

## THE PEOPLE COULD FLY (A FOLKTALE)

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According to an old story, Africans in ancient times could fly like birds. As late as slavery days, there were still some who retained the power of flight, though they looked like other men. One of these people once turned up on an out-of-the-way plantation in America. This is what happened. The plantation's cruel master had a habit of working his slaves until they died of overwork in the burning sun. After driving a group of slaves to such a cruel fate, he bought a new batch of slaves at auction and put them to work at once. Among them was a young woman who had lately borne a child, her first, and she was still weak. Whenever the baby cried, she spoke to quiet it in words the foreman could not understand.

But then one day, sick with the heat, she stumbled and fell. The overseer struck her with the lash until she got up. She spoke to a man near her. He was the oldest there, tall and strong with a forked beard, and the overseer could not understand their talk. After another spell of work, she fell again. The overseer whipped her to her feet and again she addressed her words to the old slave. But he said, "Not yet." So she went back to work.

But when she fell down a third time, and the overseer came running with his lash yet again, she turned to the old man, and this time he said, "You, daughter, go!" With that she leaped straight into the air and flew away with her baby astraddle her hip.

The overseer turned to the others to make up for his loss. The sun was very hot indeed. Soon a man fell down. The overseer lashed him. But the old man called out in an unknown tongue, and when he had spoken, the beaten slave laughed and leaped up into the air and was gone, flying over field and wood. The overseer called out to his men, "Get that old devil! Get him!" They all ran at the old man with their whips ready. Even master ran at him, too, with a stout stick he had picked up. He planned to beat the old man to death. But the old man laughed in their faces and then he spoke strange words so loudly that all the slaves in the field heard.

As he spoke, they all remembered what they had forgotten and recalled the power that had once been theirs. Then they all stood up together. The old man raised his hands, and they all leaped up into the air with a great shout and in a moment were gone over the field, over the fence, and over the top of the wood. Behind all of them flew the old man. The men went clapping their hands, the women went singing, and the children laughed and were not afraid. The master, the overseer, and all the men looked after them as they flew, but they were helpless to do anything. Those men, women, and children flew beyond the wood, beyond the river, miles and miles, until they passed beyond the last rim of the world and disappeared into the sky like a handful of leaves. They were never seen by the master again.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What are the fantastical qualities of this story?
2. How are words and memory important in this folktale?
3. What does the slaves' memory of flight symbolize?
4. Why would memory be important in the life of an African slave in America?
5. How does this folktale embody the greatest hopes of slaves in America?