

ELI: How old is Culpepper?

SOLLY: He ain't but seventy-two. I'm sixty-seven. He got five years on me. I told him he ain't eating right. He ain't ate right since his wife died.

ELI: Which way you going?

SOLLY: Down through West Virginia. I figure for the morning to catch me going through Wheeling. I might pick up some help on the road.

ELI: Stay away from the cities. It'll be easier. You get down to Georgia you can work your way over from there. I'd stay away from Birmingham if I were you.

SOLLY: They probably got that all blocked off.

(Citizen enters from upstairs.)

Hey Citizen Barlow. So you going to the City of Bones. I been to the City of Bones. It's something like you ain't never seen. A whole city a half mile by a half mile made of bones. All kind of bones. Leg bones. Arm bones. Head bones. It's a beautiful city. That's where I'm going when I die. I know where I'm going. Got Twelve Gates and it's got Twelve Gatekeepers. That's what I always wanted to be. A Keeper of the Gate!

CITIZEN: After I found my two pennies I come back past the mill and it had burnt down. It still had smoke coming out of it.

ELI: That's that tin. Most people don't know tin will burn. It will burn faster than paper. We learned that during the Civil War. I seen it happen.

CITIZEN: I still owe the mill some money.

SOLLY: You ain't got to worry about paying it.

CITIZEN: Making the people owe is worse than slavery.

SOLLY: Ain't nothing worse than slavery! I know. I was there. Dark was the night and cold was the ground. Look at that . . .

(He hands Citizen a chain link.)

That's my good luck piece. That piece of chain used to be around my ankle. They tried to chain me down but I beat them on that one. I say, I'm gonna keep this to remember by. I been lucky ever since. I beat them on a lot of things. I beat them when I got away. I had some people who helped me. They helped show me the way and looked out for me. I got all the way to Canada. There was eight of us. I was in Canada in 1857. I stood right there in Freedomland. That's what they called it. Freedomland. I asked myself, "What I'm gonna do?" I looked around. I didn't see nothing for me. I tried to feel different but I couldn't. I started crying. I hadn't cried since my daddy knocked me down for crying when I was ten years old. I breathed in real deep to taste the air. It didn't taste no different. The man what brought us over the border tried to talk with me. I just sat right down on the ground and started crying. I told him say, "I don't feel right." It didn't feel right being in freedom and my mama and all the other people still in bondage. Told him, "I'm going back with you." I stopped crying soon as I said that. I joined the Underground Railroad. Look at that . . .

(Solly shows Citizen his stick.)

That's sixty-two notches. That's sixty-two people I carried to Freedom. I was looking to make it sixty-three when Abraham Lincoln come along and changed all that. Him and General Grant. I never did join the Union Army but I showed them where to go. I know all the routes. Me and Eli worked together many a time.

START

ELI: You needed to know all the routes if you wanted to get up to Canada. It wasn't easy. All right . . . we'd be down in the swamp and then we'd hear the call. *(Calls)* "Hoot. Hoot. Hoot."

SOLLY: Sound like an owl.

ELI: Three times: "Hoot. Hoot. Hoot."

SOLLY: Then we knew they had got through.

ELI: Sometime we'd hear the dogs right behind them. We'd make contact and get the runaways from the other conductor. See he just pass them on. Otherwise if he don't hook up with us he got to go out his section. He got to carry them farther. Maybe he don't know the woods as much as he do his own section. See, that make slower going . . . all the time the dogs after you. All the time. You got to keep going.

SOLLY: I was what we called the dragman. I'd guard the rear. You had to fight a lot of times. I done been bit nine times by dogs.

(Solly shows Citizen his battle scars.)

Look here . . . see that? A dog tried to tear my leg off one time. I got a big part of my arm missing. Tore out the muscle and everything. He was going for my throat. I told myself I was lucky. It was a good thing I found that pure otherwise I'd have to kill every dog I see.

ELI: All right . . . he hook up with us and pass them off and for the next two hundred miles they ours. It just go on like that till you in freedom.

SOLLY: Till you in Canada. You can't stay in the North. If you stay in the North you subject to end up back down South in slavery with a half a foot and waving one arm.

ELI: That's the way that went many a time. You got to leave the country to get freedom. You got to go up in Canada.

(Eli gets a bottle of whiskey.)

SOLLY: They got civilized people up there. I seen them. White as cotton. Got smiles on their faces. Shake your hand and say, "Welcome." I seen them. Don't never let nobody tell you there ain't no good white people. They got some good white people down here but they got to fight the law. In Canada they ain't got to fight the law. Down here it's a war.

ELI: It's a war and you always on the battlefield.

SOLLY: And the battlefield's bloody! The field of battle is *always* bloody. It can't be no other way.

ELI: The only thing you don't want to end up being the corpse. You don't want it to be your blood.

SOLLY: Ain't no sense in you getting mad 'cause it's rough out here. It's supposed to be rough. You ain't supposed to complain when you see some blood. I found out you could bleed and you didn't have to die. I said this is too good to be true! Since then I ain't never been afraid of losing some blood. I said they gonna have to kill me. I can give up some blood all day long if it'll keep coming back. Your blood is like a river it don't never stop till you dead. Life's got lots of comeback but death ain't got no comeback. That's the only way life have any meaning. Otherwise don't nothing count.

ELI: Come on, get you a drink. A man going to the City of Bones deserves a drink. **END**

SOLLY: That boy too young to drink whiskey. You got to give it to him out a teaspoon.

CITIZEN: I drinks whiskey.

(Eli pours each a drink of whiskey. Solly raises his glass in a toast.)

SOLLY:

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
Like one that wraps the drapery of his cough
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

(They drink.)

That's W. C. Bryant. I learned that poem when I was fourteen.