

Little Willie and the Blue Jacket

—AN ESSAY BY—

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Writing *Chasing the North Star* was a sharp departure — a change of direction — for me as a fiction writer. At least three things inspired me to tell the story of Jonah and Angel. First, I wanted to write an adventure story, a kind of “on the road” narrative, evoking the landscape and culture of the mid-nineteenth century in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in the years leading up to the Civil War. I also wanted to tell a story that took place, in part, in the Finger Lakes region of New York, in Ithaca, where I have lived for the past forty-four years and where, up to now, I had never set a novel. Third, I felt drawn to the character of a teenage slave on a plantation in upper South Carolina who feels he has no choice but to escape from bondage and make his way north in search of freedom. I knew he would be on his own, in constant danger from bounty hunters, lawmen, outlaws, and ordinary citizens upholding the law, and at the mercy of the elements.

But there was also a fourth inspiration for me when I began *Chasing the North Star*: a story passed down in my family from my great-grandfather, Frank Pace (1838–1918). In the years just before the Civil War, in the late 1850s, runaway slaves from Georgia and South Carolina often came through the mountains of western North Carolina on their way north. To help or hide a fugitive was a felony, punishable by fines and imprisonment. Poses of men with horses and dogs and guns followed and usually caught the runaways. Those who turned in runaways could collect rewards.

One evening as they sat down to supper, my great-grandfather Frank and his parents, Sarah and Daniel Pace, heard something disturbing the hens in the chicken house. Frank took a lantern out on the porch and saw a man in overalls standing at the edge of the yard.

“Are you stealing chickens?” Frank called.

“No, sir. We just need a drink of water,” the black man said.

The man stepped forward into the lantern light, followed by another man and a woman and a boy who limped. They were ragged and exhausted.

Frank's mother came out on the porch and offered the runaways dippers of water and baked sweet potatoes and cornbread from their table. The boy, about five years old, had a bleeding sore on his leg. As they ate, the sound of dogs baying could be heard from the river. The woman pushed the boy toward Sarah and said, "Willie can't run no more. You keep him." And then the two men and the woman disappeared into the night.

The shouts of men and barking dogs came closer. Sarah picked up the boy and carried him to the storeroom behind the kitchen. She placed the boy in the barrel of cornmeal, put tow sacks over him, and sprinkled meal on the sacks. Then she told Frank to scatter black pepper on the porch and in the yard where the fugitives had stood and sat.

When the men on horses and the dogs burst into the yard, Frank and his parents came out on the porch.

"Have you seen four runaways?" the lead man said.

"We were just having supper," Frank answered.

"It's illegal to help escapees," the posse foreman warned.

The slave hunters demanded to search the place. They were heavily armed. Frank told them to search all they wanted: he had nothing to hide. With torches the men looked in the barn and smokehouse and chicken house and other out-buildings. They went through the house, opening closets, searching bedrooms, cellar, attic, cedar chest. One lifted the lid off the meal barrel and looked in but apparently saw nothing suspicious. Before they left they warned Frank that he could go to jail for harboring a runaway or for not reporting one. The hounds were so confused by the pepper they prowled in circles, unable to find the trail.

AFTER THE SLAVE HUNTERS were gone, Frank and his parents had to decide what to do with Little Willie. They assumed the runaways would return for him or send for him. They didn't even know his last name. But in the meantime Sarah doctored the boy's leg with herbs and salves and poultices. They could hide him for a while but knew neighbors were certain to find out about him. Sarah came up with a plan.

When Willie's leg was almost healed, they loaded up their wagon with

hams, honey, and molasses and hid Willie under a canvas as they drove down the mountain to Greenville, South Carolina, to peddle the produce door to door. When they returned home, Willie sat on the seat beside them, and Frank told neighbors they had bought the boy in Greenville. It was the only way to protect him.

Sarah became very fond of Willie. Wherever they worked, in the fields and woods, he went along. As the months passed, they waited for someone to come and claim him, but no one ever did. His folks might have been caught, or killed, or made it all the way to Canada. Sarah sewed him a blue jacket, which he was especially proud of.

ONE DAY IN LATE WINTER Frank and his father were cutting trees on the hill above the spring. Little Willie helped, holding one end of the crosscut saw and pulling it toward him. As the day warmed up he took off his blue jacket and laid it in the leaves. Later, as an oak tree began to fall, he saw the tree would crash right onto his coat. He dashed to retrieve the jacket and would have made it, except he slipped and fell, and the tree hit him, killing him instantly.

They buried Willie in the blue jacket in the family cemetery. When I was a child I was shown the rough stone that marked his grave, and the blue jar in which my great-great-grandmother had placed flowers every year on the anniversary of his death.

ONCE I BEGAN writing of Jonah and his escape, of his encounters with bootleggers, storms, and floods and his meeting with the character Angel, also a teenage runaway, the story seemed to take me over. Jonah and Angel are so vulnerable, in so much danger, more danger than they even realize, and I found myself holding my breath as I wrote. I could hardly wait to get up in the morning to find out what would happen next. Jonah and Angel have a lot of courage and initiative, but they are on their own, with no one to guide them. They have no help from the organizations of the Underground Railroad and have no way of contacting such an organization. They have to rely on their own resources, energy, and luck. But most of all they learn that to survive they must lean on each other. It is a lesson that all of us, sooner or later, learn, if we are blessed with the good fortune to find someone to lean on.