Elijah learned to read the Bible with his Massa first son. During that time, he memorized twenty Bible verses and taught another man in his sixties the verses, and how to apply them to their situation and ask God for help.

Betsy and Elijah watched Jeb gallop away. Betsy looked at Elijah and asked, "how you goin' take care doe' boys?"

Elijah said, "Massa silly, he thank' dat' cause' he say so, it gonna' happen. No matta' how's we's be fillin."

"Wha'd' ja talkin' bout."

"Massa say, do dis,' he say do dat,' we's posed' ta do what he say, don't matta' iffen' we's be sick. We's work til' we's die."

"We's he's' property, "Betsy held her head down sorrowfully as she continued, "owned like da' chickens."

He looked at Betsy and said, "you be yongen' me, I's be dying soon, take good care of da' boys. Dey' had it hard. You be up in da' big house, you's don't know what be goin' on down here in da' slave quarters."

Betsy replied, "I's bout's ta' learn."

Jeb went into the fields and asked the slaves and overseers about Moe's mom. They all told him, what he knew and had seen, the slaves said that she was a despicable drunken woman that beat her children. One of the slaves, looking down at the ground said, "you's a mighty fine Massa, none us slaves got nonthin' ta' runs fer.' Dat woman be awful Massa Jeb."

Jeb thought about Moe's brothers' cuts, bruises and the big opened sore in the middle of the older boys' head, made Jeb shiver. He went ballistic, he ordered Moe's mom to receive thirty lashes, he told the overseers to pull her hair out by the roots, just like she did her older son.

The overseers were happy, they all hated the woman. That day, her beating and hair pulling ordeal was atrocious. Moe's mom went home. She crawled in the door, laid on the floor and shivered from the pain that was all over her body. Moe's mom scooted to her bed; she moved the mattress over. A floorboard was loose, she struggled to lift it, she reached in and pulled out a handkerchief that had two dollars in change. Holding it in her hands, she spotted the small chest that sat in a corner. She opened it; her husband's knife was there. She pulled herself in a sitting position and leaned against the wall. Her motivation to end her life was Jeb's words, "I want you to experience what living with you feel like."

Her scalp was burning, her back, face, and legs were in pain. After the overseers had seen what she had done to her oldest son head, they snatched clumps of hair with skin attached from all over her head. Moe's mom wiped her brow with the back of her dirty arm, blood smeared on it. She leaned forward, she opened gashes on her back, left traces of blood on the wall. She looked at her feet that were filthy, big, and had spread wide from never wearing shoes. She realized that a great number of the other slaves wore shoes. She said, "I's do't not won't' ta' lib' wid' me."

She held the knife with both hands and rammed it through her throat. She did not die right away; the pain

was excruciating as she pulled the knife out. Her body shook violently in pain, she cried, changed her mind about dying, she wanted to run, she wanted to be free. She had a strong desire to one day work in the shoe factory and see other people, beyond the plantation.

Moe's mom had been a slave all her life and never been off the plantation. One time, she snuck around to see the front of Massa house, she saw further than she had ever seen before. It was wide opened space and the front of Massa house was grand. A noise frightened her, she quickly and unseen ran back to the slave quarters. That was the last time she saw a glimpse outside the slave area and fields.

The blood in her esophagus was suffocating, she could not talk or yell for help. She laid on the floor gasping for air, crawling towards the door to get help was tough. Moe's mom made it across the floor only, two paces. Unable to go any further, she laid flat on her stomach, in front of her, was the rod she used to beat her sons. She squeezed her eyes shut; she did not want to remember the day before. Gasping for air triggered her eyes to open, laying behind the rod was the clump of hair she pulled from her oldest boy's head. The meaty part from his scalp was filled with dry blood. Looking at the site caused her to revisit her hatefulness towards her children.

She struggled to breathe through her nose, her eyes were stretched wide open as she gazed at the items on the floor. A tear dripped out her eyes, she inhaled and died at the same time.

An overseer entered the cabin, on the floor he saw the opened handkerchief that held the coins. He took the money, stuffed it in his pocket. He looked at Moe's mom closer, she was still holding the knife, the slit in her throat was barely visible due to the blood clotting. He left, to report that the boy's mom had killed herself.