

FROM

Chasing the North Star

BY ROBERT MORGAN



He was called Jonah because he was born during a terrible storm and his mama said soon as she let go of him and put him ashore in this world of folly and time, the thunder quieted and the wind laid. Trees had broken off their stumps and skipped across fields like dust brooms, and the Saluda River spread wide over the bottomlands. Some of the slave cabins behind Mr. Williams's brick house got smashed to splinters by the high tempest.

But soon as Jonah was cut loose and washed off in a pan and wrapped up in a towel rag, his mama said the sky cleared and the moon came out and shined so bright you could see a needle in the light from the window. Everything the storm had ruined was vivid in the moonlight, including dead birds that had been torn from their roosts and snakes washed out of holes in the ground. Because Jonah arrived on the full of the moon in the middle of a storm under the sign of the Crab, his mama called him her moon baby. The granny woman that delivered him said he would always be darting away, running from one thing and then another. He'd be no more dependable than Jonah in the Holy Book.

THE DAY JONAH DECIDED to run away from Mr. Williams's plantation was the day he turned eighteen. It was in the middle of summer, a hot day in the cotton fields and cornfields. The Williams plantation lay in the foothills of South Carolina, north of Greenville, on land just below the cotton line. Higher in the hills the season was too short to grow cotton. Farther

south the winter was too short for apple trees to thrive. Mostly Mr. Williams grew corn, which he sold to stock drovers in the winter to feed their herds of cattle, horses, hogs, or flocks of sheep or turkeys. Drovers came by every day on the Buncombe Pike, driving their animals through dust or mud to the markets in Columbia and Charleston.

Mr. Williams had built pens beside his big brick house to hold the herds and flocks, and the drovers paid two bits to sleep on the floor or four bits to sleep in a room upstairs in the big house. The house was called a stand or a tavern, and many of the women worked inside cooking and cleaning and taking care of the drovers. But in the summer they worked in the fields also. Mr. Williams called the plantation Snowdon, for a place in Wales overseas where his grandpa had come from.

Since the Williams Place was not a regular plantation, almost everybody did more than one job. Field hands chopped wood when firewood was needed, and they cut trees and sawed lumber when a new barn or stock shed was built. "I can't afford no field hands *and* house help," Mr. Williams liked to say. Everybody had to hoe corn in the spring and all the men had to clean manure out of the stables and pens and spread the wagonloads on the fields.

But Jonah the moon baby had been lucky, because Mrs. Williams picked him out as a boy to serve her and her children. Mrs. Williams was blonde and young and plump. She was young enough to be Mr. Williams's own child. She was from Columbia and she liked to wear lacy pink dresses and give parties for her friends from Greenville and Travelers Rest. She even gave parties for her children, Betsy and Johnny. And she liked young slaves to serve at parties for her offspring. She had special clothes made for Jonah to act as butler at frolics for Betsy and Johnny and the neighbor children of quality.

And because she paid special attention to Jonah, he paid special mind to Mrs. Williams. He volunteered to bring her the best strawberries from the patch just when they were perfectly ripe, and raspberries from the garden wall. He gathered chestnuts in the fall and roasted them on the hearth for his mistress. He carried her lap robe to the church in wintertime.

When Betsy and Johnny had their lessons, Jonah often got to sit with

them. His job was to bring things the tutor and his pupils needed, a glass of water, a book from the library, an extra pen or pair of scissors. Jonah got to listen to the lessons and observe the writing on the slates, and in time he learned to read and count the same as Betsy and Johnny did. Jonah knew he was not supposed to be reading. Nobody but white folks were supposed to read. But every chance he got he listened to the lessons and he learned the letters and numbers. He tried to read newspapers left on the table and the children's books left in the playroom.

It was Mrs. Williams who caught him taking a book from the master's library. It was a big book called *Robinson Crusoe* and he'd listened to the tutor read that volume to Betsy and Johnny. It was a thrilling book, with lots of words Jonah didn't understand. Day after day he listened to the tutor reading from that story, and when the book was taken back to the library Jonah promised himself he was going to slip it under his shirt and carry it back to the cabin to read himself by firelight.

Jonah knew where the book was. He'd replaced it on the shelf himself between smooth leather volumes with gold lettering on them. He had no trouble finding the book again and sliding it inside his shirt. He hoped to walk quickly down the hallway and take the side door out of the house. He would hide the book in a boxwood until nightfall. But just as he passed the dining room, Mrs. Williams called to him from the bottom of the stairs. She wanted him to carry a message to her friend Ophelia, who lived on the adjoining farm. She often called Jonah to deliver letters. But almost instantly she spotted the book under Jonah's shirt where the volume's weight pulled down the fabric.

"What is that?" Mrs. Williams said, and pointed to the sagging cloth.

"Ain't nothing, ma'am."

"Don't lie to me," Mrs. Williams snapped. She made Jonah draw the book from his shirt and hand it to her.

"I won't have a thief in my house," his mistress said.

Jonah wanted to tell her he was borrowing the book for the tutor, but he knew the tutor would say he'd already read the book to Betsy and Johnny.

“You were going to take the book to the store and try to sell it,” Mrs. Williams said.

Jonah shook his head and began to cry. He didn’t mean to cry, but his knees shook and his jaw trembled. He had no choice but to say he was borrowing the book to read himself. As he said the words he felt something hot and wet running down his pants leg. He looked at the floor and saw a puddle of pee growing on the varnished planks. Mrs. Williams noticed the streak down his jeans and the puddle also.

“Shame on you, Jonah,” she said. “Shame on you for deceiving us, and for stealing a volume from Mr. Williams’s library.”

Mrs. Williams was fat and soft, and she smelled like face powder and perfume. She took a handkerchief from the pocket of her dress and wiped his cheeks. She put her hands on Jonah’s shoulders and looked him in the eyes.

“I won’t tell anybody you can read,” she said. “I won’t tell anybody, if you’ll promise me. Will you promise me?”

Jonah nodded that he would promise her whatever she asked. He was trembling and afraid he might be whipped and put in chains and branded the way Old Isaac was. If a slave fought and hurt another slave, he was whipped and put in chains. Even worse, Jonah was afraid he might be sold and sent away to live among strangers. Mrs. Williams said she’d tell nobody he could read if Jonah would return the book to the library and read to her from the Bible from time to time. She said he’d benefit most from reading the Good Book and she was going to give him his very own Bible so he could study it and learn more.

“Reading the Bible will teach you not to steal and deceive,” Mrs. Williams said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Reading the Bible will make you wise and useful.”

The Bible Mrs. Williams gave Jonah was small enough to fit in his pocket. It had letters the size of gnats and hairs. But it was the prettiest book he’d ever seen, bound in rippling black leather. The edges of the pages were gold. The book had paper thin and crackly as cigarette paper or filmy bark on a river birch. Mrs. Williams made Jonah promise to read the book when he was alone. He could read it out in the woods or he could read it in the big

house. He could read the book to her for his private lessons, and her private devotions.

“We will learn with each other,” Mrs. Williams said. She made him clean up the pee on the floor and wash his pants at the well.

AS JONAH READ TO Mrs. Williams from the Bible and learned more words, and learned the stories from the Bible, Mrs. Williams explained what words meant, words like *void* and *begat*, *serpent* and *multiply*. He stumbled through verses and Mrs. Williams explained when she could. Some of the words she didn’t know herself. She said someday he could learn to look up words in the dictionary, but for now he should just keep on reading. She liked to close her eyes while he read, like she was dreaming of things described in the Bible. Sometimes she had headaches and put a damp cloth soaked with camphor on her forehead and kept her eyes shut as he stumbled through verses.

“This will be just our secret,” Mrs. Williams said.

To help with his reading, Mrs. Williams let Jonah take newspapers back to the quarters. “Tell your mama they are to start fires with,” Mrs. Williams said. “But before you burn the papers up, you can read every word.”

From reading the newspapers Jonah learned about the Fugitive Slave Act, and he learned about the Great Compromise. Much of what he read he didn’t understand. He read about elections and things in faraway Washington. He read about the northern states, and at some point it came to him there was a place in the north, beyond North Carolina, where no one was a slave. He’d heard rumors about that. But an escaped slave could be arrested and returned to his owner. There were supposed to be no slaves up there, in the states to the north.

Jonah read many mysterious things in the newspapers before they got burned. He read about foreign countries and wars in places he’d never heard of. He read about places where the snow never melted, far to the north. And he read about governments with kings and ships that sailed to China. The newspapers were Mrs. Williams’s greatest gift to him, besides keeping the secret of his reading. In the heat and dirt of the Williams Place, the

newspapers were an inky threshold where he could enter a landscape that reached to the North Pole and to other times and people he'd never heard a whisper about before.

The day Jonah decided to run away from the Williams Place was the day his secret was found out.

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ISBN 978-1-56512-627-5

On Sale April 2016