“I WOULD RATHER DIE” The incredible true story of Frederick Douglass

BY SPENCER KAYDEN
Characters
Circle the character you will play.

*Narrators 1 & 2
*Freddy, a young slave
*Old Frederick, Freddy as a grown man
Overseer

Slaves:
Aunt Katy
Esther
*William
Jake
Harry
Hugh Auld, a white businessman

*Sophy Auld,
Hugh’s wife
Tommy, Hugh and Sophy’s son
Thomas Auld, Hugh’s brother, a plantation owner

Slave Owners 1 & 2
Joseph,
a free black man
Conductor

*indicates large speaking role

Key Ideas and Details As you read this play, think about how reading changed Frederick Douglass’s life.

LOOK FOR WORD NERD’S 7 TERMS IN BOLD

Scene 1

N1: The year is 1838. On a plantation in Maryland, 7-year-old Freddy is curled in a ball on the kitchen floor. He is shivering, wearing only a tattered shirt.

N2: Aunt Katy, the cook, comes in to make breakfast. She kicks Freddy in the ribs.

Aunt Katy: Get up, you. Out of my way.

N1: Freddy lingers, hoping to get a bit of food.

Aunt Katy: Get on out, or no breakfast for you.

N2: Outside, Freddy finds two boys, Jake and William. They are watching the overseer drag Freddy’s cousin Esther by the ear.

Overseer: This is twice now you have overslept.

Esther: I am sorry! I was—

Overseer: You’ll sleep outside tonight.

Esther: It’s winter, sir!

Overseer: My word is law. Get out to the fields.

N1: Freddy winces as he hears the loud crack of the overseer’s whip. He turns to the boys.

Freddy: Do you ever wonder why you’re a slave?

William: My mama’s a slave. Her mama was too.

Freddy: Mine too. But will we be slaves forever?

Jake: What choice do we have?

Freddy: The cows have straw to sleep on. The pigs have leaves. What do we have? Nothing.

William: Keep your voice down, Freddy. Talking like that will only bring you trouble.

Scene 2

N2: At age 9, Freddy is sent to Baltimore, Maryland, to be a slave for Hugh Auld, his wife Sophy, and their son Tommy. One day, the two boys play.

Tommy: How old are you?

Freddy: I don’t know.

Tommy: That’s silly. When is your birthday?

Freddy: Around harvest time, I think.

Tommy: My birthday is February 19.

Freddy: What’s feb-yoo-airy?

Tommy: You don’t know much, do you?

Sophy (walking in): Boys, shall I read a story?

N1: Tommy settles in on the couch next to his mother. Freddy holds back, hesitant.

Sophy: Come here and sit with us, Freddy.

N2: Freddy sits at her feet and listens to her lovely voice.

Sophy (reading): “Then Pharaoh’s daughter saw a basket among the reeds. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying.”

Freddy (timidly): Miss Sophy, would you teach me how to read?

Sophy: Why of course! What fun!

Scene 3

N1: A few weeks later, Sophy calls to Hugh.
Sophy: Oh, Hugh! We have a surprise for you! Show him, Freddy.
Freddy (reading): “The boy has a bird. The bird can fly. See the bird—”
N2: Hugh grabs the book from Freddy’s hands.
Hugh (yelling): You taught this boy to read?
Sophy: Yes! Isn’t he a fast learner?
Hugh: It is unlawful to teach a slave to read!
Sophy: But why? Such a bright boy should—
Hugh: If he learns to read, he will want to write, and then, there’s no telling what he will want. It will make him forever unfit for the duties of a slave. (to Freddy) If I ever catch you reading again, I’ll not spare the whip.
Old Frederick: Those words opened my eyes. If knowledge made me unfit to be a slave, then I suddenly understood the pathway to freedom.

Scene 4

Old Frederick: After that, I read whatever I could find. I took scraps of paper from the gutter and books that Mr. Auld tossed aside. I carefully copied the letters until I could write my own sentences. But I had to be careful.
N1: Freddy pores over a newspaper in his room.
Freddy (reading): “Thirty... dol... dollars for... the... cap-tour... capture—”
Sophy (storming in): FREDDY!
N2: She snatches the paper.
Sophy: How dare you! No reading!
Freddy: Yes, Miss Sophy.
Sophy: It’s for your own good. Nobody wants a disrespectful slave.
Freddy: Yes, Miss Sophy.
N1: Freddy watches, his face twisted in agony, as Sophy throws the newspaper into the fire.

Scene 5

N2: Many years have passed. Freddy is 17, and Mr. Auld has sent him back to the plantation.
N1: Freddy is harvesting wheat with other young men, sweating in the scorching sun.
William: Is that you, Freddy?
N2: Freddy turns to see a young man with a sunken, hollow face.
Freddy: William? I hardly recognize you. All these years you’ve been doing hard labor. How can you stand it?
William: I see you have not changed. Please don’t stir up trouble. I’ve had enough lashes.
N1: William lifts up his shirt and shows Freddy his scarred back.
N2: Freddy opens his mouth to speak when he overhears the overseer rides over on his horse. He brings his whip down hard on Freddy’s back.
Overseer: No talking!
N1: Freddy crumples to the ground.
William (whispering): Just keep your head down and do your work.

Scene 6

N2: Freddy sits under a tree with William and a few others. It is their one day off a week.
Freddy: Working in the fields makes me so tired and hungry, there is no time to think. I feel my dreams of freedom slipping away.
William: Freedom? Are you crazy?
Freddy: We must keep our minds active. I have an idea. I’ll teach a class, right here under this oak tree. Bring as many others as you can.
Harry: I could get 40 stripes for that.
Jake: Plus, what's the point? We're slaves for life.
Freddy: There has got to be more to life than serving our masters. We have hearts and minds and souls! If we don't try to escape, what hope do we have?
Jake: We don't think about hope.
Freddy: Knowledge is freedom. Find books that your masters and mistresses have cast off. Bring them here, and I will show you how to read them. Please.

Scene 7

Old Frederick: The following Sunday, five brave men came to my class. The next week, a dozen. Every week, the number grew. Soon, slaves from nearby plantations were coming.
N1: One morning, the men sit under the tree, their books scattered about.
Jake (reading): "They have a pow'er over my li-ber . . ." What's this word?
Freddy: Liberty. It means "freedom." It's what the slave owners have taken from us, and we must take it back.
William: Escape is impossible, Freddy. Go by land, their dogs will hunt us down. Go by water, we freeze or drown.
Freddy: I would rather die than remain a slave.
William: Shhh. You hear that? Sounds like—
N2: Led by Master Thomas, three plantation owners with weapons ride up on horseback.
Thomas: Books! Papers! What's going on here?
Freddy: We are just reading, sir.
Slave Owner 1: They are plotting an escape.
Slave Owner 2: We should kill them all.
Slave Owner 1: Nah, I paid a lot for Harry.
Slave Owner 2: This is all Freddy's fault. He is a bad sheep who is spoiling our flock.
Thomas: I will take care of it.
Slave Owner 1: If you don't, I will.
Old Frederick: I thought I'd be hanged for what I had done, but Thomas spared my life and sent me back to live with Master Hugh in Baltimore.
Scene 8

N1: A few months later, Freddy is working in a shipyard among free black men.
Joseph: Freddy, since I met you, all you talk about is freedom.
Freddy: Because it is all I think about.
Joseph: Have you any money?
Freddy: No. Master Hugh takes all my wages.
Joseph: Will he ever set you free?
Freddy: Never. I'm a slave for life—unless I run.
Joseph (looking around): Listen, Freddy. I may have a way to help you. I know a sailor—a freeborn black man. He is willing to lend you his free papers while he's at sea.
Freddy: Joe, you could be killed for helping me.
Joseph: I know.
Freddy: What do I have to do?
Joseph: I have a sailor's outfit for you and a few coins. Take the train to New York. There are abolitionists there who will protect you. But beware of slave catchers!
Freddy (in disbelief): Can this plan work?
Joseph (smiling): I hope so. Go be free, Freddy.

Scene 9

N2: Freddy sits on a train speeding out of Baltimore. His heart pounds anxiously as the conductor approaches.
Old Frederick: I did not hear the thundering wheels or see the blur of trees whizzing by. I saw only the conductor's stern face. He did not know that what happened next would save my life—or destroy it.
Conductor: You have your free papers?
Freddy: Yes, sir.
N1: Freddy hands him an official document.

Old Frederick: I held my breath. If the conductor looked closely, he would see the papers described a very different man. I would surely be arrested and sold to the Deep South, my dreams of freedom forever dashed.
Conductor: All right, sailor.
Freddy (trying not to tremble): Yes?
Conductor: Come on—pay your fare.
N2: Freddy gives the man a few coins. The conductor returns the papers and moves on.
N1: Freddy exhales deeply. He turns to stare at the blue sky out the window.

Epilogue

N2: Frederick escaped to the free state of Massachusetts. He began speaking at antislavery conventions and became one of the most important voices in the abolitionist movement.
N1: He became an adviser to President Abraham Lincoln and later held positions in the U.S. government. His autobiography, published in 1845, is widely read to this day.

WRITE TO WIN!

Explain how reading affected Frederick Douglass’s journey to freedom. Use details from “I Would Rather Die” to support your ideas. Send your response to “Storyworks Frederick Douglass Contest” by March 15, 2014. Five winners will each receive a copy of Elijah of Buxton by Christopher Paul Curtis. See page 2 for details.