



THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

By Brian Freeman

www.bfreemanbooks.com

When Joseph told me about Teresa's phone call, and about their meeting that night in the sculpture garden, I couldn't help but think of my own brief encounter with her the month before. I didn't know then what was starting. Or perhaps I did. Perhaps I picked up enough of the clues to be less than surprised.

I often run away to the wilderness of Black Oak Park, the great forest which looms near our small town and seems sometimes to possess it. There I sketch, paint and think in solitude. Sometimes, wandering higher and higher, I fantasize that this time I will not return. But these are fleeting things, longings, yearnings. Most of the time, really, it is glorious to be alive.

On one of my excursions to the park I saw Teresa. I had hiked alone until the afternoon was almost gone, through the quiet of the thickest forest, to the point where a small meadow led to Octavia Lake. The view there near sunset, the expanse of blue water with the hills framed behind it, never failed to seem alive to me. That day it was, alive with childish laughter. My first sight from the trees was a young boy, seven or eight, running by the shore with his hair jumping up and down, his mouth hanging in a silly smile. I followed him and watched him run up to his mother, who knelt down, beaming, and pressed her nose against his.

I knew her, of course (in Black Oak everyone knows everyone). But I had rarely spoken to her and surely never seen her in this light. Teresa Benton's reputation ran before her, an oddity, a newcomer, although that could be quietly said about anyone not born here. She had no real friends (at least none shared with me), but she did have Blake Benton as a husband, plus a son from a previous marriage. No one seeing her here would have supposed she needed much more.

Teresa took her son's hand and guided him to the edge of the lake, where she crouched down and pointed out across the water to where a heron was lifting off, its wings curved into a giant arch. The boy squealed with excitement, then covered his eyes as the bird flew closer and closer. It rose higher and disappeared far above me. I saw the boy crouch in the sand and pry up a flat rock, then skip it twice, three times across the surface of the lake. Teresa clapped and laughed.

She wandered away as her son continued to dig up rocks from the beach. I saw her run both hands through her hair. In those moments, I thought I had rarely seen someone look so free, as if her vision of the hills were much grander than my own idle fantasies, as if indeed she might scoop her child up and dance away. Here was someone I would paint, her black hair messy and flowing in the breeze, her billowing dress a splash of yellow. I even felt an odd pang of envy, staring at a different life from my own and wondering--was it more intense? Did she see or do or feel things I did not? Even odder, I remember thinking, one day she will flee. Escape, like my idle dreams.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

When a cold wind blew through the forest down to the lake, I shivered. Teresa looked up, not seeing me in the shadows. She stared over the swaying treetops at the sky, to where the sun had now vanished and left a deepening, darkening blue.

The universe seemed to close in on us. This would be the moment, I imagined, for a ghost to appear. A timely thought, because just then I heard a noise and turned to see something in the blackness move thirty yards away. No ghost, though -- a man, stepping into the waning light of the clearing. The spectre was Blake Benton, one of the few physicians in town (just as Joseph was one of a few lawyers), and more important now, Teresa's husband.

Blake stood well over six feet, with wavy blond hair and intense blue eyes, a contrast to the clipped black cut and medium build my husband Joseph carried. I had coveted him once (every girl had) a very long time ago, when my imagination ran wilder than my reason. That fire left no sparks at all. I knew, though, that several local women felt cheated three years ago when Blake married Teresa, a stranger who had seemingly wandered off a train and into his arms. Very romantic. But not popular to steal the most eligible bachelor in a small town.

I felt guilty eavesdropping. As Blake approached Teresa from behind, I expected him to slip up quietly, put his arms around her, startle her and kiss her. Teresa spoiled his surprise. Some instinct caused her to turn, and she saw her husband a few feet away. A strange moment. It may have been the shock, not to be alone in such a desolate location, but Teresa recoiled, her small body seeming to shrink even further as I watched her. Even the relief and relaxation I waited for did not come. I was not close enough to see her eyes, but something had gone awry. Her son froze, too, not moving a muscle, a rock still lodged in his hand where he had been about to toss it. Then voices. I couldn't hear words, only fading tones like whispers. What was happening here?

I didn't understand. I stared in utter confusion at all three of them, as if watching a play that had taken a bizarre twist. None of the emotions matched my expectations. Instead here was tension, anger, fear, all simmering and bubbling to the surface. It made no sense. Their whispers became like arrows or guns, and the more I looked, the more I saw Teresa wilt, losing her spirit. And still her son never moved, afraid maybe that one word, one motion, would cause a catastrophe. But what?

For a while I was paralyzed, too. But I could not stay that way. Suddenly I knew it was very important that those people not be alone. I was witnessing something intimate, and intimacy here bore a danger I didn't fathom. Everyone had to put on a mask again. So I plastered a smile on my face and burst from the trees: "Hello!"

I don't know if they welcomed or resented me, but just as I thought, the tension melted. They all smiled like nothing had happened here. Was I wrong? I looked for an answer in Teresa's eyes, but she wouldn't look at me. She turned away after a murmured greeting, bowed her head, and hurried to her son.

It left a mystery lingering in the back of my mind. Then Joseph called, and the mystery finally made sense. Or did it only begin again?

*

BRIAN FREEMAN

Joseph entered the sculpture garden from the southwest. The garden formed an enormous wheel, two paths cutting across it, another path stretching in a circle around the inner grounds. Each spoke ended at the fountain, a fabulous complex bordered by porpoises spouting at frogs, surrounding a reef where a well-endowed mermaid lay perennially bathed by geysers spraying up from hidden crevices in the rocks.

He passed through a mythological gallery, watched by nymphs and gods and deer. Their frozen alabaster brooded in the pale moon glow, faces profiled in silhouette, arms pointing into the skeletal bushes of early Spring. They had all been captured in motion, as if trapped by a spell that would one day relent and allow them to re-awaken. Joseph, no dreaming romantic, shivered when he saw a shadow detach itself from the cluster of statues ahead of him. Coming closer, he realized this was the person he had come to meet.

Standing nervously by the fountain was the woman whose voice, half-weak, half-whispered, had drawn him here. Her hands clutched a white purse, held in front of her like a shield. She had a black leather coat draped over her shoulders. Under it Joseph saw a silk lavender blouse and a simple blue skirt. She was slim and small, a wisp of a woman, but as attractive as she was frail, with dark hair past her shoulders and warm brown eyes. Her face had the sculpted narrow lines of any of the more striking goddesses erected in the gardens. Behind her, wild waters danced.

"Hello, Mr. Birch," the woman said quietly. Her voice echoed like a soft bell, barely audible over the rush of the fountain. "I appreciate your coming here on so little notice, with so little explanation. My name is Teresa Benton."

Joseph nodded. "I know. You're Blake's wife."

He had picked the wrong introduction. Teresa's brown eyes widened, and she tripped over her words. "Oh, you know my husband?"

"Black Oak is a small town," Joseph said. "You knew me enough to call me. I know you enough to know who you are. But that's all."

"I see. Even in three years, I guess I haven't adjusted to the ways of a town instead of a city."

Joseph smiled. "Still you knew that coming openly to my office wouldn't go unnoticed."

"That's true," Teresa admitted.

"But in some ways it's riskier if anyone wanders by. So maybe you should tell me how I can help you."

Teresa closed her eyes and nodded slowly. Joseph felt guilty, as if even this slight pressure had been too much. But when Teresa focused her eyes on him again, she had become calmer and stronger. She had come this far, and she had chosen to see it through. "Can I trust you, Mr. Birch?"

Joseph reached out, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. "Let's sit down." He guided her to a cast-iron bench, its back shaped to form the pattern of two black roses. When they had sat down on the cold metal, Joseph took one of Teresa's hands. Her palm was warm. "I can see that something has you frightened and concerned. I hope I'll be able to do something for you. But regardless, what you tell me now is between us."

His sensitivity convinced her. Teresa smiled. Slipping out from her anxious features came her bewitching beauty again. He felt her whole soul reaching out to him, investing in him her hopes and desires.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The sudden rush of emotion in her face disconcerted him, so complete was the change. She had an overwhelming need to believe in someone.

"That's a great relief," she murmured. "I've thought about calling you for a long time." Teresa glanced off at the fountain. "Does she look free to you, that mermaid? She's not, you know. I come here when I can, when I'm not in the big park, and sit and watch her. She's trapped there, no less than me."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Joseph said.

Teresa nodded sadly. "Mr. Birch, I need to divorce my husband."

"I see."

"I never thought I'd be saying this."

"A divorce can be amicable, if both parties realize it's inevitable," Joseph said. "And even in the messy ones, for all the pain, eventually you come out on the other side."

"It's not so simple, I'm afraid." She stood up restlessly, mesmerized by the jets of water again. Teresa unlatched her purse and slid out a photograph. She handed it to Joseph, who saw a picture of a boy, perhaps four years old, playing in a swing, his hair flying.

"That's Bobby. My son. He'll be eight next month now. That was taken a few years ago."

"He looks like a sweet boy."

"Yes, he is. He's the reason I have to do this. If it were just me, I would probably stay. But for Bobby..."

Joseph watched her, not interrupting. Her thoughts and emotions spilled out randomly, like cards plucked from a deck, some high, some low. She seemed to be watching her life in her mind's eye, a sad old movie, played over and over again.

"Three years ago, I thought I was saved. Finding Blake lifted me out of a black hole. My first husband had died, you see, and I had never held a real job. We had hardly any savings, and when it ran out -- well, we were on the edge." She held up two bent fingers, a fraction of an inch apart. "This close, that's how near it was. This close to giving it all up. We were homeless, drifting."

"How did you meet Blake?" Joseph asked.

"Bobby and I were on a train. Someone had given me a little money. I heard them call the Black Oak station, and I knew about Black Oak Park, you see. That vast, wonderful space. I knew nothing about the town or anything else, just the park. On the spur of the moment, I decided I wanted to see it. And it was wonderful. Bobby and I spent hours by the lake, on the trails, wandering everywhere. But then I tripped and broke my ankle."

Teresa smiled, finding something ironic in the event -- either her own carelessness, her luck, or the way simple things changed lives.

"Bobby had to run and get help. They carried me out and took me to a doctor."

"Blake."

"Yes. I was in desperate need, and I guess a star guided me to Blake, or that's what I thought then. He must have sensed I had no way to pay him, and nowhere to go."

Joseph could understand Blake's realization, because he had already felt Teresa's great need himself. She projected a sweet, vulnerable sensuality, an odd paradox.

"At first it was wonderful," she continued. "I needed help, he offered it. For the first few months, I thought we were the perfect couple, that I had finally re-captured part of what I had lost when my first husband died. The trouble was, as I got my confidence back, Blake resented it. I began to realize he wanted me weak and helpless, that as long as that was the role I played, he would lavish his love on me. And that's what I did, as long as I could, but the net just kept tightening. I couldn't go anywhere without him being jealous and suspicious. He would throw rages, go into strange fits. And worse." She stopped and looked away.

Joseph frowned. "This is difficult to ask, but do you have any proof to back up your story? Witnesses? Anything else?"

Teresa hesitated. She began to undo the buttons of her blouse. She stopped at the base of her bra and pulled aside one of the lavender folds. On the pale swell of her breast, rising and falling with her breath, Joseph saw a thin line of scar tissue. He glimpsed, too, a slim crescent of the dark half-moon of her nipple above the lacy fringe of her bra.

"He smashed a plate," Teresa explained as she fixed her blouse. "One of the pieces flew out and cut me."

"Is there more?" Joseph asked quietly. "Other physical evidence?"

Teresa nodded. "Yes. Other nights, other scars. Or bruises. They go away, of course, on the outside anyway."

"How long has this been happening?"

"Well, it keeps getting worse. It started with a few isolated incidents about a year ago. It's every week now, sometimes every day."

"You'll be asked why you chose to stay," he said.

Teresa sighed, closing her eyes. "I know." She pursed her lips, as if she had already asked herself this question over and over and still had no answer. "I could just say it was for Bobby, couldn't I? Because I thought leaving would hurt him, after what we had suffered before. It isn't all true, though. The truth is, I don't know. I still love him. I don't know what kind of future I have without him. It's just that, after yesterday, I realized it couldn't go on as it had."

"What happened?"

"I went and shopped in the town for a few hours. When I returned, Blake wasn't mad. He was calm, almost smug. Bobby had a massive welt on his cheek. He wouldn't explain it, and Blake said he had fallen in the yard. But I knew. It chilled me to the bone, Mr. Birch. You see, he's found a new weapon. Whenever I leave, I know Bobby won't be safe. I'm terrified. I have to free us, Mr. Birch. I have to escape." She stared at him with her soulful eyes, now welling up with tears. "Will you help me?"

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

*

I knew he would, of course, but Joseph had chosen an unpopular cause.

Blake Benton had spent his whole life in the town of Black Oak. He had delivered many of the children who spent their afternoons playing near the mermaid fountain in the town square. Teresa lived with the disadvantage of still being the stranger here, and she was telling the townspeople something they didn't want to hear or believe. The rumors of abuse spread quickly but were quickly discounted. Then the counter-rumors began, where Blake's considerable wealth became the real issue. She had arrived penniless, they whispered, and now she wanted to flee with his money. I understood. I knew the people at their best, but in this fight they were forced to choose. They chose one of their own.

I believed they were making a mistake. Years ago I discovered how easily a strong and attractive man could cross an ugly line, but I had the good fortune of escaping before I suffered any real harm. It was the glimpse of Blake and Teresa in Black Oak Park -- that odd moment I cannot forget -- which echoed my own experience.

But who could I tell? They would not believe me either, not now. Instead, in the weeks that followed, I felt my neighbors placing Joseph and me on the wrong side of an invisible line. Maybe if Joseph had not been so righteous in her defense, they would have believed he had taken the case out of some obscure legal obligation. He had no choice, they would say. But this was not Joseph's way. Everyone knew the truth, that he had genuinely taken her side because he believed in her.

The proceedings went smoothly at first. Joseph obtained a court order to remove Teresa and Bobby legally from Blake's house until the hearing, with sufficient mandated support to allow her to live. For a brief period, at least, she was free. That temporary escape was small comfort, though. Everywhere she went, mean looks followed her.

About the same time, Blake's lawyer launched a devilish counter-attack.

I was in Joseph's office when he took the call. As he listened, his eyes hardened angrily. When he hung up, immediately he called Teresa and asked her to join us. He told me about it while we waited. It was nasty indeed. I suspect Teresa had read the tone in Joseph's voice, because when she arrived, she hovered reluctantly in the doorway and had to be coaxed in. I offered to leave, but she insisted I stay.

Joseph came around in front of his desk and guided her into the overstuffed chair. He stayed near her, leaning back on the desk, balancing his palms on the smooth mahogany. I drifted to the sofa by the window and sat down.

Teresa fidgeted, uncomfortable in the office setting (or was it because of me?). Her eyes darted back and forth between us. She grabbed a strand of hair and massaged it nervously between her fingers. Several times she smoothed her black trenchcoat and tugged it down below her knees.

"It's not a nice process, is it?" she asked softly.

Joseph shook his head. "No. No, it brings out the worst in people, I'm afraid. I know it's hard on you. And Bobby."

Teresa smiled humorlessly. "I didn't have a choice, you know that. Even so, I'm not sure I'd do it over again if I could go back." Teresa bit her lip and continued, her voice cracking. "You said you had news?"

"I do."

"So is it good or bad?"

"I'm not sure it's that simple," Joseph began.

"In other words, bad?" Teresa laughed and stared at the ceiling. "Do you know what a friend told me once? She told me to play the lottery. She said luck comes to some people in huge doses, the good and the bad, and sooner or later I'd have to strike it rich. I actually bought a ticket. What's funny is, I missed the jackpot by one number. Can you believe it? One number. What does that mean, do you suppose?"

Joseph groped for words. He reached a hand toward her, then pulled it back. I looked away. "Blake has elected not to contest the divorce."

Teresa's eyes registered a new hope, tinged by disbelief. The glimmer of a smile crossed her face, then disappeared as Joseph raised his hand to stop her. The other shoe dropped. She wasn't prepared.

"However, I'm afraid he is counter-suing. He wants to get custody of Bobby."

I winced. Even knowing the news, and how it might affect her, I had no desire to see its results. Never had I seen such instant, crushing devastation. It was obvious that even in her worst fantasies, her nightmares of all the consequences of the path she had chosen, she had never imagined this. Joseph may as well have been a doctor, breaking the results of a lab test that left her in a battle for her life.

Trembling, Teresa asked weakly, "Why?"

I didn't even know if she was talking to Joseph. Perhaps she expected an answer from the walls or the sky, some explanation for her life. Why? Like an echo. She must have asked it many times.

"Overtly for financial considerations," Joseph replied evenly. "He's claiming he can provide a more stable home environment."

"He's not even Blake's son," Teresa whispered. "He barely knows him, or talks to him. My God, the man is cruel. It's extortion. Go back to him, drop the divorce, or I lose my son."

Joseph clenched the sides of the desk. His knuckles were white. "That seems to be his strategy."

I found myself staring at both of them, lawyer and client, like an apparition they couldn't see. They were too absorbed now to notice me anyway. For someone who didn't wear his passions on his sleeve, Joseph's involvement in this woman's plight was surprisingly intense. I had seen him handle case after case for years, sometimes caught in violent or emotional disputes, but he had never crossed this line before. As the tide of opinion turned against him, as he found himself her lone defender, he began to let his emotions cloud the judgment that saved him in court. He believed in her so much that I saw him grow blind to the dangers.

Teresa meanwhile teetered on the edge of an abyss. I think she saw the future coming, more clearly than Joseph. In hindsight, I imagine she knew right then, as we all sat there, that her gamble was lost.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Joseph had no such doubts. "I don't think you should be overly concerned," he continued. "It's a crude tactic but a desperate one. These things are decided in the courtroom, remember, not in the streets. Judgments come from facts, not gossip."

"Do they really?" Teresa wondered.

"Believe me."

He reassured himself with this little speech, and maybe some of his confidence penetrated Teresa's soul. It gave her something to cling to. She had trusted him with her life; perhaps, after all, he could deliver.

*

I wasn't so sure. Joseph had the confidence that comes with experience, but I wondered if he understood the battle he had joined. I didn't tell him of my reservations, my instincts. They arose from nothing I could prove or talk about. Partly I saw something in Teresa's eyes (a weakness to be exploited, a secret to be exposed), and partly I remembered the coldness of her husband. I did not believe Blake was the kind of man who would give up readily, or who would play this game without the hand he needed to win.

The day of the hearing proved uglier than I imagined. I sat behind Joseph and watched the courtroom fill with gossips and curiosity-seekers, those with a morbid fascination in the suffering of others. Teresa sat next to Joseph, her hands folded in front of her, wearing a light blue flowered dress. I could see her face in profile, a face frozen in fear, no stronger than a dandelion puff in a meadow, on the verge of scattering at the first breath of wind. By contrast my husband's confident eyes showed the fortitude of a rock. But it took so little wind really, and what could a rock do to save a flower?

I saw Blake at the opposite table, and what I saw confirmed all my fears. Without glancing across the divide, Blake stared into space, unconcerned, uncaring, unafraid. His whole demeanor, from the close-shaved jaw to the lines of his designer suit to the neat layering in his hair, bespoke utter calm and patience. This was the patience, I thought, of a lion following the bloody tracks of a wounded gazelle, secure in the knowledge that time is a friend and will ultimately bring victory.

In reality he needed little patience.

Teresa took the stand. My husband guided her through her story, rationally, thoroughly, laying a foundation of brick to build the same image in everyone's mind: that here was a caring, abused mother, fighting for her freedom and her future, at the hands of a man whose temper and desires could not be controlled. So easy, I thought, as Joseph laid each brick. So true, so right. And then he sat down, as pleased with himself as he had every right to be, and up popped Blake's lawyer, the big bad wolf, huffing, puffing, blowing Teresa's house down.

Is it true? Is it true?

Three little words, one little question. Oh, Joseph, you never asked, did you? Why now, why the blind spot on this one? What have you not told me? But it wouldn't have mattered.

Is it true?

BRIAN FREEMAN

"Is it true, Mrs. Benton, that four years ago you spent two months in a drug rehabilitation center after your second arrest on charges of theft? Is it true you were temporarily removed from custody of your child? Is it true, Mrs. Benton? Is it true?"

The buzz of the courtroom stopped in shocked silence, all this too macabre even for the ghouls here. A grim smile of triumph curled onto Blake's lips. On Joseph's face, I saw his confidence, his faith, his principles, crumble around him, as he realized for the first time that justice would not prevail here.

And Teresa. She didn't answer. Is it true? She sat there like a statue, her mouth going slack, her eyes dazed and disbelieving. She had retreated into a nether-world, driven by the certainty that the past had won -- that the most important part of her life would be stripped away -- that maybe madness lay in any direction she chose now.

I wondered what this said about any of us as human beings, and in due course, I would find out.

*

When Teresa came to our back door several weeks later, I barely recognized her. She came at night through the yard, a bonnet shrouding her head to protect her from the spring rains and perhaps also from the stares of our neighbors. Her black hair, wet and unkempt, fell in loose strands across her face. Her cheeks were gaunt, her neck and wrists thin. I wondered when she had last eaten. Nonetheless Teresa retained a certain dignity, proud in her despair, maybe even more attractive now that hardship had gripped her soul again and etched a troubled reality in her features.

"I'm sorry," she whispered guiltily. "I didn't know where else to go."

I shook my head. "You did the right thing."

I took her coat and replaced it with a blanket, which I wrapped around her shoulders as she sipped hot coffee at our kitchen table. When I found some crackers and cheese, she tried to hide her hunger, and I pretended not to notice the speed with which she ate piece after piece.

Joseph came into the kitchen, glasses pushed to the edge of his nose as he perused a thick brief. He wore a gray V-neck cardigan I had found for him on his last birthday. Joseph noticed Teresa with surprise and concern. I had been downstairs when she arrived and hadn't had time yet to call him from his upstairs office. Teresa blossomed as she saw my husband. I felt awkward, as if the reality of my life were too normal, too happy, as if I were a shrew to resent Joseph's part in this tragedy. And did I resent it? Did I resent her? Joseph, too, looked awkward. For him, two opposite worlds had suddenly joined. Here I was, warm and secure, his equal; here she was, vulnerable, beautiful not just in her face but in the way she needed him.

"I didn't know where to contact you." Joseph scolded her like a child. "I was worried. I haven't heard from you since the hearing."

Teresa avoided his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry about not telling you about the past. I thought it was over, but I guess I can't escape it. No one ever understands the kind of bottomless pit you face when you're alone, or how easy it is to slip down when you want more than anything to climb out."

"That isn't important. What's important is, how are you now?"

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

"No." Teresa shook her head, intent on punishing herself. "It is important. It's my fault." From each eye a tear mingled with the rain on her cheeks. "And I've lost my child because of it."

"We're appealing the case."

Teresa smiled weakly. "You're sweet to fight for me." She caught my eye, and the smile faded. "But it's a waste of time, isn't it? They know me, who I am, what I am. Or what I was --but it doesn't matter to anyone else. That's fine. I don't ask for anything better. It's Bobby."

"Have you seen him?" I asked her. "Is he all right?"

"Two afternoons a week," she murmured. "Under lock and key. Blake's always there, watching me. It's still clear, isn't it? Go back to him, the door's open, my son is there. And Bobby needs me. He hardly says a word, never smiles. He's dying on the inside."

Joseph and I said nothing. There was little to say.

"I'm thinking of doing it," Teresa concluded, her voice hollow. "I'm going back to him."

"No!" Joseph retorted angrily. "Teresa, don't do this. You don't have any illusions. Putting yourself back in his web won't make it any better for Bobby."

"At least we'd be together. He'd have me."

"Blake would have both of you."

Teresa hesitated. She glanced at the little things around the room: spice rack, wooden shelf lined with photographs, a calendar on the wall. Everything that was us, Joseph and me, stared at her and reminded her of what she didn't have. She flicked her eyes at me sullenly, aware of the chasm between us. I understood. We could argue with her about good and evil, right and wrong, but never from her perspective. Joseph didn't want her to put her head back in the tiger's mouth. But he didn't live in the jungle.

"I've taken too much from you already," she decided finally. Teresa stood up and gathered her coat. "I haven't even been able to pay you. Maybe I can remedy that, too."

"Don't be foolish," Joseph said.

Teresa smiled. "Thank you." She was anxious to be gone now, as if in one short visit she had reconciled herself with a terrible choice. Without letting us stop her, she hurried back into the rain.

Who knows what motivates a person? I didn't analyze my own reasons too carefully (don't go looking for something, my father told me, unless you're prepared to find it). Instead, when Teresa left us alone, the two of us in our warm kitchen, I spoke right from my heart.

"Joseph, we must help her," I said.

But Joseph didn't hear me. His mind had sailed ahead, sifting through precedents and appeals. He tore apart his memory until he began to massage his forehead to rub down the pain. I knew the answer already: if there had been a way out in his law books, he would have found it weeks ago. He had run out of tricks, but his humanity and his morality still stared him in the face.

"Is there a way?" I asked.

Joseph went and poured a cup of coffee. "No." He paused, hardly able to say the next words. "And yes. There's only one way. It occurred to me a few weeks ago, but I never even considered it until now. But how can I do it?" Joseph stopped. So would anyone, on a cliff at night, about to jump, hoping for a river below.

"Do you remember the old fairy tale?" he asked me idly. Joseph took a sip from the mug and watched the rain fall in streams through the glow of our porch light. "A son and his father lived in a seaside village. The father was a seaman, and he used to go off for months at a time, out trading riches in far-off lands. Every time he came back, he would ask his son, 'While I was gone, boy, did you look into the eyes of the devil?' The boy would say, 'No, sir.' 'That's good,' the father always replied, 'because no matter the cause, that is the one thing you must never do.' And the boy grew up strong and honorable, looking forward to the brief days with his father as the sweetest times of his life. Except one day the ship returned, but his father did not."

"Joseph," I said. But he looked away and kept talking.

"The men on the ship told the boy his father had been spirited away by a wizard. So like the father, the son went to sea to find him. He visited port after port, and in every town he asked after his father. He talked to the poor and the powerful, the religious and the magical, and no one could help him, no one could tell him anything, no one could show him the way. And when he had nearly given up, he met a blind man in the most distant of villages, an old man in a tattered robe and black glasses, with a dented tin cup rattling with a few coins. The boy almost didn't ask, because what could a blind man tell him? But to his amazement, the blind man knew his father immediately. He could show the son just where his father was, if only the boy would do one thing."

I knew how this ended. Seriously, I repeated, "We must help her."

Joseph found the courage to stare at me. He laughed, the kind of laugh of someone about to cry. "And the blind man took off his glasses and told him, 'First, look into my eyes.'"

*

"Dr. Benton!" A muffled, agitated voice crackled over the phone line.

Blake Benton balanced the antique receiver on his shoulder. "Yes?" he answered calmly. Panicked calls were commonplace in his evenings over the years.

"I'm down in Bounlea!"

"Bounlea, yes. Can you speak slowly and clearly please? I can barely make you out."

Bounlea, twenty miles south of Black Oak, had no doctors or medical facilities inside the meager blocks of the town. The doctors of Black Oak serviced the few residents among them.

"It's Annie Scriver, Dr. Benton. I'm going into labor!"

Outside rain tapped on the chambered windows of Benton's den. He heard the sound of pacing footsteps in Bobby's room upstairs. Blake sighed wearily. "I see. Who is your regular doctor?"

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

"Dr. Thompson. He's out of town this weekend. I'm scared." The voice cut off into a bellow of pain.

"Take a deep breath and relax, Mrs. Scriver. How frequent are the contractions?"

"I haven't timed them. It seems like they're one on top of another!"

"All right, can your husband drive you to the hospital?"

"I don't have a husband, Dr. Benton."

Blake paused. For a brief moment, the chilly voice sounded familiar. "I see. Do you think you can drive yourself?"

The woman sobbed, "No, no!"

"Don't excite yourself," Blake retorted firmly. "I'll be there. Lie down and relax. I'll be there in twenty minutes. Give me your address."

"15 Violet Drive. A white Rambler. Hurry, please!"

*

I hung up the phone. I had slipped only once, and I hoped it was not enough to betray me.

My part was done. Now it was Joseph's turn.

Were we on the side of the angels tonight? Or was Mephistopheles staring back from the mirror? Was I looking into his eyes?

*

It seemed to Teresa that they drove forever. She had no idea how far it really was, only that the cluster of houses in the town disappeared and the spectre of Black Oak Park loomed for miles and miles on the north side of the road. Even that, too, disappeared (she thought), and they found themselves in an even deeper frontier, moonless and foreign. She saw strange shapes in the shadows, strange beasts. Next to her Joseph sat silently. He didn't look at her, perhaps to follow the black line of the road, or perhaps to avoid her eyes. She thought this was a new route for him, too, and maybe he was as unsure of what the night held as she was.

Bobby lay asleep in the back seat. They had parked in the rainy cover of Blake's street, almost invisible in the cloak of night and fog. When Blake's car turned out of his driveway toward Bounlea, Teresa crept across the street, eyeing the nearby houses for the silhouettes of neighbors peering into the avenue, and reclaimed her bewildered son. Teresa could tell him little, for she was bewildered, too. Joseph had divulged very little of his plan, only that tonight she and Bobby would escape. As they drove and drove, she wondered where this newest escape would lead her.

They made only one stop. It came nearly an hour after they left Black Oak far behind them. A yellow light beamed above the road ahead of the car, and suddenly Teresa realized they had reached the

crossing of an old railroad track. Joseph drew to a stop beneath the solitary light. He got out of the car. Teresa heard his steps crunch on the dirt as he walked to the trunk and popped it open.

She got out, too, to listen to the stark silence and feel the crisp air on her face. The railway, like the road, came from nowhere and returned there, nothing but a crease in the endless rows of trees. She saw nothing and heard nothing. The rusted joints on the warning lights looked as if they had long since corroded, as if no trains had thundered by here in years. But Joseph had other ideas. He pulled a blaze orange flag from the trunk, then spent two or three minutes wedging it securely into a rotting post by the tracks. When it unfurled, it cast a sharp neon glow that must have been as visible as a fire in the piercing headlight of a train. If a train were to come.

"Will you tell me now?" she said. Her voice, breaking the silence, sounded loud.

Joseph hesitated. He stared at the flag, fluttering gently in the weak breeze. "Soon."

That was all. They returned to the car and drove again, back through the forest, twisting and turning, all alone on the road. Teresa began to feel scared. She had not had time to listen to her feelings in the midst of the intrigue, but now, staring into the nothingness, she felt she was staring into her future. With each mile she felt more disconnected. It did not seem to have an ending. She knew what she had left, but where was she going? She wondered, too, if the past would catch up with her there (where?), as it had in Black Oak. Were some things inescapable?

Quietly, Teresa sobbed, surprising herself. She didn't want Joseph to hear her, but he glanced and saw the shine of tears on her cheeks. All her uncertainties had spilled over.

"It's a new beginning," he said softly. Then after a pause: "Have you heard of the Underground Railroad?"

Teresa wiped her eyes. Confused, she stared at Joseph. "Wasn't that during the Civil War? The route for slaves out of the South?"

Joseph nodded. "There's a modern equivalent," he said.

"I don't understand."

"An underground. For abused women and children. A way out. It's an illegal network, a sort of shadow protection program that helps women disappear, start new lives under new names. You'll be safe. No one will know where you are. I won't. Certainly Blake won't."

The magnitude of this scheme settled in slowly. Joseph was right to call it a shadow program, for she was leaving amid the shadows, vanishing like a shadow. Teresa thought about losing her identity, blending into the darkness, and the image held both comfort and fear for her. She would be safe, but she had no illusions that she would be free. But freedom felt like a luxury now.

Somewhere in the dark curves, Joseph found a narrow dirt road. For another mile, they crept through a wilderness that seemed to brush up against the car. Then the trees thinned, and an old farmhouse rose like a vague silhouette against the black sky. The car bumped and bucked in deep ruts as Joseph guided them along the driveway to the fallen front steps.

No one had lived there for many years. Most of the windows upstairs and downstairs were broken, with large gaps where wind, rain, and snow blew inside. Fragments of siding, remnants of several years of

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

storms, lay in the overgrown yard. It had been beautiful once, a grand Victorian painted bright rose, set amid a clipped lawn and bushes growing with white berries. The rose had faded and peeled now, and the landscaping had begun a slow repossession of the house. Whoever had deserted it had left emptiness behind for miles, an unvisited corner of the world. But Teresa noticed a small slope a short distance from the house and the same crease in the forest that marked a railway cutting across the land.

"So it stops here?" she said.

"Yes. We have about an hour."

Joseph stopped and headed for the steps, picking his way carefully. The front door loosened wide cobwebs as he pushed it in. The hinges screeched, sharply enough that both of them jumped, expecting people to run at them from the shadows. No one did. Inside a damp chill pervaded, a smell of rotting wood, an echo of ghostly voices.

Teresa carried Bobby inside and laid him on an old bench in what must have been the living room. Then Teresa and Joseph stood nervously on the wide, open floor. As their eyes adjusted to the darkness, they saw each other's faces in new detail, with the nuances of eyes and lips.

"How did you hear about this?" Teresa asked awkwardly. "How did you make contact?"

"There are some things that come your way as a lawyer that you never dream of using. But you don't destroy them, either. I peeled it away layer by layer. After the first contact, it was all anonymous. They didn't know me, I didn't know them. All they knew was you. They did their own research. Last week I discovered they had approved you."

"Another trial," Teresa said. "A jury of my peers?" She smiled. It changed her emotions somehow, to know that others had already passed judgment and believed her. And to know, too, that she might not be thoroughly alone. That in one form or another there would be welcoming arms for both of them.

Bobby slept, the way only children can, uncomfortably, in the cold, in the midst of one more sea-change in his young life. He curled up on the hard bench, knees pulled up almost to his chin. He would sleep while Teresa and Joseph talked softly, while Teresa carried him onto the train -- sleep until the sunshine of a new day and a new world. Teresa watched her son's quiet slumber. She watched Joseph, too, whose face betrayed his doubts.

Teresa sensed his emotions when she turned away from Bobby and found Joseph's confused eyes. It was a dangerous moment. "I don't imagine you've ever done this before. Or am I wrong? Am I the latest in a long line saved by the angel of Black Oak?"

"You're the first."

"Yes, I know. It isn't enough to thank you. I can't even convince you you've done the right thing."

Joseph winced. "Don't misinterpret. It's not from any reluctance to help you."

"But to help me this far," Teresa said. "To break the rules."

"I live my life by rules."

Teresa reached out shyly, touching Joseph's cheek. "And now that you've broken them for me, how does that change your life?"

For Joseph, she knew, this was a question within a question, an echo hanging between them, asking too many things. He opened his mouth and said nothing. Behind Joseph, a wisp of fog drifted through the cracked window and floated above them, glowing in the flickering light. She smiled at him and tried to read his mind. He had jumped into the breakers for her, not knowing how to swim, and as he saved her, he drowned himself. He struggled through a watery nothingness, no anchor, no escape, no rules. Perhaps her smile could rescue him.

"Why did you?" Teresa said finally.

"I wanted you and Bobby to be safe."

"But it's so risky for you."

Joseph shrugged. "I took precautions. Lawyers understand alibis, after all. If it becomes necessary, my wife and I can prove we were home together tonight."

"I see." Teresa paused, and her voice became a whisper. "But you're not."

"No."

Bobby whimpered, shifting in his sleep. Teresa knelt and stroked his face. "Teresa flees," she murmured ironically. Her eyes filled with an uncertain longing. "I don't know if I'm strong enough."

"You are."

"You want me to be. But tomorrow you won't be there, if I'm weaker than you imagine."

For a moment Teresa had a fantasy, blooming out of the chill and night. The cold house seemed warm. She pictured Joseph's strong arms and wanted him to hold her. As long as he held her, she thought, as long as the train didn't come, as long as they spent an infinite night together in the abandoned building, then the future and past didn't matter. She pictured a kind of frozen eternity here.

"How long?" Teresa said.

Joseph said, "We still have a few minutes."

Teresa came closer.

*

I didn't ask Joseph if Teresa kissed him goodbye, or even if he kissed her, just as I had not asked about the late nights and missed dinners over the past six months. I didn't need to ask, because in my heart I trusted Joseph, to be true to his own life regardless of temptations. Surely he was tempted. Because I knew that Teresa had fallen in love with Joseph.

I saw it in her eyes, the flush in her cheeks, the sound of her voice. Teresa needed to be in love. As surely as day followed night, she would find a man and flower in his shadow. At least in my man she had hit it right.

He was the kind of honorable gentleman she needed if she would not find her own strength -- someone to scoop her up, or put his arm around her shoulder, or tell her to come in from the rain and dry her

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

hair. He could do everything for her, give everything to her, not for power but for love, because she wanted him to, needed him to. And in return she would offer herself in the bargain, let her damp clothes fall away, let him ravish her in the pale light.

It's funny. To me Joseph was never a hero. Ours was a comfortable love: come home from the office late; I'll be up. Sit with me by the fire. Would you like a glass of wine? Tell me about the case; I'll tell you about my day. We would be doing that for sixty years, I knew, and I would be as happy in the sixtieth as I had been in the first.

Then I began, these past months, to see him through Teresa's eyes. What a shock. That was the problem all along: I was jealous, not of their being lovers (for I did not believe they were), but of the way she saw Joseph, of the part he played in her life, a part I had not seen in him for me. This was all different. I was angry because he was her savior, her white knight. To me he was a friend, someone who knew me like I knew him, quiet, funny, a man to cherish. Yet had I missed something? My man of principle had broken the law.

He said little when he returned late that night. I asked him if the train had come, and he nodded, distracted. So she had gone. The pieces of our lives were back in place. Although something would always be different now, not better, not worse.

I let him struggle with his thoughts. There was no point in asking what he still had never explained, why he had gone so far for her -- no point, because I knew. Not for her alone, but for us. For me -- because I wanted it. My hero.

Joseph stood by the window. He swirled a glass of red wine in his hand idly and stared into the darkness of our garden. What a handsome man he was, tall and strong and caring. He had saved Teresa. And I thought, He'll make love to me tonight.

Brian Freeman is an international bestselling author of psychological suspense novels sold in 46 countries and 18 languages. His books include IMMORAL, STRIPPED, STALKED, IN THE DARK, and THE BURYING PLACE. He is also the co-author of the chick-lit book THE AGENCY by "Ally O'Brien."

His short story "The Underground Railroad" originally appeared as an exclusive bonus feature in the U.S. book club edition of IMMORAL, which was a Main Selection in the Literary Guild and Book of the Month Club.

Find out more about Brian and his books at www.bfreemanbooks.com or become a Facebook fan at www.facebook.com/bfreemanfans.

BRIAN FREEMAN