



KITE TO FREEDOM

The Story of a Kite-Flying Contest,
the Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge,
and the Underground Railroad

STORY BY
KATHLEEN A. DINAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
IRIS M. KIRKWOOD

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Cross Your Fingers
A City of Light Imprint



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*To my father,
who planted in me the seed of the idea for this book.
And to my children, whom I dearly love.
And, of course, to my mother.*



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PREFACE



HIS BOOK IS A FICTIONALIZED account of actual events that occurred in Niagara Falls during the construction of the first international railroad and pedestrian bridge in America in the mid-1800s. Surprisingly, in 1848, the construction of the Niagara Falls International Suspension Bridge over the Niagara Gorge began with a kite-flying contest and soon became an important part of the Underground Railroad.

The original suspension bridge was replaced by a steel arch bridge in the late 1800s. Renamed the Whirlpool Bridge, it still spans the Niagara Gorge today, connecting the United States and

Canada. The Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, at the foot of the Whirlpool Bridge in Niagara Falls, New York, celebrates the role this important bridge played in helping enslaved African Americans, then known as negroes, escape to freedom in Canada. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 effectively ended slavery, and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865 formally outlawed the practice throughout the United States.

1

KATIE AND HOMAN



HE SHOP DOOR CREAKED OPEN, jingling the bell on the door and filling the shop with the chill of January air. A thin brown-skinned girl approached the counter, where a portly white man was organizing items.

“Hi Mr. Walsh,” she said. “Is Homan around?”

“Out back,” he said, without raising his eyes from the items on the counter.

The girl walked outside and through a small alleyway between the shop and the building next door.



“Homan!” she called, “Homan! Where are you?”

She neared the opening to the back yard of the shop.

“Boo!” A freckled-face boy jumped out from behind the side of the building.

“That ain’t funny!” cried the little girl, jumping back and catching her breath.

“If it ain’t funny, then why am I laughing?” he said, smiling and revealing the small gap between his front teeth.

The girl rolled her eyes and walked farther into the yard. A tall, slender man was unloading barrels from a cart to the back door of the shop.

“Papa!” The girl yelled in excitement. She ran towards him and threw her arms around his waist, her black braids bouncing behind her.

“Hey there, little Miss Katie,” the man said in a warm voice. “What are you doing down here? I thought you were helping your mama with some chores this afternoon.”

“I finished helping, and Mama said I could go play with Homan,” Katie said.

Homan appeared next to Katie, as if on cue, and next to him his dog, Ella, wagging her tail. Katie scratched Ella’s head. The dog flopped down on her back, asking for her belly to be rubbed.

“Do you want to go explore down by the rocks?” suggested Homan.

“You’re going out to the islands again, aren’t you?” Katie’s papa asked. “You better be careful. Don’t get too close to the water; it’s not frozen over yet. And for heaven’s sake, don’t tell your mother I let you go.”

“I won’t, Papa,” Katie said, giggling.

“Look after her, Homan.” Papa added.

The two children ran off, Ella in tow with her ears flopping in the wind. Homan was older than Katie, and his longer legs carried him farther, but Katie was quick. Her 11-year-old legs kept pace with her 14-year-old friend. They raced through the streets, dodging carriages and people until they came to the edge of the tree line. Slowing their pace, the children and dog meandered through the woods. Homan’s cheeks had grown red from running into the wind. The sound of the rapids grew louder and louder. Light peeked through the treetops and glittered through the trees. When they reached the edge of the tree line, a small bridge stood before them.

The pair skipped across the bridge and began to explore the island. They roamed about before perching on the edge of the island, facing the Cataract House, a favorite place for tourists to stay when visiting Niagara Falls. They could just see hotel's broad veranda where the wealthy

visitors were eating dinner and wondered aloud what delicacies they might be enjoying.

“I bet it smells mighty good over there,” Homan said. “They come and eat fancy food and stay at a fancy place.”

The Cataract House was the most impressive hotel in town and was located on the bank of the Niagara River. It was owned by the Whitneys, a well-respected Niagara Falls family. General Whitney was a good businessman, at least that’s what Katie’s father said.

“I wonder where they are all from,” Katie pondered, looking across the rapids at the finely clad tourists. Katie and Homan took turns scratching Ella’s head.

“My pa says a lot of them come from the South,” said Homan. “That’s why they bring slaves with them.”

“Bring what?” Katie asked. Her hand stopped rubbing Ella’s ears, which the pup protested with a whine and a nudge.

She'd never heard the term "slave" before. Katie's family had been free for as long as she knew. In fact, she didn't know people could be anything but free.

"Slaves. Ya know, black people who work for white people?" Homan said.

"Oh, so like my papa in your papa's shop."

"No, no. Slaves don't get paid."

"Then why do they work for those people?"

"I guess they have to."

The two were silent. They watched the river rapids crash against the nearby rocks and careen over the falls. Homan continued to fantasize about the food at the Cataract House while Katie wondered what made her any different from a "slave."

The hotel veranda had emptied of diners, and the sun began to set.

"We better get back home before dark," said Homan.

"But I want to watch the sunset," Katie protested.

Just then, a commotion started on the shore below the Cataract House, by the ferry steps. A young black woman was running down the steps toward a man in a rowboat. A large group of men appeared right behind her, shouting after her. Negro waiters from the hotel were already running toward the boat. The children could just barely hear them yell to the woman: “Run, Martha! Run!”



The woman slipped on the steps. The white men were trying to reach her, and a few waiters were trying to block their way. When she reached the shore, she hurled herself into the

rowboat. It rocked perilously, but a waiter who had reached the bottom before the gang gave the boat a shove and the rower immediately pulled away from shore.

“We better get back home,” Homan repeated.

Katie just stared. She stared at the boat crossing the water. She stared at the paddles piercing the water’s surface. She stared at the rapids, wondering about the strange event that they had just witnessed. Before that day, Katie had never paid much attention to the river or those who crossed it. Now she started to pay much closer attention.

2

BID FOR THE BRIDGE



AS THE SUN SET, HOMAN WALKED Katie home. They passed shops closed for the evening, homes lit inside by a fire, and a few of the town's taverns. Inside one such tavern an important business meeting was taking place. They passed by the Eagle Hotel tavern without a sense of curiosity—just the desire to get out of the cold. Ella followed, her tail wagging.



Inside the tavern at a round, dark wooden table sat a group of men drinking pints. Pieces of parchment with calculations and diagrams were spread on the tabletop. A man with a light brown mustache pushed one of the diagrams to the center.

“Ellet, I understand your proposal just fine. What I don’t understand is how you actually plan to execute the thing!”

The man speaking was Charles B. Stuart, a proprietor of the Great Western Railway in Canada. In 1845, two years earlier, Stuart had put out a call to engineers all over the world, looking for a way to connect his railway with those in New York. Although most of the responses he received were negative, four engineers thought it could be done. The papers reported that Charles Ellet, Jr., John A. Roebling, Samuel Keefer, and Edward Serrell would each submit a proposal to bid for the chance to build a bridge—one that would span 761 feet across the Niagara River gorge.

Stuart's finger pressed into the diagram, and he looked sternly at the smirking Ellet, who had won the initial bid from Stuart and had just received funding for his bridge.

"You're making a bigger problem of it than it is, Stuart," Ellet said gruffly. "The only point that still needs to be solved is how, precisely, we will span the gorge."

"That's the whole problem! That's the start of a bridge!"

Stuart's voice was shrill. He was clearly irritated. The other men around the table began to speak in hushed tones to themselves, perhaps pretending that they weren't witnessing the confrontation between the two men.

"What we must do," said Ellet, "is get a single wire across the gorge. From that, we can build on it, over and over again, to create a strong base to begin construction of the bridge."

"But the cliffs are over 200 feet high," another man chimed in. "How on earth are we

supposed to span the width of the gorge over the river? You've seen them whirlpools pull boats under."

"What about an archer?" another voice chimed in. "An archer might be able to shoot an arrow across those rapids."

"I know for a fact that the best archer in the world can't shoot a line more than 760 feet. I, for one, propose a rocket," Ellet retorted.

The men at the table looked puzzled.

"Well, if an archer shooting an arrow can't span the gorge, why don't we replace an archer's arm power with a rocket? That wouldn't have to fight the winds over the river!"

"A rocket, Ellet?" Stuart sighed. "And how do you propose we make this rocket land in the right place? Without blowing something—or someone—to bits?"

Ellet looked resigned.

"If any of you have any ideas, now would be the time to voice them," Ellet said calmly.

The table grew silent again. A few men drank from their pints, pushing Ellet's papers to the center of the table so as to not spill on them, sometimes fiddling through them, looking for a spark of inspiration.

"If I may impose, sirs—" A young-looking man approached the table. He nervously ran his hand over his slicked back hair before continuing. "Why not fly a kite over the gorge?"

The table was quiet and the men exchanged looks—some confused and dismissive, but Ellet, stroking his sideburns, was pondering the idea. Then it seemed as though the idea had been rejected, and the young man had begun to excuse himself when Ellet raised his hand to stop him.

"What do you do, sir?" Ellet asked the stranger.

"I'm an ironworker, Mr. Ellet," he said. "I've been watching the papers and listening to all of the gossip over the past couple of years about this

bridge building venture. I'm rather interested in it all."

"And what did you say your name was?"

"Theodore Hullet, sir."

"Well, Mr. Hullet, pull up a chair. It seems we may have a spot for you on our staff," said Ellet.

As the night went on, the group ordered round after round of pints as they listened to Hullet's plan. He proposed a kite-flying contest, a contest that would challenge people on both sides of the river to fly kites across the gorge. Just one string across would be enough to begin building the foundation of the bridge—and that was one string more than Ellet had.

3

THE ANNOUNCEMENT



THE NEXT MORNING, STUART called a meeting in the town square to announce the latest development in the bridge-building plans. Townspeople gathered, whispering amongst themselves. They had been hearing rumors about the bridge for nearly two years, but had seen no developments aside from what the papers had to say about the matter. They had no physical proof of the project. A public announcement about it caused excitement—and a bit of skepticism—from important citizens like General Whitney, who stood to profit a lot from

a bridge that would attract even more tourists to the Cataract House.

Whitney was in the crowd, of course, along with other men who hoped to develop businesses and prosper from the bridge. Shop owners, women, and children all gathered in the square, anxiously awaiting the announcement.

Stuart stepped up onto a wooden platform, followed by Ellet and Hullet. He cleared his throat.

“May I have everyone’s attention, please,” shouted Stuart.

The crowd began to quiet.

“Thank you all for attending today. I realize you all must be anxious to hear of our new developments—”

“We are! So get on with it!” shouted a voice from the group of townspeople. Stuart took a deep breath.

“Without further ado, I present Mr. Charles Ellet, Jr., the bridge designer.”

The crowd clapped, and Ellet stepped forward.

“I’m sure many of you know by now that we’ve received full funding for this project,” Ellet began. “I am thrilled to be the lead engineer on what will be a structural marvel of this great town for centuries to come!”

Ellet paused, hoping for a crowd reaction, but received only silent stares. He cleared his throat.

“We have, however, encountered a slight problem in the bridge’s development that could cause delays.”

There was a collective groan.

“But we think we’ve come up with a solution,” Ellet quickly interjected.

Stuart jumped into Ellet’s presentation, sensing the need for clarity and conciseness.

“Mr. Ellet has proposed the creation of a suspension bridge to span the gorge. The only way to begin a suspension bridge is to link each end of the bridge with a piece of wire—or string,” Stuart explained. “To do this, a very

skilled archer would need to shoot an arrow nearly 1,000 feet across the gorge, and we've determined that to be impossible."

"To counter that implausibility," Ellet interjected, "we are proposing a kite-flying contest!"

The crowd remained stubbornly silent.

"The first person to successfully land a kite on the other side of the gorge will win a prize of five dollars!"

Suddenly the crowd grew lively.

"Five dollars? That could go a long way towards a new horse," one man said with awe.

"Timmy! Get your kite ready!" a mother shouted to her son.

"We'd like to wish everyone the best of luck!" Ellet shouted over the stirring crowd.

"And remember: the contest begins the day after tomorrow!" added Stuart.

The crowd dispersed, leaving Homan and Katie standing in the square with Ella, of course, wagging her tail.

“Homan! You’ve made lots of kites. We can get new supplies and build an even better one,” Katie said, jumping up and down. Ella jumped too, dancing on her hind legs, ears flapping.

“If we win, we can split the prize money,” said Homan. “But we need to get started quick.”

The group was off, running toward Homan’s father’s shop. Ella kept pace with the children who seemed to be running faster than ever before. Before they knew it, they were in front of the shop, catching their breath and pushing their way through the door.

Katie’s papa swept the floor in the corner. Homan’s dad was taking inventory of the shop shelves.

“Hi Pa! Hi, Mr. Clay,” Homan boomed.

“Hi Papa! Hi, Mr. Walsh,” Katie followed.

“Pa, can we use the shed out back?” asked Homan. “And we’re going to need some supplies.”

“I suppose you two were down at the square to hear the news about the kite-flying contest,”

replied Mr. Walsh. “Early this morning, Mr. Ellet was bragging about it when he stopped by the store on his way to make his grand announcement.” He smiled and shook his head.

“Well, if you’re wanting to win that contest, you’re going to need a good kite,” Mr. Walsh said. “You can use whatever you need from the shop or shed, but make sure to let me know what you’ve taken so Katie’s dad can restock the shelves. Okay?”

“Oh my gosh, really?” Katie exclaimed from the corner in the shop where she’d been peering at her father.

“Now what do you say to Mr. Walsh, Katie?”

“Thank you, Mr. Walsh,” Katie said in a singsong voice.

“We’ll be out back, Pa!” Homan yelled. “C’mon, Katie! We’ve got work to do!”

The pair pushed through the back door. A light snowfall had begun and Ella jumped with glee. The fresh snow crunched under Homan and Katie’s shoes, and Ella dipped her nose into it as they walked to the shed.

“First we’re going to need wood. Lightweight wood,” said Homan matter-of-factly. “And we’ll need to see what fabric we can stretch over the wood. It’s gotta be light, too.”



Inside the shed, Homan sifted through remnants of past projects, tossing scraps here and there. Ella reached for some in mid-air, thinking perhaps Homan had invented a new fetch game. Katie, dodging the hurled objects, looked quizzically over his shoulder.

“Why don’t we just use one of the kites you’ve already made?” she asked. “I’ve seen how well they fly. I’m sure we could win with one of those.”

“Nope,” Homan answered. “Those are all flat. And the tails are way too short. They’ll never hold up in the wind, let alone cross the whole gorge. You know that thing is like a thousand feet wide?”

Katie tried to picture exactly how far a thousand feet was. She looked down at her own feet.

“I guess a thousand feet is pretty far,” she said.

Homan continued to rummage around until he came across a small pile of wood. Each piece was thin, but whole. He turned to see the mess he’d made on the worktable during all of his scrounging and tossing.

“Well, this won’t do,” he said. “Hold this.”

Homan pushed the supplies he’d gathered into Katie’s hands and began to push things off

the table. Now it was Ella's turn to dodge objects as they came spiraling to the ground.

"There we go. A nice, clean work space," he said, after brushing more dust off the table.

"I don't know if I'd call this clean, Homan, but it's a table, so it'll do," said Katie, putting the supplies down. "So if the flat kites won't work, what are we gonna build?"

"A barn door kite," said Homan. "It'll have six sides, and I can bend this wood just enough to get a bow in it. That will help it catch more wind."

The two began to work. Katie diligently handed Homan supplies, like she was assisting in a major surgery. Ella snoozed in the corner.

"Knock, knock." The shed door creaked open, bringing even more of a chill in with it. Katie's papa appeared. "How's it going in here?"

"Pretty good," Homan said. "We've been building the base so far, but we've got a lot of work to do if this kite is gonna be ready by the day after tomorrow."

“Well you better step it up then,” said Mr. Clay. “We’ve got one more hour until Katie and I have to go home for dinner.”

“But Papa!” Katie protested. “We’ve got so much work to do on the kite! It’s gotta win!”

He smiled and patted her curls.

“I know, baby, and I’m sure you two will build a wonderful kite. But if you’re late for dinner again, Mama won’t let you come back tomorrow to finish building your winning kite. We can’t have that, now can we?”

Katie sighed.

“Homan will you keep working on it tonight? We’ve still got to pick out fabric and everything!”

“Homan is going to have to go in for dinner when we leave, too,” said Mr. Clay. “Your pa wanted me to tell you.”

Homan nodded in affirmation.

“Now,” Mr. Clay said, “I’ve got a few more things to get done in the shop before we close up. Then I’ll be back for you. Okay, Katie?”

“Won’t you stay and help us?” she begged.

“I can’t, baby. I’ve got to get some orders packed up to take into town first thing in the morning. If we get home on time tonight, maybe your mama will let you come to Homan’s in the morning when I come to work—if it’s okay with Mr. Walsh, that is.”

“I’ll ask my pa tonight!” said Homan. “But I’m sure he won’t mind. I’ll just get my chores done extra early!”

“See, Katie, no problem,” Mr. Clay said. “I’ll be back in a little bit.”

Mr. Clay left, and Katie watched Homan tinker with the bow in the wood, loosening and retightening screws. It seemed like only a few minutes had passed when her papa called for her outside the shed. Homan set the kite down on the work table. The pair emerged with Homan holding the door so Ella could scoot her way past his feet.

“See ya tomorrow, Homan!” Katie called as she walked toward the alleyway with her father.

Homan waved and called back, “You better be here bright and early! We’ve got a kite-flying contest to win!”

NOT FOR SALE

4

KATIE'S QUESTION



IN THEIR WALK HOME, KATIE and her papa talked about the contest. Papa told Katie that she and Homan should hope that the snow held off for the contest. Katie breathed into the icy air just to see it. It wasn't long before the father and daughter reached home and Katie ran inside to hug her mother.

“Something smells delicious,” exclaimed Papa.

“I made stew and some bread this afternoon,” said Katie's mama.

Katie was at the stove, peering into the pot and smelling the simmering dinner. Mama

came over to the stove and began scooping heaps of the stew into bowls, handing them to Katie to bring to the table. They sat down and Katie began slurping her stew as her parents talked about the day. Her ears perked up when she heard her name.

“I’ve got an early delivery tomorrow, and Katie hoped to come with me in the morning to Homan’s place. They’re building a kite for the contest,” said Papa.

“Oh, is that right?” Mama asked. “What color kite are you going to build?”

Katie stopped gulping down her dinner to join the conversation.

“Homan says it’s called a barn door kite, but I don’t know what color it will be yet. We don’t have any fabric.”

“Well, I imagine it will have to be light enough to catch the wind, but sturdy enough to withstand the snow,” Mama said.

“Yeah, Homan said it needed to be real light.”

“Well, after you help me clean up dinner, maybe we can go through my fabric scraps to see if there is anything you like.”

“Really?” asked Katie, already visibly excited. Mama nodded, a small grin creeping across her face.

“Now where is this delivery that you’ve got to leave the house so early for?” Mama asked, looking Papa squarely in the face. “I don’t think it’s right of that Walsh fella to be sending you out before the sun even rises.”

“He’s not making me go. I just want to get the delivery out to the Cataract House,” Papa replied. “I’ve got some business to handle with the headwaiter. We have to straighten out some things.”

Mama seemed to understand exactly what this meant. Katie remembered the last time that she saw the Cataract House. She remembered Homan telling her about slaves. She remembered that woman as she ran away

from all those angry men. She wondered if the woman was a slave.

“What’s a slave?” Katie asked. The question seemed to shock both of her parents. A silence that felt like an eternity ensued. Katie began to worry.

“Why you askin’ about slaves?” said Mama. “Where’d you hear that word?”

Papa seemed alarmed, as if something he had said led to this question.

“Well, the last time me and Homan went down to the islands, we saw the Cataract House and he told me Southerners come up here with their slaves.”

Papa finally spoke. “Homan is right. Lots of Southern people come to see Niagara Falls. The ones who can afford to stay at the Cataract House are rich, and many rich Southern families own slaves.”

“But a slave is a person, right?” asked Katie. “Homan said a slave is a black person who works

for a white person and doesn't get paid. How can you own a person?"

"Things are very different in the South, Katie," said Papa. "People buy and sell other people and make them work in their fields. People who look like us are considered property—objects—in the South."

"But how come we're not?" asked Katie.

"Before you were born, your grandparents were purchased from a Southerner by a Northern man. That man made a habit of buying people—people just like you and me—and bringing them to the North to set them free," said Mama.

"Those people at the Cataract House who come to see the Falls—do they set their slaves free when they come to the North?" Katie asked.

"Unfortunately, not all people share the same values," said Papa.

"They bring slaves here to be slaves, and bring them home just the same," added Mama.

Katie thought about bringing up the woman she had seen running away and the boat that ferried her off. She thought about telling them about all the angry men who chased her. But then she thought it best to not tell her parents what she had seen. Her parents might not let her go back to the Cataract House or go exploring, even during the summer. Maybe they wouldn't even let her go to the kite-flying contest. She decided to remain silent.

That night, after all the dishes were washed and Katie had picked out pretty fabric for the kite from her mother's bin of scraps, she changed into her nightgown and crawled into bed. She contemplated the dinner conversation. Now she understood what a slave was, but she still didn't understand why she was any different.



5

THE UNION



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, KATIE was still troubled by the dinner conversation. She was quiet through breakfast. She dressed in warm clothes knowing she'd be in the shed with Homan all day working on their kite. As she pulled on her woolen stockings she wondered if slaves got warm clothes to wear when it was cold out.

“Almost ready, Miss Katie?” Papa called to her.

Katie straightened her dress and sat down on a chair near the door to pull on her shoes.

“Okay. I’m ready to go,” she said.

“You don’t sound very excited about going to finish your kite,” remarked Papa.

“I think I’m just tired,” Katie said.

The two walked in silence to the shop. When they arrived, Katie found Homan already in the shed. She presented him with the fabric, a green color, which Katie said she chose because it reminded her of the famous “Niagara Green” of the river. Homan said it would work perfectly and showed Katie the progress he’d made on the kite after she had left the night before.

“All we need to do now is attach the fabric and give it a name,” said Homan.

“Why a name?” Katie asked.

“A winning kite should have a name!” replied Homan with a toothy grin.

Katie smiled for the first time since the talk with her parents at dinner. Outside, Papa was adding a few more boxes to the cart and readying the horse to make deliveries.

“We should probably test the kite once the fabric is attached,” Katie said.

“Definitely,” said Homan, focusing on affixing the fabric to the bowed frame.

“Maybe we could go to the river—by the islands,” suggested Katie. “You always do well flying your kites over there.”

“That would work,” replied Homan. “I think your papa’s first delivery is to the Cataract House. Maybe we can ride in the wagon with him.”

Katie ran outside to ask her father, and she was just in time. He was nearly ready to leave.

“Papa, wait!” Katie called from the shed door.

“You can’t be done with your kite already,” Papa said.

“Actually, Homan is just finishing it right now. He worked on it after I left last night. Once he attaches Mama’s fabric, it’ll be ready to fly!”

“Well isn’t that exciting,” Papa said. “You better test it out before the big day.”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you about,” said Katie. “May Homan and I come with you to the

Cataract House to test our kite by the islands? Homan takes his kites over there a lot.”

Papa paused, hesitating as he considered this request. Finally he said, “Well I don’t see why not if you’re ready to leave. I got to keep my delivery schedule, which means we need to leave right about now.”

As if on cue, Homan burst through the shed doors, holding the kite high. Ella peeked out from behind his legs. Katie hadn’t even noticed she was in the shed, but she wasn’t surprised. Ella was always with Homan.

“It’s ready!” Homan yelled.

The children climbed onto the back of the wagon, with Ella, of course. Homan explained the work he had done on the structure of the kite the day before to Katie, who seemed less enthralled with the process than Homan.

“You said we needed a name,” Katie said, interrupting Homan’s detailed explanation of the proper screws for kite building. “So what shall we name it?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that. My idea is to call it ‘The Union,’” Homan replied.

“Why The Union? What does that have to do with a kite or a bridge?” asked Katie.

“The bridge will join Canada and the United States,” explained Homan. “So the kite string makes the union of two countries possible.”

Katie pondered his reasoning for a moment.

“I suppose that’s a good name then,” she said matter-of-factly.

“It sounds like a good name to me,” Papa said. “Get The Union ready because we’re almost there.”

The wagon pulled up to the Cataract House and all its passengers disembarked.

“Now, meet back here in an hour, okay?” said Papa.

“Okay, Papa,” Katie said.

“Will do, Mr. Clay,” added Homan.

The children ran off toward the entrance to the islands with Ella close behind. Katie’s papa

watched them for a moment before walking toward the Cataract House. Inside, he found the headwaiter. They waited until the room had cleared of other people before sitting together at a table. They began to speak in hushed tones while closely scanning the room around them.

Meanwhile, Homan and Katie reached the island entrance to find a sign posted to the gate.

HIGH WATER-NO ISLAND ENTRANCE TODAY
SORRY FOR THE INCONVENIENCE

“What do we do now?” wondered Katie aloud.

“I suppose we’ll just have to go back to gorge. If we stand near the edge, we can probably catch enough wind to test The Union.”

“I guess it’s better to test it there anyway,” said Katie. “We’ll be flying it for real on the edge of the gorge tomorrow.”

They walked to the rim of the gorge and found an open area behind the Cataract House to test their kite. Homan readied himself to toss

The Union to the wind, but Katie was distracted. She noticed that they were on the edge of the gorge above the ferry, the very spot where the woman running from those men had boarded the boat. She was so wrapped up in looking down that she didn't realize that The Union was taking flight above her until Homan elbowed her out of her daydream.

"Look! Look, Katie! It's flying!" Homan said. "It looks so beautiful. And it handles great! We're gonna win for sure."

Katie clapped her hands and smiled.

"Since we know it works perfectly, maybe we should go find my papa and tell him that we're ready to go whenever he's done," she said.

Homan reeled in The Union, and Ella jumped to nip at it when it got close to the ground. Homan scolded her and grabbed the kite as soon as it was within reach.

Katie and Homan both looked around in awe as they slowly walked into the Cataract House.

Neither had ever before been inside. It was beautifully decorated, with framed art on the walls—the kind of art rich people have, thought Katie.

They reached the dining area where Katie's papa and the headwaiter were deep in conversation with their backs to the entrance. As the children drew nearer, they overheard bits and pieces of the conversation. Katie's interest was piqued.

“But she escaped, right?” she heard Papa ask.

“Yes, Martha is in Canada now. I rowed the boat myself. A family was waiting for her on the other side,” the waiter said. “But she barely made it down the stairs. There was a mob, Tom,” said the waiter.

Katie thought it was odd to hear someone call her father by his first name. Mama always called him Papa, and Homan calls him Mr. Clay. She didn't dwell on this, though. The conversation was much too interesting.

“How did anyone find out about her plans?” Papa asked.

“I haven’t a clue,” the waiter said. “But we must start only planning escapes at night. I prefer those anyway, but even these occasional daytime runs are far too risky.”

“Is Martha the woman who was chased by all those angry men the other day?” Katie asked instinctively.

The two men jumped slightly at the sound of her voice.

“Katie! When did you get here? Why didn’t you say something? It’s not polite to eavesdrop,” said Papa.

“I’m sorry, Papa. Homan and I finished flying The Union, and it works great,” said Katie. “We just came to tell you that we’re ready whenever you are, but we didn’t want to interrupt your talk.”

Before her papa could respond, the waiter was speaking.

“How did you know about the woman being chased by those men?” he asked Katie.

“We were over on the island,” Katie replied quietly. “Homan and I were exploring. We were

just sitting on the edge of the rocks when we heard all the noise.”

“Honest. We weren’t causing any trouble, and we didn’t tell anyone anything,” Homan piped up, fearing punishment.

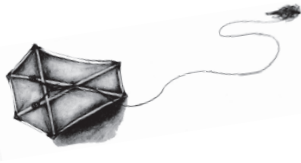
“Why didn’t you tell me about this, Katie?” asked Papa sternly.

“I don’t know,” Katie lied.

“Well, at any rate,” the waiter said, “to answer your question, yes, that woman you saw running down the rocks and jumping into the ferry was named Martha. We helped her escape to Canada.”

“Escape from what?” Katie asked, but Homan already knew the answer.

“Slavery,” he said.



Katie, her papa, Homan and Ella left the Cataract House shortly after that conversation. It was a mostly quiet ride back into town, but

Papa said a few things. He told the children that the server they spoke with was Mr. Morrison. He said that Mr. Morrison helped a lot of slaves, or freedom-seekers, escape to Canada, because Canada was the only place where they were safe and couldn't be forcibly brought back to their masters. The whole conversation made Katie uneasy. It all seemed to wrong to her.

When the wagon arrived back at the shop, Papa told the children that they mustn't tell anyone about that afternoon. Katie and Homan shook their heads vigorously in agreement and hopped off the wagon with their kite and Ella. Katie waved to her papa as he left to finish his day's deliveries. She still felt sick. Homan asked her to stay and play, but she wasn't in the mood to play—not after understanding what she really had seen that day out on the island. Katie told him she was tired and went home.

She went to bed early that night.

6

THE KITE CONTEST



THE NEXT MORNING, KATIE WOKE up in a cold sweat. Her heart was pounding, and her mama burst through the door.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” she asked in a panic.

“I think it was just a bad dream,” Katie said.

“You were screaming, Katie,” Mama said.

“I was scared to death, but it’s okay, baby. Calm down, you’re safe. Do you remember your dream?”

“I was a slave. I was escaping.”

Her mother seemed uneasy at Katie’s response, but she held her close. “Well calm

down,” she said. “It was just a dream. Get up and get dressed, so you can have some breakfast before Homan comes to get you for the contest.”

Katie felt a little dizzy. As Mama left the room, she wondered if she even wanted to go to the contest. Still, she got dressed and began eating the breakfast her mother had made for her. Shortly after Katie sat down at the table, her mother went to the bedroom where her father was dressing for work. Even though Mama shut the door, Katie could still hear her parents talking quietly. Mama told Papa about Katie’s dream, but her parents’ voices got progressively quieter. Katie was intently listening when a knock at the door startled her.

“Hey Katie!” It was Homan. “Ready to go win a kite-flying contest?”

Her parents emerged from the bedroom. “Sounds like Homan is here, baby,” Mama said. “Go get your boots on.”

Katie pulled on her boots and opened the door to a grinning Homan.

“Be safe you two!” Mama called from the kitchen.

“You’re gonna do great!” Papa yelled.

Katie shut the door behind her and the two were off towards the gorge, Ella following close behind. The wind was blowing and snow was falling more heavily than the day before. It was the most wintery day of the season so far. But when they arrived at the gorge, plenty of children were already there, beginning to put flight to their kites.

“Let’s go get on the ferry,” Homan said.

“But why can’t we fly our kite from this side of the gorge?” asked Katie. “It doesn’t matter which side we start on for the contest.”

“No, but the wind is coming in this direction,” Homan explained. “If we start here, we’re working against it. It’s not very strong, so we need all the help we can get from it.”

So the two walked down to the ferry boat and boarded. Katie looked down into the water,

thinking of the way the water had rippled away from the boat carrying Martha to Canada.

When the ferry reached the Canadian side, the children and Ella began their ascent to the top of the gorge, being careful not to slip. When they reached the top they saw that they were not the only ones with the idea of flying their kites from the Canadian side of the gorge. Many people—some of whom Homan presumed were Canadian—were already flying their kites.

Katie picked a spot close to the edge, and Homan tossed *The Union* up into the air. With a swirl of snow and wind, it rose to join the other kites. Homan maneuvered the kite and his footing to bring the kite farther up and over the flock of other kites, trying to catch more wind.

As they watched it rise, the snow blew faster around them.

“Can you see it?” Katie shouted.

“I don’t think I can,” Homan hollered back. “It’s hard to see any of the kites that are that high. The snow is blinding.”

They shivered. Ella huddled close to Homan’s leg.

“I think it caught on something!” Homan suddenly yelled. “Here! Tug at this!”

Just as Katie reached for the kite handle, Homan felt the line go limp.

“Oh no!” he cried

“What?” asked Katie.

“I think the line just snapped.”

“What do we do now? Do we have time to make another kite?” Katie asked. Suddenly her interest in the contest was reinvigorated.

“We can go back over and look for the other end of the line and reattach it if we find it,” Homan said. “But it’s getting really bad out here. I don’t know if we’ll be able to see too much in the snow.” They walked to the ferry, but the steps were closed off. A wooden sign hung from a rope that read:

FERRY CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE
CHOPPY WATERS AND NO VISIBILITY
SORRY FOR THE INCONVENIENCE

“If we can’t get home what will we do?” asked Katie frantically. “We’ll be stuck here with no place to stay!”

“My Pa used to bring me here all the time,” replied Homan calmly. “We would visit his friend. I don’t think he lives too far from here, but honestly, I’m not entirely sure how to get to his house.”

“Do you remember what direction you went when you got off the ferry?” Katie asked.

“Right, definitely right,” Homan said.

“Okay, well let’s go that way and see if we can find it.”

7

WE HAVE A WINNER!



AFTER KNOCKING ON THREE DOORS that Homan was *certain* was the right one, Katie told him to ask for directions at the next house that looked familiar.

They approached door number four, a newer-looking door painted blue. A man with black-turning-gray hair answered.

“Homan? Is that you?” the man asked, astonished.

“I knew this was the one!” Homan exclaimed. “Hi, Mr. Roy.”

“What are you doing up here? Come in out of the cold.”

The children stepped in with Ella close behind, and Mr. Roy shut the door behind him, shivering at the cold outside.

“Who’s your friend, Homan?” Mr. Roy asked.

“Oh, this is Katie,” Homan said. “And you remember Ella.”

Ella jumped at Mr. Roy’s pants. He patted her head fondly.

“We were trying to fly our kite across the gorge, but the line snapped, and the ferry is closed because the weather is so bad,” Homan said.

“I don’t know how soon that ferry will be reopening” Mr. Roy said. “The weather looks like it’s only getting nastier.”

“But we’ve gotta get back and find our kite! We’re trying to win the contest!” Homan protested, as if Mr. Roy had control of the weather.

Just then, a voice called from the kitchen.

“Who was at the door, dear?”

Homan recognized the voice of Mrs. Roy. She came out, wiping her hands on an apron.

“Oh Homan, how good to see you!” she exclaimed. “Come! Sit by the fire! You must be freezing.”

“Homan and his friend Katie here were trying to win that kite contest and got stuck on this side of the gorge. They’ll need to stay here until the storm passes.” Mr. Roy explained to his wife.

“Well of course,” she said. Then, turning to Homan and Katie, “But I’m afraid our spare bed is taken up by another guest right now. I’ll get extra blankets and pillows for you two. You can sleep right here in the parlor.”

They made themselves comfortable near the fire and Mr. Roy asked Homan about his parents and the store. Homan dutifully answered. Katie scratched Ella’s head and looked around the house. The Roys had a much nicer house than hers, she decided, and they were very nice people for letting them stay with them. She was curious

about the other visitor, though. She hadn't seen anyone else in the house.

Mrs. Roy came back into the living room with hot tea for everyone.

"Where's Martha?" Mr. Roy asked her. "It's getting much too cold outside."

Katie's ears perked up. Could this be *the* Martha?

"She said she was going to watch the contest down by the gorge, but I would think she'd be back by now, given the weather," said Mrs. Roy.

Mr. Roy nodded. Then Mrs. Roy turned to Homan and began asking him most of the same questions her husband had already asked before moving on to Katie.

"So what about you, Katie? What do your folks do?"

"Well, my papa works for Homan's father at the shop," she said. "And my Ma sews dresses and things for people to buy."

“How lovely,” she said.

Then the door flew open and a burst of cold air swept into the house so forcefully that they could feel it next to the fire.

“I’m back!” called a young woman from the entrance. She walked into the room and looked startled to see other people there.

“Martha, this is Homan and Katie,” Mrs. Roy said. “They were trying to win that kite-flying contest you were watching, and the storm has them stuck on this side of the gorge. Homan’s father is a good friend of ours.”

“Hello,” she said softly.

Katie stared at Martha. She was slender, with light brown skin, and looked young, but much older than she and Homan. Katie knew it must be her.

“Excuse me,” Katie said hesitantly. “Your name is Martha. Just the other day Homan and I saw a woman take a boat from the Cataract House to the other side of the river. Men were

chasing her....” Katie paused. “Was that you?” Martha looked stunned.

“How...did you know...about all that?” she asked, almost stuttering.

“Homan and I were sitting on Goat Island and we saw you,” Katie said. “Later, Mr. Morrison from the Cataract House said your name while he was talking with my papa.”

The Roys looked a little uneasy.

“Mr. Morrison is a fine gentleman,” Mr. Roy said.

“Yes, he is,” Martha followed.

There was an uncomfortable silence. A cloud had dampened the conversation. Mrs. Roy announced that she was going to fix supper. Mr. Roy and Homan struck up another conversation—this time about Homan’s kite-making skills. Katie and Martha sat quietly near each other, soaking up the heat of the fire.

Before long, supper was ready and everyone gathered to eat. This was the routine for the eight

days that Homan, Katie and Ella were stuck in Canada. Each day they walked to the gate to see if the ferry was operating, and each day the sign said it wasn't. So they sat by the fire and played in the snow when they could. They helped the Roys with housework. Katie helped with dinner, along with Martha. Homan brought in wood for the fire. No one was out flying their kites across the gorge.

Each morning the children hoped they would be able to cross the river. They hoped they would be able to find The Union. Afternoons and evenings came and went, and each day the hope of getting home to find their kite before it was buried under the snow dimmed. During those waiting days, the children became close with Martha. Katie asked her questions about her escape—and what she was running from. Martha answered, never seeming nervous or offended by Katie's curiosity.

Homan usually listened to Martha's stories, but one morning, he left Katie and Martha near

the fire to talk while he went to check the ferry gate. He wasn't gone for long when he burst back through the door!



“It’s running!” he yelled. “Katie! The ferry is running! We’ve got to go find The Union now!”

Katie jumped up with glee. They immediately started to gather their belongings. Katie put on her coat. Homan nestled the handle and kite string into his pocket. Mr. and Mrs. Roy hugged each of them—including Ella—goodbye. The children thanked them for the food and a warm place to sleep.

“Will you come back to this side of the gorge to fly your kite again?” Mr. Roy asked.

“Of course, sir!” Homan replied. “If the wind is still blowing towards the States.”

“First we’ve got to find and fix the head of the kite, though,” Katie said.

“Well, you better be off then,” said Mrs. Roy. “We’ll all be on the lookout for you to come back.”

Homan, Katie, and Ella ran out the door toward the ferry gate. They boarded the ferry, and when they reached the other side Homan

told Katie to run to the store to tell their fathers that they were safe.

“Come right back here once you’ve told them,” Homan said. “I need your help to find our kite.”

Katie ran off, and Homan immediately began searching for any sign of The Union. He first had thought he should try to line himself up with where they had been standing across the gorge, but then thought the kite would’ve blown off course anyway, so it didn’t matter. He walked up and down the edge of the gorge, occasionally stopping to dig through the snow, which Ella enjoyed.

Katie rejoined them, but it still seemed hopeless. Then suddenly Ella began to bark. Homan ran to where she was digging. He saw a bit of green fabric!

“Katie! Come look! I think Ella found The Union!” Homan exclaimed.

Katie came running, and the three uncovered what was, indeed, The Union. They raced off to

the shop to dry and repair the kite. When they clamored through the shop door, Homan's father stopped working and came to hug his son.

"We've been worried sick about you two!" he said. "Tom! Tom, they're both back now!" Mr. Walsh called for Katie's father.

"Oh my goodness. I'm so glad you're both safe," he said. "Now do you want to explain what happened? Katie ran off before she told us anything."

"We got stuck in Canada when the ferry couldn't run," Homan said. "We tried to come home every day, but they said the ice was clustering and there was no way."

"Where did you stay?" asked Papa.

"Homan's parents have friends in Canada!" Katie said. "The Roys. They were very nice."

"How nice of them to take you two in," Papa said.

"Indeed," said Mr. Walsh. "I'll need to pay them a thank-you visit when spring finally comes."

“We’ve got to repair The Union and get it dried off! People are already out with their kites again!” Homan pushed through the adults. Katie and Ella followed close behind him.

It didn’t take long for Homan to repair the frame and attach new string. It felt like an eternity sitting in front of the Walsh’s fireplace to dry the kite, though. Once Homan declared it dry enough to fly, the two took off toward the ferry yet again, followed by shouts from their fathers: “Be careful!”

This journey across the gorge was just like the first one, except now Katie felt happier. She had met Martha. Martha was happy and free now. They had found their kite. Life seemed less heavy to her.

Homan set up at a different spot on the Canadian side of the gorge this time. He said it seemed like a shorter distance. They launched the kite, and Homan maneuvered it up and over their competition, just like the first time. This

time, though, the skies were clear. The wind picked up and carried The Union higher and farther. Homan adjusted his body to keep his grip, occasionally asking Katie to hold on with him when the wind really roared.

“That is a mighty fine kite,” shouted a familiar voice from behind them.

They turned to see Mr. Roy. Homan smiled.

“It’s catching a lot of wind!” he shouted. Then Homan felt a tug on the line.

“Oh no. Not again,” he cried.

He turned from Mr. Roy to face the gorge, scared he would see The Union broken again. But what he saw was much more pleasant. All three of them struggled to follow the kite string across the gorge. Homan tugged. It was stuck. Katie squinted.

“Homan! I think that’s our kite stuck in the tree over there!” Katie said excitedly. “I think we won!”

“Well, you’ll need to go collect your prize then, kids,” said Mr. Roy. “I’ll hold this end of the

kite. You two go catch the ferry. Make sure they know The Union is yours!”

Katie and Homan ran to the ferry. Even the heavy snow on the ground couldn't slow them down. By the time they reached the kite, a man they recognized was under the tree along with a small group of people.

“It does appear we have a winner!” exclaimed Mr. Ellet.

“That's our kite!” Homan yelled to him, short of breath and still approaching the group of onlookers at a slow jog.

The crowd turned to see who was coming toward them. Katie smiled. Ella wagged her tail.

“What're your names, children?” asked Mr. Ellet.

“I'm Homan. This is Katie. And that's my dog, Ella.”

“So, Homan, Katie, and Ella, does this kite have a name?” Mr. Ellet asked.

“The Union!” Katie shouted.

“Because its string is forming the union between the United States and Canada!” added Homan.

Mr. Ellet smiled.

“Folks, I’d like to officially announce that The Union, flown by Homan and Katie, is the winner of the contest!”

A small celebration was held in a town tavern that evening. Katie and Homan were allowed to stay up later than usual but they were still ushered home earlier than either would have liked. They hugged goodbye and slept soundly that night knowing that their kite—their one little kite—was going to change the way the world worked.

8

THE SUSPENSION BRIDGE



THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE bridge began the very next day. Working tirelessly, Mr. Ellet and his team stretched new cords along The Union's string, transforming the narrow kite string into a thick, strong cable. Two large towers were then constructed on either side of the gorge, allowing for even heavier cable to span the chasm. The newspapers said construction was on schedule. Katie and Homan sometimes went to watch the workers build. One morning, a few days after their last visit, Katie's papa read the newspaper aloud to her.

“Iron Basket to Carry Supplies and People Across Gorge,” read Papa.

“What does that mean, Papa?” Katie asked.

“Well, it says here that Mr. Ellet’s ironworker is constructing a basket,” Papa answered. “Mr. Ellet says he’s going to attach the basket to the cables and use it to get workers and supplies from one side of the gorge to the other.”

“So people can ride in the basket?” exclaimed Katie. “I want to ride in the basket!”

“I’m not sure they’ll be allowing anyone to do that but workers, baby, but you can certainly go watch.”

And that’s what Katie and Homan did. Their trips to the gorge became a daily ritual—and much more tolerable as the weather began to warm into a welcoming spring.

The first day Katie and Homan saw the iron basket, they overheard Mr. Ellet speak to the man who brought it about how much weight it could carry. Then the man connected it to

the cable, and after two passes back and forth over the gorge, they added supplies to test it with weight in the basket. Workers looked on anxiously, hoping to not lose the supplies which they needed to continue working. But the basket didn't break. It swayed in the breeze, but not one item was lost.

Katie and Homan became more enthralled with the bridge with every passing day. They tried not to miss a day at the construction site, even if they could only spend a few minutes watching.

One day while watching the team struggle with the ever-expanding cables, Homan began asking the workers questions.

“Excuse me, sir. Those cables are getting bigger every day. How big will they be when you're done?”

“Well,” the worker replied, “We need to pull heavier and heavier lines until the final cable—that'll be nearly an inch thick.”

“One inch doesn’t seem like that much,” said Katie skeptically. “It’s got to hold up a whole bridge!”

“It may not seem like a lot, but it’ll be very sturdy,” said the worker.

Before Homan could ask another question, a man yelled from a distance.

“What are you standing around for? Get back to work!”

Mr. Ellet approached the children.

“You two could get hurt hanging around here, ya know,” he said.

“We try to stay out of the way, sir,” Homan said. “But our kite was the one that won the contest, and we’re really interested in the bridge.”

“Ah, I see,” said Mr. Ellet. “Well, what questions have you got?” He sounded both challenging and self-important at the same time.

“What do the towers do?” Homan asked. “I just don’t understand how this cable and a couple towers becomes a bridge.”

“We need strong towers to hold the weight of the cables,” Mr. Ellet replied. “The cables will hold up the bridge.”

“So that’s why it’s called a suspension bridge!” cried Katie.

Ellet seemed a little shocked that the connection was made by Katie, but he smiled nonetheless.

The next day Mr. Ellet, with Homan, Katie, and Ella right behind him, approached an ironworker. It was Mr. Theodore Hullet, the man who had come up with the idea of the kite-flying contest in the first place. The two men had a brief conversation, and then Mr. Ellet announced to all who could hear that the next day he would get in the basket and go over the gorge himself!

The news spread quickly. The next day crowds gathered on both sides of the gorge to watch Mr. Ellet’s journey in the basket. He climbed into the basket and it began to move. As it swayed in the wind, Mr. Ellet held on to the

edge with one hand and waved at those watching from both sides of the gorge—he seemed to be quite intentionally not looking down. It went to the Canadian side of the gorge and back.

When the basket finally stopped and Mr. Ellet's feet touched the American side once again, the crowd cheered. Katie and Homan stood right in front, screaming with delight. Ella wagged her tail, happy to celebrate with everyone else.

Mr. Ellet shouted, "Thank you, thank you!" and introduced Mr. Hullet as the man who had made the basket. While Mr. Hullet explained the basket design and how the pulley system worked, Mr. Ellet noticed Katie and Homan in the crowd.

"Ah! Here are our winning kite-flyers!" he exclaimed, motioning to Katie and Homan.

"Yes we are, sir!" said Homan proudly.

Mr. Hullet paused, and the crowd looked on expectantly.

"Well, I think the winners—the children whose kite string made this all possible—should

get to go for a ride in the basket! Do you agree?”

Ellet asked the crowd.

Katie felt uneasy, but Homan was ecstatic.

“Do you mean it?” Homan cried.

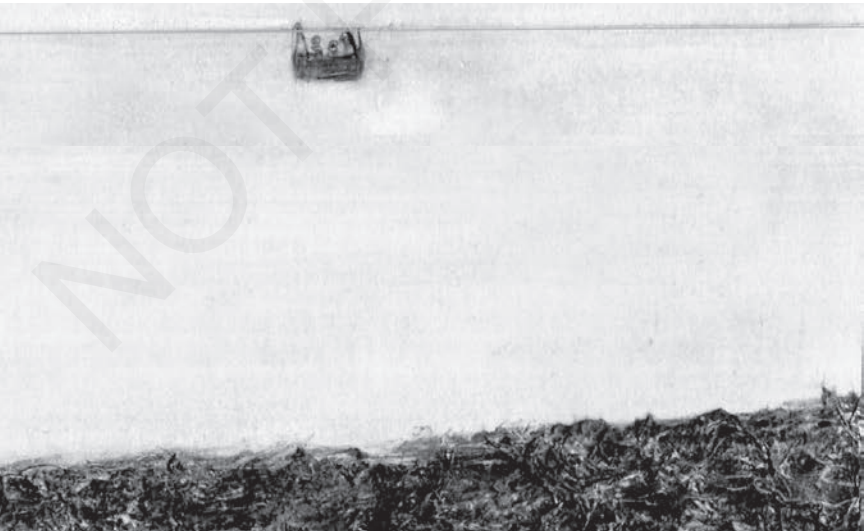
“Of course! Come on over here!” said Mr. Ellet, motioning toward the iron basket.

Homan took Katie by the hand and helped her climb—a bit reluctantly—into the basket, instructing Ella sternly to sit and wait for him. Mr. Ellet climbed in, too. Katie had wanted to go for a ride in the basket, but seeing how high



it really was and watching the basket sway in the wind made her nervous.

Then the basket began to move, lurching forward a bit. Katie grabbed the iron rim. It felt cold even though the day was warm and sunny. As the basket neared the center of what would become the bridge, Katie thought about Martha for the first time in months. She wondered if this basket—this bridge—would have helped her escape faster than by the boat. Katie was so deep in thought that she was surprised to



realize they were already on the Canadian side of the gorge.

“Wave to the crowd, children!” prompted Mr. Ellet.

They waved, and then the basket began its journey back to the other side.



Weeks passed as the men continued working on the bridge. It was summer, the time of year when tourists came from across both nations to see the magnificent Niagara Falls. Mr. Ellet began selling rides in the iron basket to anyone who would pay. Papa told Katie that it wasn't smart of him since Mr. Stuart didn't approve of him collecting money on the job or inviting civilians into the construction zone. No criticisms or warnings stopped Mr. Ellet, though, and both the basket rides and the bridge construction continued.

The sound of hammers filled the air as planks of wood were laid between the towers. Two small footbridges were built side-by-side. Soon, Mr. Ellet was also charging people to walk across the bridge. Then the footbridges were joined together to make an eight-foot wide suspension bridge, big enough to hold a carriage!

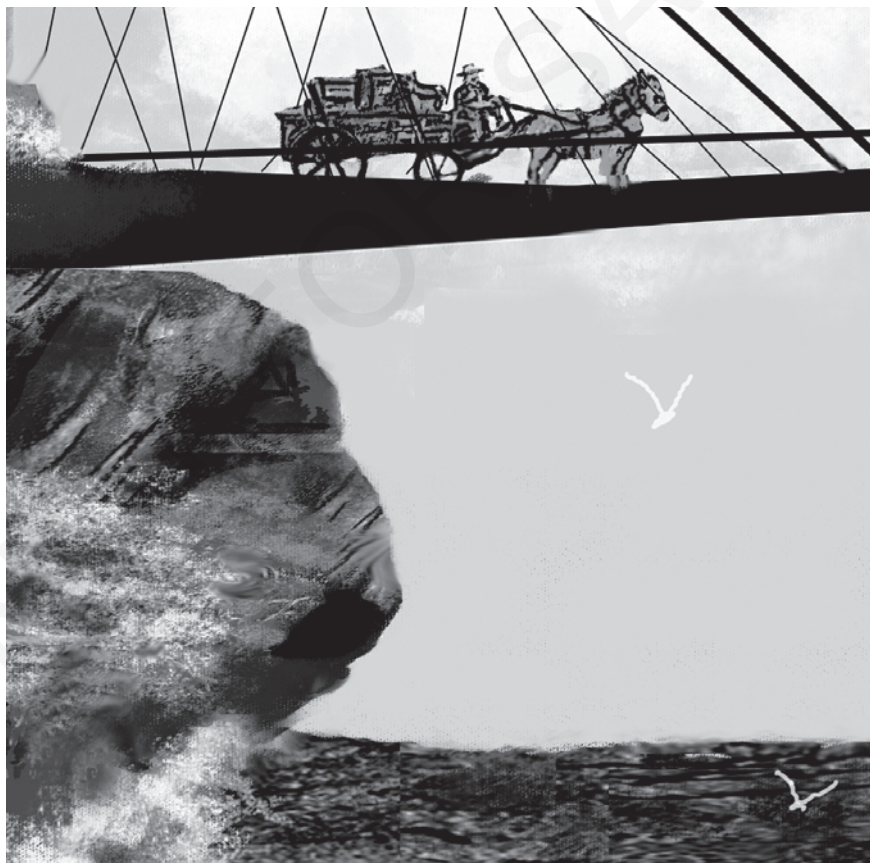
On July 26, 1848, the bridge was complete. Yet another crowd gathered to watch Mr. Ellet cross the bridge in a carriage.

The crowd cheered when he arrived, and many people wondered when they would get their chance to ride over the carriage bridge. But before Mr. Ellet could begin speaking to the crowd, the man who commissioned the bridge to be built jumped in.

“We’d like to thank you all for your continued support for this project,” said Mr. Stuart. “And, of course, I’d like to thank and congratulate our lead engineer, Mr. Ellet, on this incredible feat. Now

we must continue our work to make the bridge railroad-ready!”

After the opening of the bridge, Mr. Ellet continued to charge pedestrians and carriages a fare to cross the bridge. Unfortunately, Mr. Ellet did so without the permission of the bridge



directors, and he decided to keep the money for himself. Five months later, Mr. Ellet was fired from the bridge project.

“Papa was right,” thought Katie. “Mr. Ellet should have listened to Mr. Stuart when he told him to stop selling trips over the gorge.”



9

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD



BY THE END OF THE SUMMER, Homan and Katie were back to their daily routines. Both did their chores and made time to play, sometimes over by the Cataract House. A year or so passed, and they watched as the bridge continued to grow. It towered over everything. It was the biggest thing Homan and Katie had ever seen.

In 1850, the papers announced that Mr. Stuart had hired John Roebling to modify Mr. Ellet's bridge. Mr. Roebling planned to add a

second deck to the bridge by using Mr. Ellet's bridge as scaffolding.

While helping with a delivery to the Cataract House one day, they realized that they could see some of the bridge from the veranda. Homan, Katie, and Ella squinted into the sun to see the massive structure, marveling that they had helped get it started. They were standing so quietly by a column at the railing, staring in awe at the bridge, that two waiters failed to even notice them as they walked by on the veranda.

"The railroad must cross the river tonight," said one of the waiters quietly but with urgency. "We've got to get them over to the other side."

"I don't know if Mr. Morrison will approve of a rushed job," the other waiter responded doubtfully. "It's already so dangerous."

"The Underground Railroad is always going to be dangerous," the first one said flatly. "Until it's no longer needed."

The two men kept walking, their voices fading out of earshot. Katie looked quizzically at Homan. Homan shrugged.

“Katie! Homan!” Papa called. “It’s time to head home!”

They clambered into the wagon. Ella jumped in after them. Papa steered the wagon back to the shop and he and Katie walked home, enjoying the autumn air.

“Papa, can I ask you a question?” Katie said.

“Well you just did,” laughed Papa. “But sure, you can ask another one.”

Katie ignored her father’s joke.

“Today, when we were all at the Cataract House, I heard a few waiters talking about a railroad needing to cross the gorge, but you said the bridge won’t be ready for railroad cars until I’m nearly 18! I’m only 14, so how can it be ready so soon?”

Papa paused. He paused for such a long moment that Katie didn’t realize they were outside their own door.

“Go on in, Katie,” Papa said. “Let’s talk about this with your mother.”

Katie wasn’t sure what the problem was. She just wanted to understand the bridge.

Papa went into the kitchen to talk with Mama. Katie sat by the door to take off her shoes. Soon, her parents came into the room.

“She’s old enough to understand,” Papa said to Mama.

They sat down and asked Katie where she had heard about a railroad crossing that night.

“A few waiters...at the Cataract House,” said Katie, slowly. “They said it was called the Underground Railroad, and that it was dangerous... Is the Underground Railroad what they are building the bridge for? Is that the name of the railroad? That seems odd. It’s up in the sky, not underground!”

“Oh, Katie,” Mama said. “We’ve got a lot to tell you.”

So Mama and Papa explained the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and

safe houses that slaves escaping from the South could use to reach freedom.

“Remember Martha?” Papa asked. “She used the Underground Railroad.”

“But she went over the river on a boat not a train,” Katie said, confused.

“The Underground Railroad started many years ago—before this bridge and trains crossing the gorge were even thought of,” Papa said.

“I’m not sure I understand,” said Katie.

“It’s okay,” Mama said. “You will when you’re older.”

With that, Katie was sent off to bed. But she couldn’t sleep. She lay awake, trying to decipher what her parents had said. What is the Underground Railroad, and why isn’t it a train? What did this have to do with Martha escaping slavery? Why wouldn’t someone just tell her what was going on?

Katie watched the moon out the window for a long time. Then, she thought she heard her

mother singing. At first, she didn't get out of bed, thinking she must be dreaming. Why would Mama be awake at this hour?

But then she noticed the soft glow of lantern light seeping in around her door. Her mother crooned:

Swing low, sweet chariot.

Coming for to carry me home.

Things were quiet then, but Katie heard a peculiar knock at the front door. She crept out of bed and inched the door open a crack, trying to keep it from squeaking. Kneeling on the floor, she peered out. A young man Katie didn't recognize sat there. He had dark skin and short hair. His clothes were dirty, and his face looked worn, but she could tell he was still young.

Mama gave him some tea and sat next to him. Katie couldn't hear what they were saying, even when she leaned as far out of her room as she dared. Then, another knock, the same peculiar pattern as before.

Papa opened the door. It was Mr. Morrison from the Cataract House!

“What could he be doing here?” wondered Katie.

Mr. Morrison shook the young man’s hand and sat down. They whispered to each other for a few minutes, and then Mr. Morrison motioned for the young man to come with him. They left the house, gently shutting the door behind them, and climbed aboard a cart waiting outside.

It would be a few years before Katie asked her parents about what she saw that night, but she would understand all of it before the bridge was finished.

10

THE BRIDGE

BECOMES A RAILROAD



BY THE TIME KATIE TURNED 18, Mr. Roebling and his team had added massive limestone support towers to both sides of the gorge.

The newspapers said those towers could support up to 12 million pounds, which made the upper deck of the suspension bridge safe for train traffic. On March 18, 1855, just before Katie's 19th birthday, the first passenger train passed over the gorge on the suspension bridge, officially opening the bridge.



Over the years, Katie had watched many people like the young man she saw when she was 14 years old come into her home. She had



listened to her mother sing different songs as she hung a lamp in the window. Like moths, they came seeking refuge. Mama always had

hot tea ready for the visitors. Mr. Morrison or someone who worked for him always came to pick up the visitors.

When Katie turned 16, she found the courage to ask her mother about the singing, and the lantern, and the strangers. Mama said she knew she that would ask someday. She reminded Katie about when she was young and asked about the Underground Railroad. And she asked Katie to remember Martha and the ferry. Katie nodded.

Mama told her that their house was a stop on the Underground Railroad, that she and her papa had been helping freedom seekers escape for years. She explained that the lantern and songs were markers for the escaping slaves—markers that meant it was safe to knock on the door of the house.

Katie understood, then, what had been happening all those years. The trips to the Cataract House with Papa weren't just for Mr.

Walsh's shop. Her parents didn't leave out details of stories just to keep her confused all those years. They did it to keep her safe. She knew now that helping a slave escape was illegal. Katie remembered when she saw the first man escaping to freedom through their home. Shortly before that, she had read in the newspaper that President Millard Fillmore passed a law called the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which made it even more dangerous for escaping slaves and for the people trying to help them and required that slaves be returned to their owners, even if they were in a free state.

Now, as a 19-year-old young woman, her parents were more open with her. They let her know when someone would be coming that evening. She even began getting them tea, like she had secretly watched her mother do for so many years.

Katie prepared a blanket and a cup of tea for the visitor they expected that evening. But

Papa told her that this night would be different. They'd be having multiple visitors.

"How many cups of tea will I need to make?" asked Katie.

"We'll know when they get here," Papa answered.

There was a knock on the door, a different pattern than Katie was used to hearing. Papa answered. A small-statured woman stood at the door. She was older than Katie, but she certainly wasn't her parent's age. Behind her stood two young women, a young man, and a man who reminded her of her father.

"Missus, please come have a seat." Mama motioned them into the room, glancing out the door before closing it.

"Can I get anyone some tea?" Mama asked, but before she could turn to the kitchen, Katie was right behind her with five cups of tea on a small tray.

"And who might this be?" the woman asked.

“This is our daughter, Katie,” Papa said.

“Well, nice to meet you, Katie. Thank you for the tea. You may call me Sarah,” she said. Then she turned to her traveling companions.

“You four are going to be the first to cross the border into Canada on the train,” Sarah said. “Once that train starts moving, you’re headed to safety, but you’ll feel much better once it’s stopped and your feet are on free ground.”

The group understood and nodded. There was a nervous tension in the room.

“So they don’t have to go by carriage or ferry, Missus Sarah?” Katie asked. “They really can use the railroad?”

“This is the first time we’re trying,” she said slowly. “But more people, like these nice folks, can get over all at once with something big like the train.” There was hope in her voice.

“Missus Sarah,” Katie said quietly. “When that bridge was first being built, they needed a string to span the gorge before they could start building.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that’s how suspension bridges are made,” said Missus Sarah, eyes peering over her small glasses.

“Well, my friend Homan and I flew a kite and won a contest. Our kite string was the first string to span the gorge that helped build the bridge.”

Papa looked on proudly at his daughter’s realization that her kite from so long ago might help save people today.

“We got prize money for winning that contest,” Katie continued, now turning to the four individuals who had come with Missus Sarah, all of whom seemed too anxious to speak.

“I saved my share of that money, not knowing what to spend it on all these years,” said Katie. “But with your permission, I’d like to give it to you four.”

Everyone in the room looked astonished.

“Katie, I thought you spent that money years ago,” Mama exclaimed.

Katie walked to her bedroom and pulled out a small envelope with \$2.50 in it. She returned to the living room and handed the envelope to one of the young women.

“It’s not much, but I hope it will help you get your new lives started.”

“Thank you,” said the young woman fervently as she took the envelope from Katie, her hand shaking.

Soon, a carriage came to pick them up and take them to the train. Katie lay awake in bed that night, but not because she was brimming with questions and confusion like when she was girl. She lay awake, anxious, hoping that Missus Sarah could get those people safely into Canada and freedom.

The next morning, Katie awoke to bright sunlight streaming through the small window. She hadn’t even realized she’d fallen asleep. She went to the kitchen where her father sat at the table.

“They’re safe,” Papa said. Mama and Papa exchanged a long glance before Papa continued to speak.

“Katie I think that you have demonstrated enough maturity that we can trust you with this secret. Missus Sarah’s real name is Harriet Tubman. She’s a very strong woman, but if anyone knows she was here, it could be very bad,” Papa replied.

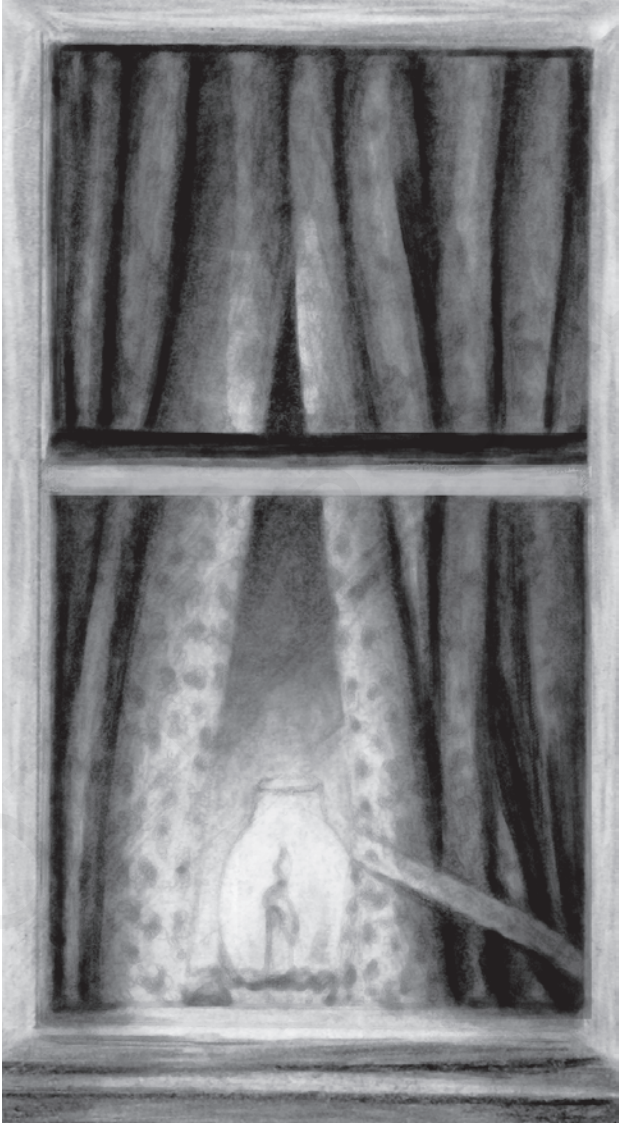
“Why does she keep her name a secret?”

“Because her work is very dangerous,” Mama softly stated. “Many slave owners and bounty hunters would like to see her dead. Anyone who associates with her is in danger.”

“So we are in danger?” Katie cried in surprise.

“Yes,” Papa said calmly. “But it is a choice that we have made to help those unfortunate slaves have a life of freedom.”

After a moment, they all sat down to breakfast.



EPILOGUE

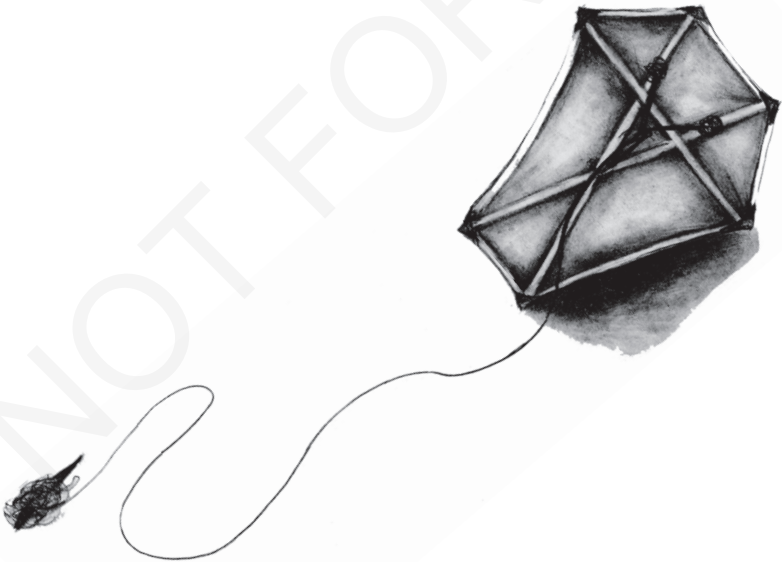


FOR MANY YEARS, KATIE HELPED her parents as they helped slaves escape safely to freedom in Canada. Missus Harriet came to their home several more times, and Katie was careful never to use her real name. During these visits, Katie developed a deep bond with her, a relationship that she treasured for the rest of her life.

Since those long-ago days, many years have passed. Homan left Niagara Falls for a new life in Lincoln, Nebraska, and Katie missed her dear friend. Now Katie spends her evenings with her grandchildren, sitting near her fireplace telling

stories of the Underground Railroad and the famous bridge. She tells the story of Harriet Tubman—her friend and one of the most famous freedom fighters to ever live.

And she tells them how a single kite string built a bridge to freedom for many escaping slaves, reminding them that something great can grow from something very small.



THE AUTHOR




Kathleen A. Dinan was inspired to write this book by her father. She was born in Buffalo, New York, and lived most of her adult life in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, where she raised her three children. A graduate of Saint Louis University School of Law, she worked in New York City and New Jersey for a number of years.

THE ILLUSTRATOR



Iris M. Kirkwood, a self-taught visual artist, was born and raised in Buffalo, New York, just a few miles from Niagara Falls. She used elements of the story, the setting, the young characters, and her unique point of view, combined with digital and traditional tools, to create the visual narrative for this story. Her work is in private collections as well as exhibited in galleries and museums.



A powerful story that masterfully weaves together the construction of the nation's first railway suspension bridge and its critical connection to the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls. This colorful tale entwines imagination with documented history to create an engaging story that depicts life as it was at the height of Underground Railroad activity on both sides of the border, as refugees escaped slavery to find freedom in Canada. Highly recommended for all young readers.

— Bill Bradberry

Co-founder of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad
Heritage Center and Chairman Emeritus

NIAGARA FALLS, 1848

Can a kite change history? Katie and Homan's did.

When engineers were faced with the challenge of bridging the vast Niagara Gorge, the solution was a kite-flying contest. After Katie and Homan's kite crosses the gorge and wins the contest, construction begins on the first suspension bridge to connect the United States and Canada. The two friends are there as it becomes an important link on the Underground Railroad, helping slaves escape to freedom.

Even as her parents try to shield her from the ugly existence of slavery and the dangers of the Underground Railroad, Katie discovers that the scary truth is closer to home than she could have imagined.

Kite to Freedom is an action-packed, fictionalized account of actual events that occurred during the construction of the Niagara Falls International Suspension Bridge, which still connects the United States and Canada at Niagara Falls.



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