

FREEJOE

A Story of Faith, Love and Perseverance

EXCERPTS

“I’s members massa Harris’ mama an’ his poppa too. They’s not bad people lak I hears tell of some of de massas”.

“I’s jus’ thought massa Harris would be diff’runt.” “Massa Harris is diff’runt but when it comes to dat, dey’s all de same” said Hanna, regretfully.

The two men paused for a few moments, looked at each other and left the room. “Ned, we’s thinkin’ de same thang effen we’s thinkin’ massa Harris” said Simon. “Dey’d jus’ takes our women folk an’ ain’t nothin’ we’s can do ‘bout it” said Ned, angrily.

“Go out and find Mister Hanes, George....tell him I want to see him right away” Nancy Ann ordered. George found Robert Hanes and informed him of Mrs. Harris’ request.

“You wanted to see me, Mrs. Harris?” inquired Robert. “Yes Mr. Hanes, I do” Nancy Ann answered sternly. I’ll get right to the point. I don’t think it’s a good idea to carry on with the gals on the row”. “I don’t understand, Mrs. Harris.” Robert answered warily. “Have you seen Comfort’s baby?” Nancy Ann asked sharply. “I can’t say that I have Mrs. Harris.” “If I didn’t know the baby’s mother, I’d say that baby is white.” “I resent that Mrs. Harris. I don’t carry on with no darkie. You’ve got some nerve pointing the finger at me.” said Robert, angrily.

“I hears Ned an’ Simon wantin’ passes to see their wives over on the Nelson place.” Comfort confided. “I’s jus’ hopes dey’d don’t find their wives wit’ big bellies.” said Dafney. “Now ain’t that’s de truth.” said Comfort.

“Mama, when I was in the store in town, people were looking at me. I would look at them, and they would look away. Why were they looking at me?” Joseph asked. “Oh, I’s tink dey’d say dat a pretty little boy over there” Comfort tried to smooth her son. “No mama. Mister George saw them looking at me and he never say anything to me.”

“Joseph, de people lookin’ at yo’ don’ know any better. Dey’d tinkin’ yo’ white. All de time, dey’d wonderin’ why dat white boy workin’ wit’ a darkie” Comfort explained.

“I’m going to tell Master Harris it’s not right for me to take your job, George” said Joseph. “Yo’ can’t tell de massa what right or wrong. Yo’ git yo’self de worse whuppin.”

Robert came down with his whip again. Ned let out a scream as the whip cut the tattered shirt off his back. Ned tried to cover himself as the whip again made contact with his naked back.

“You black bastard. I’ve had about enough of your back talk.”

Joseph reached for Fanny’s hand, and she reached for his, as she raised her head and their eyes met.

“What’s your biggest fear? Of all your fears, which one is the biggest?” Joseph asked softly. Fanny pondered Joseph’s question for a few moments.

“I really have two fears. The first and biggest, is the selling of my children, and the second one is the selling of my man, because if either happened to me, I’d lose my family. I think family is the most important thing you can have.”

Joseph and James knelt down beside the bed, looking at their lifeless mother. “It’s alright, mama” Joseph whispered. “It’s alright to die, mama. You did all you could do, mama. You raised us the best you knew how, mama. We are proud of you, mama. We wouldn’t want any other mama. We love you mama. You in good hands now, mama. You in God’s hands now, mama” Joseph’s body began to vibrate as he sobbed.

“Ht’s alrite, mama,” James talked to his dead mother. “No mo’ gittin’ up ‘fore sunrise. Ht’s alrite, mama. No mo’ wukin’ froms can to can’t. Ht’s alrite, mama. No mo’ fixin’ backs dat got thirty ‘an nine. Ht’s alrite mama. No mo worrin ‘bout me an’ Joe, mama. Ht’s altrie mama. Yo’ free, mama.” James shook with sobs.

“He told me that Nancy Ann wanted him to tell me that he was my father. Today, that man told me, that white man told me that I was his son. There ain’t many white men that have the guts, the nerve, to own up to their children of color” said Joseph tearfully.

“When he recognized me as his son, he recognized and gave respect to my colored mama, rest her soul, Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Thanks be to the lord” Tears streamed down his cheeks.

“Nat Turner ain’t cold in his grave and Master Samuel is going to teach you how to use a rifle and a pistol?” Fanny exclaimed.

“Joseph’s been pretty valuable to you. His skills have made you a lot of money. What did you tell him?”

“I told him Joseph wasn’t for sale” John said softly. “I told him...my son wasn’t for sale.” “You did what! Elizabeth asked in shock. “I told him my son wasn’t for sale” said John, in a stern voice. “How could you admit to such a thing?” Elizabeth demanded. “Because it’s the truth. I’m not proud of what I did, but I’m not ashamed to admit that Joseph is my son.

“Who else knows about this?”

“His mother knew. Nancy Ann knew. Joseph knows and Samuel knows.”

“The law says that once a man is freed in Virginia, he’s got twelve months to get out of the state or be returned to slavery” Joseph explained.

“Maybe that’s the reason those other men never come back” said Fanny. “Maybe and maybe not. One thing I do know, a man needs his family and a family needs a man. I would rather go back to being a slave than be without my family. I’ve got you, Peter, James, Susan, Lettie and a new issue on the way” Joseph rubbed Fanny’s stomach.

“There’s a lot to leave behind, including our family and friends” Joseph agreed. “But Tennessee is a place where lots of people are starting over again. Master Samuel was telling me that in Tennessee a free man of color can vote. Can you imagine that? A colored man voting.” Joseph smiled at the thought.

“How dare you come into this office and pull the wool over my eyes by having me grant a piece of land to a slave and his family” said Walt, angrily. “You wait one minute Mr. whatever your name is.” said Samuel sternly. “The name is Walt Adcock.” “Mr. Adcock, the man is not a slave.” Samuel retorted. “Oh he’s one of them free negras?” “One that I just happen to issue a land grant to.”

“These land grants said nothing about color” said Richard, angrily.

“You know that’s something,” Marcum declared. “I’ve seen a lot of our people around that age put out of the wagons and left on the trail to die. And they would die if the Indians didn’t come along and take them in. The masters don’t want to take care of them in their old age anymore. These Leakes’ must be good people. You got to really care.”

“The government is doing everything they can to force the Cherokees west of the Mississippi River.” said Marcum. “I haven’t had a minute’s trouble from them since I’ve been here” said Joseph, with a sigh. “Listen, these people are trying to please the white man in every way they can,” said Marcum in a raised voice. “They are trying to live as he lives. “They have farms, farm animals and even some slaves. They are trying to adopt to his way of life.”

“I saw them in the camps. They are dying; no food, no water for the women, the children, the old people and the sick. These are the same people who took me in and taught me how to hunt and trap. No one deserves to be treated like this. The courts sided

with them. Tell me, Joe, who is Andrew Jackson's God? How can any man treat anyone the way they are being treated. The white man's court, not the red man's court upheld their right to remain on their land."

Ned just stood there in the door with his mouth wide open, not uttering a word. "FreeJoe! FreeJoe! Lawd has mercy. Dis is yo'. Dey'd said yo' might be a comin' but I's jus' couldn't brings myself to believes hit." Ned grinned, showing a dwindling number of teeth.

"I'm sorry Joseph," the judge apologized. "The slave names on our property records were discontinued in 1794. Therefore, I have no other choice than to deny you any participation in the division of the property of the estate of John Harris, Sr."

"You mark my word, Joe. The issue of slavery is going to be settled on the battlefield" said Marcum.

"He was my brother, Joe. My brother. We came here together," said Samuel weeping. "Master Samuel, you're preacher, and I'm a preacher, Joseph reminded him. "We can't stay here forever. We have to put in our time and move on. No matter who we are or what we are, we can't stay here forever. Richard was a good man for the times in which he lived. This will pass."

"I'm not really free," Joseph reminded them. "No man can be truly free when his brethren are in bondage. My freedom must be your freedom, and your freedom must be my freedom. Any man who holds back another, holds himself back. Neither can move forward, because hatred holds the hater and the hated in one place."

"There is a story they tell about a white women out east that heard Frederick for the first time, Marcum explained. "She said, I've heard Daniel Webster and he's great. I've heard Henry Clay and he's good, but I really hadn't heard anyone until I heard Frederick Douglas."

"I remember what you told me a long time ago," Marcum replied. "They probably serve a different God; the god of greed, the god of racial hatred, the god of injustice, the god of money,"

"Little gods, brother Marcum, with a small g. That's who they serve. You can go through this life serving the gods with the small g, but one day, when you cross over to the other side, you'll have to answer to one God, with the big G. Everybody is going to have to give an account for his stay on this earth. Every knee shall bend and every tongue must confess. Explain it to the Lord.

“God has sent the deliverer.” “The deliverer is here.” “The deliverer has arrived.” “Shh, Lincoln is the deliverer.” That was the hissing sound on slaves’ row early in the morning and late at night. This belief transcended county and state lines where plantations existed.

“Pa, I was a slave for thirty-eight years,” James replied as they traveled home. “I’m not going to wait another thirty-years for the white man to realize that a great change has come and boys are now men”.

“I see how they are using us” Joseph replied. “Trouble is, a lot of us can’t see it. The Southerners wish us ill will and the Northerners use us for personal and political gain. I don’t know what it’s going to take to realize that. We ain’t had the right to vote since the convention of ‘34.”

“They buried one of her sons last year,” John replied. “Nobody knows who killed him. Rumor has it, he was being too friendly with a white woman.” “That’s right, I remember now,” said Cornelius, shaking his head. The white woman is never too friendly with the colored man. It’s always the other way around.”

“Gray’s Creek Baptist Church will continue to be open to help the freed men, women and children to read, write and do arithmetic,” Joseph vowed. “I’m going to keep on feeding those that hunger, clothe the naked and provide shelter as best that I can.”

“I’m talking about the colored vote,” said Virginius, smiling. “You know, I don’t think a single colored man voted against me.” “The Leake name is a good name among colored people in West Tennessee,” Joseph explained.

“Joseph Harris lived the word. Can I get a witness? Just one will do.”

Joseph Harris was a Renaissance man. He dared to be different. Day in and day out he demonstrated the power of prayer. He left America a new definition for faith, a new definition for love, a new definition for perseverance, a new definition for family, a new definition for togetherness and yes a new definition for RACE.