

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

escape from slavery

ALMOST FREE: LIFE IN THE NORTH

It has taken weeks, but I have arrived in Cleveland, Ohio. I am amazed to see with my own eyes communities of free Negroes and to hear about others.

For the past two weeks I have traveled across Ohio like a spy – skirting through the woods, hiding in cellars or barns, taking on disguises.

Many black families help me along the way – I can hide among them and not stand out. But as John warned me, there are risks for folks helping a runaway slave – and big rewards for turning one in. Despite kindness shown to me by both blacks and whites, I am never sure who to trust.

I was introduced to a white man who offered to take me the rest of the way to Cleveland by train, posing as his servant. I thought running and hiding was tough, but being out in the open was downright terrifying. I felt every eye on me, certain they were viewing me with suspicion. They must know that folks try to sneak runaway slaves north by train.

I want nothing more than to leap off the train and hide, but my gentleman assures me everything's okay. At last I hear the conductor shout, "Cleveland," and my heart leaps. But hearing the name can't compare to stepping out of the station and seeing a big city for the first time. Great buildings as far as I can see . . . bustling crowds of both blacks and whites.

My gentleman directs me to the home of a Negro family, where I stay the night. They show me to my last stop in this country – a two-story white house with two white chimneys like rabbit ears. It belongs to a wealthy man, they tell me. He commands a boat that will take me across Lake Erie into Canada. My journey is almost done. I am almost brave enough to think I have made it.

I don't know for sure what awaits me in Canada. But I do know this . . . I will not die a slave.