Harriet Tubman

from *Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters*

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Adapted by Fishtank Learning

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Harriet Tubman

Born: Dorchester County, Maryland - 1820 or 1821 (exact date unknown)
Died: Auburn, New York - March 10, 1913

"There was one of two things I had a right *to, liberty or death;*
If I could not have one, I would have the other."

NOBODY KNOWS THE EXACT YEAR Harriet Ross was born. But no one can forget the courage and determination she demonstrated in her lifetime.

Harriet was one of eleven children born to Harriet Green and Benjamin Ross, slaves on the Edward Brodas plantation on Maryland's Eastern Shore. She was named Harriet after her mother. But folks who knew Harriet and her family well called them by their nicknames. Harriet's mother was known as Old Rit. Her daddy was Old Ben. And most of the slaves on the Brodas land called Harriet Araminta, the name Harriet's parents called her when she was a babe in the cradle. Old Rit and Old Ben called their child Minty for short.

Harriet's master, Edward Brodas, was one of the meanest slave masters around. As soon as Harriet was old enough to pinch cotton, she was forced to work long, hard days.

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Brodas was big on making money. To bring in extra cash, he *rented* little Harriet to nearby plantations, to people who were nearly as mean as he was.

When Harriet was just five years old, her master hired her out to work for a family named Cook. At the Cooks', Harriet slept and ate with the family dog. Like a dog, Harriet had to fetch the muskrats that had been snagged in James Cook's rattraps. The traps were set at the edge of an icy riverbank. Cook forced Harriet to wade in the water, waiting for the traplines to catch an animal. That river water was freezing cold, which set deep in Harriet's bones. It left her with a vicious cough and fever that grew to measles and bronchitis. So James Cook sent Harriet back to the Brodas plantation, where Old Rit nursed little Minty back to health.

Master Brodas was a man of little sympathy. As soon as Harriet's cough cleared up, he rented her out again, to a woman who needed a caretaker for her baby. Diapering and cuddling a baby sure beat looking for muskrats, though a baby requires constant attention.

One morning after breakfast. Harriet, a child herself, couldn't keep her thoughts off a bowl of sugar lumps that rested on the kitchen table. When Harriet's mistress wasn't looking, Harriet snuck a lump of sugar onto her tongue. She'd never tasted sugar before, and for a moment that sweet crystal lump eased the harsh treatment Harriet had endured. But when the mistress caught Harriet, that sweetness turned bitter in a snap. Harnet's mistress came after her with a rawhide switch.

Harriet ran and ran, past houses and farms and trees, until she'd outrun the mistress and her switch. Tired and out of breath, Harriet settled into a pigpen, where a sow and her piglets lived. She stayed hidden for nearly a week.

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But even the pigpen was not safe. Harriet had to fight off the sow for food scraps. She grew hungry and frightened, and with no place else to go, she went back to her mistress, who whipped her good. When the whipping was over, the mistress sent Harriet back to the Brodas plantation. There, Old Rit dressed Minty's wounds and comforted her.

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While running from her mistress, Harriet had caught a glimpse of freedom for the first time. Though it was brief, that freedom tasted sweeter than a hundred lumps of sugar. And it was something Harriet craved more than anything.

Harriet knew escaping from slavery was dangerous. She had heard all kinds of stories about those who tried to flee to the North. The ones who got caught suffered horsewhip beatings, or worse. Some were sold away from their parents, wives, and children. Despite the risk of getting caught, Harriet dreamed of freedom. One night Old Ben showed Harriet the North Star, a twinkling light from the heavens that pointed north. She looked at the star and longed to go.

On an autumn day in 1835, fifteen-year-old Harriet was tending to her work on the Brodas plantation when she glanced off and saw a black man carefully sneaking away, Master Brodas's overseer spotted the man, too, and followed him. Harriet wasn't far behind. She wanted to see *how* and *if* the black man was going to be free. But the runaway got only as far as the town store before the overseer caught up with him. The overseer pulled out his whip.

Then the overseer saw Harriet. He ordered her to hold the man still so that he could give him a beating. Well, there was no way Harriet was going to assist in a black man's beating, and she told the overseer so. She blocked the overseer's way so the black man could run. This made the overseer as mad as a bloodhound. He snatched a lead brick from the store checkout counter and hurled it at the runaway, who was moving fast and furious. Instead of hitting the man, the lead brick hit Harriet in the forehead!

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Harriet bled and bled. Once again Old Rit cared for her Minty, but this time Old it feared her daughter would die. Harriet stayed in a coma for weeks. Then she was bedridden through the cold, dark winter. It wasn't until the dogwood trees started to bloom that Harriet was able to stand and walk on her own, without the help of Old Rit or Old Ben. Harriet was left with a large dent and a puckered scar on her forehead, which served as constant reminders of the price one could pay in the quest for freedom.

Harriet's injury also left her with what folks back then called a sleeping disease, an ailment that would plague Harriet her entire life. Without warning, she would fall into a deep sleep. This could happen anytime, anywhere. There was nothing anyone could do but wait until the sleeping fit wore off. When Harriet wasn't asleep, she endured constant headaches. Master Brodas's overseer tried to sell Harriet on several occasions. But Harriet was now considered damaged property and nobody wanted to buy her.

In 1844 Harriet married John Tubman, a black man who had been born free and who had never suffered under the heavy hand of slavery. John's parents had been slaves but were freed when their master died. Though married to a free man, Harriet was, by law, still enslaved. John moved to the Brodas plantation to live with Harriet.

Harriet loved John when they were first married but soon discovered that her husband was an uppity man. He treated Harriet as if she were *his* slave, doing all he could to stifle Harriet's independent ways. Whenever Harriet spoke of escaping, John shushed her and swore he'd be among the first to tell the master on her if she fled. So Harriet kept quiet. She locked her longing for freedom deep inside her thoughts, far away from John.

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In 1849 bad news came to the slaves on the Bradas plantation: The plantation had collected a heap of unpaid bills and the master was planning to pay off his debts by selling some of his slaves. Two of Harriet's sisters were among the first to be sold. They were chained and sent farther south, to cotton country—Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama—where the slave masters were the cruelest of all.

Harriet now ached for freedom more than ever. She had learned of the abolitionists, who sought to end slavery. These people had created a system for hiding runaway slaves who were heading north. The abolitionists called their hide-and-help network the Underground Railroad. Word spread among the Brodas slaves that a white woman who lived nearby was helping runaways use the Undinground Railroad. Whenever folks got to speaking this woman's name, Harriet listened carefully.

One night, without telling her husband, Harriet gathered three of her brothers. She showed them the North Star and urged them to escape with her right then. Harriet's brothers agreed. But as they followed Harriet, their fear of getting caught became too big. Harriet did her best to persuade them to keep on, but all three refused. And they made Harriet return to the Brodas plantation with them. Harriet relented. She sneaked back with her brothers but vowed to herself that next time she'd flee alone and leave her scaredy-cat brothers behind.

Two days later Harriet learned that *she* had been sold to cotton country and would be
Page 22 chained and sent off the very next day. Harriet realized, "There was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted; and when the time came for me to go, the Lord would let them take me."

Harriet couldn't come right out and tell people that she was going to escape, so she secretly said good-bye by quietly singing an old spiritual while she worked:

When that old chariot comes,
I'm going to leave you,
I'm bound for the promised land.
Friends, I'm going to leave you.

That night Harriet wrapped a salted slab of fish and a hunk of bread in a croker sack. She took one long look at the North Star. And she ran.

Once more the sweetness of freedom began to fill Harriet as twigs snapped beneath her eager feet. She headed toward Bucktown, where the white woman who was helping escaped slaves lived. The woman welcomed Harriet into her cabin and told her of a lady whose husband was a driver on the Underground Railroad.

By the next morning Harriet had found that lady's house. To her surprise, the lady handed her a broom and told her to sweep the stray leaves from the doorstep. Harriet worried that she'd been tricked back into slavery. Soon she realized that this lady had asked Harriet to take up the broom so that Harriet would look like just any slave woman doing her work and wouldn't arouse suspicion.

That night the woman's husband tucked Harriet under a blanket in the bed of his
Page 23 wagon. He piled a flour sack on top of Harriet to keep her hidden, and with the North Star

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shining up ahead, he drove Harriet toward freedom. This was Harriet's first ride on the Underground Railroad, a ride she would never forget.

In the morning the man showed Harriet how to make the rest of her trip on foot, by following the river. The trip was not easy. Harriet had to hide in salt sheds and empty barns during the day, and travel at night. She ran and ran, in the cold, under black skies covered with clouds that at times hid the North Star from her. But Harriet kept on running up the Eastern Shore toward Pennsylvania, where freedom lay, some ninety miles from the Brodas plantation

Finally, on a morning in 1849, Harriet was *free*. "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now that I was free," she later said. "There was such glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."

But Harriet's joy was mixed with sadness. Though *she* had attained freedom, so many of her loved ones—Old Rit, Old Ben, and her brothers and sisters—were still enslaved. She prayed. "Oh dear Lord," she said. "I ain't got no friend but you. Come to my help, Lord, for I'm in trouble!"

Trouble never daunted Harriet Tubman. She summoned her wits, went to Philadelphia, and got herself a job cooking and scrubbing dishes in a hotel kitchen. The workdays were long and tedious. But Harriet didn't mind. She was earning money. And while lathering plates and glasses, she had time to think. Harriet planned a return to Maryland to rescue her family. But when, she asked herself, would be the right time to risk a return? She prayed for guidance.

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While in Philadelphia Harriet learned of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, an organization that helped slaves escape along the Underground Railroad. The Philadelphia Vigilance Committee was headed by James Miller McKim, a white minister, and William Still, a black man who had been born free in Pennsylvania. McKim and Still had a primary purpose: to help free as many enslaved people as possible.

Harriet and William Still became friends. Through Still, Harriet met many fugitive slaves. She asked them about their escapes, and gathered facts that would help her help others get to the promised land.

One night Harriet got word that her sister Mary was to be auctioned and sold into cotton country. Mary's husband, John Bowley, was a free black man who knew people in the Underground Railroad network. John had made arrangements for Mary, himself, and their two children to get from Cambridge, Maryland, to Baltimore. But they needed a brave soul to guide them safely from Baltimore to Pennsylvania.

When Harriet learned of this, she knew her prayer had been answered. Now was the perfect time to go back along the Underground Railroad's trail. With the help of a Quaker family, Harriet's sister, John Bowley, and their children made it to the house of a kind white woman. Harriet was waiting there to greet them! Working her way from one Underground Railroad station to the next, Harriet guided her kin to Philadelphia—to the freedom she had found.

The rescue of her sister encouraged Harriet to go back to slave country again, to bring the rest of her family to the North. In the spring of 1851 Harriet returned to Maryland, where she rescued one of her brothers and two other men. She was putting her life on the line. But to Harriet a life without service to others was a life half lived.

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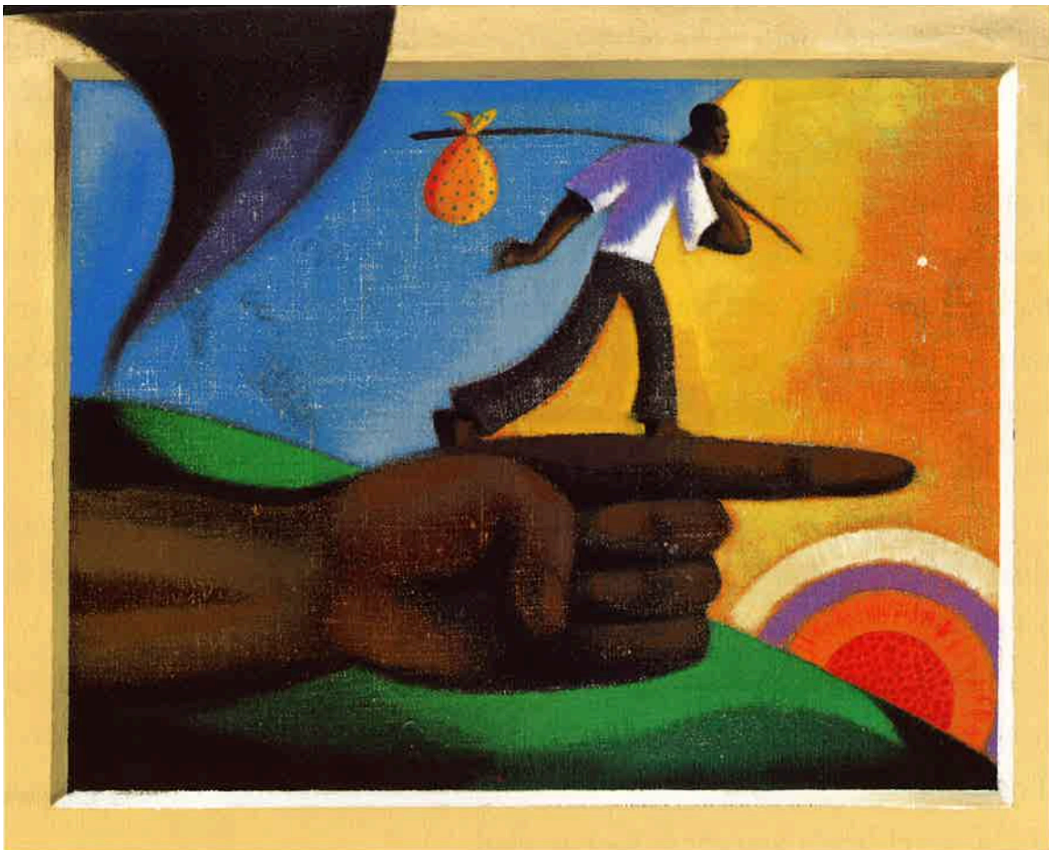
In December 1851 Harriet returned to the Brodas plantation to get her husband, John. Going back to Brodas land was a scary prospect for Harriet. People there knew her and could spot her instantly.

Harriet hoped that John Tubman had changed his ways and would come with her to Pennsylvania. But on the bone-chilling night when Harriet knocked on the door of John's cabin, he met her with a smirk and told her he wasn't going anywhere. Harriet didn't waste her trip, though. She left the Brodas plantation with several slaves in her care.



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Harriet now traveled twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall. And with each trip, she learned something new that could help her camouflage those she had rescued, and help her move quickly along the Underground Railroad. Over time she came to know every ditch, swamp, empty barn, and potato hole for hiding. She went to any length to help others. Once, she and a group of fugitives even hid in a heap of cow manure.

Harriet was beginning to get herself a reputation among slaves and slave owners who lived along Maryland's Eastern Shore. Black folks called her Moses. Like the Bible's Moses, she led her people to freedom. Plantation owners called Harriet *trouble*. They posted signs promising a $12,000 reward for anyone who captured "the woman called Moses."

Harriet now had to be extra cautious in her rescue missions. She had a price on her head. White slave catchers who saw her would most likely kill her instantly. This didn't stop

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Harriet. She returned to the South again and again. In 1857 she made one of her most meaningful escape missions. She finally rescued Old Rit and Old Ben. Because her parents had grown elderly and were too old to travel on foot, Harriet had been waiting for just the right time to take them to freedom. One night she broke into a stable on the Brodas plantation, hitched a horse to a wagon. hid her parents in the back of the wagon, and dashed off.

By the end of the following year, Harriet had led to freedom more than three hundred enslaved people. And her capture was now worth $40,000!

On January 1, J663, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, a document that called for the freedom of all slaves. There was no further need for the Underground Railroad. Black people could travel freely anywhere they wished.

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Years after the Underground Railroad's network ceased, Harriet recounted her work as one of the railroad's fearless conductors. She said, "I never ran my train off the track, and I never lost a passenger." Harriet Tubman's name will never lose its distinction. She has found a place as one of the greatest freedom seekers who has ever lived.

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