Never Caught

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR

Born and raised in Pennsylvania, Erica Armstrong Dunbar spent the early years of her education at a Philadelphia Quaker school reading deeply for hours on end. She was drawn to true stories, and when she enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania, decided to turn her childhood passion into a course of study. After earning a BA from UPenn in history and Afro-American Studies, she went on to receive her MA and PhD from Columbia University. Dunbar's research and scholarship has, in her own words, focused primarily on "the lives of women of African descent who called America their home during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." With special interests in urban history, Philadelphia history, and emancipation studies, Dunbar is the current Charles and Mary Beard Professor of History at Rutgers University in New Jersey, a post she has held since 2017. Dunbar is also the National Director of the Association of Black Women Historians and previously served as the Inaugural Director of the Program in African American History at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Dunbar is the author of *She Came to Slay: The Life and Times of Harriet Tubman*; *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*, which was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award for nonfiction; and *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*. Dunbar has also been a contributor to *The Nation*, *Time*, *The New York Times*, and *The Philadelphia Enquirer*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Never Caught is a historical text which centers the story of Ona Judge Staines. Born into slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon plantation—but technically owned by Washington's wife, Martha Custis Washington—Ona was pledged to the first lady and eventually came to serve as a handmaiden of sorts to Martha. Because Ona, as a slave, was never taught to read or write, no record of her feelings or experiences exist in her own words apart from a pair of interviews she gave to two American newspapers toward the end of her life. In the absence of historical documentation of Ona's most intimate experiences, Dunbar carefully reconstructs the things Ona might have been thinking, feeling, and enduring by using what records do exist from the time period. Dunbar carefully charts what was happening in the Washingtons' lives during the tumultuous early days of America in order to examine how the Washingtons' experiences would have affected the slaves they owned. Changing moral attitudes around the institution of slavery throughout the late 1700s did little to shift Washington's personal outlook on slaveholding—and even when he famously emancipated his slaves on his deathbed, he did not liberate the slaves his wife held as part of her own estate. By interrogating Washington as a historical figure—and by recognizing that much of what has been written about the man is hagiography—Dunbar engages with a side of American history that is often swept under the rug. Reconstructing Ona's story allows Dunbar to speak more broadly about the fundamental injustices surrounding the creation of America even as she focuses on a specific tale of one woman's journey from bondage to freedom.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Never Caught is not the only historical text published in recent years that seeks to interrogate and reimagine George Washington's imperfect legacy. Washington is often cast as a complicated man who was morally opposed to slavery, when in reality, he relied heavily on slave labor in an attempt to unbury himself from the debt and economic uncertainty he faced even after ascending to the presidency. Jessie MacLeod and Mary V. Thompson's 2016 book *Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon* and Henry Wiencek's 2003 *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* are two other works of historical scholarship which center the integral role Washington's slaves played in Washington's private and professional lives. By focusing on the fundamental injustices inherent within the creation of America, these books (as well as Mary V. Thompson's *The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret: George Washington, Slavery, and the Enslaved Community at Mount Vernon*) pull into the light the oft-overlooked ways in which Washington sought to strengthen rather than abolish the institution of slavery—an institution which served him and other white, wealthy landowners; politicians; and Founding Fathers as well. Additionally, William Wells Brown's novel *Clotel*, which traces the lives of two fictional slave daughters of Thomas Jefferson, is similar to *Never Caught* in that it also focuses on the lived experiences of slaves owned by an American president. Though a work of fiction, *Clotel* is based upon rumors (which some historians believe to be true) that Jefferson fathered several children with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge

- **When Written:** Mid-2010s
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction; History
- **Setting:** Mount Vernon, Virginia; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; New York City, New York; Portsmouth, New Hampshire
- **Climax:** Ona Judge escapes the Washingtons' residence in Philadelphia and flees to Portsmouth, New Hampshire to live as a free woman.
- **Antagonist:** George Washington; Martha Washington; Eliza Custis Law; slavery; paternalism
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Given Her Due. Though Ona Judge Staines's story might be unfamiliar to many, the first decades of the 21st century have been marked by the attempt to bring her remarkable tale to light. Not only did the popular sketch-comedy show *Drunk History* air an episode focusing on Ona in 2007, but Mount Vernon hosted an exhibition entitled "Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon" in 2017 (just before the publication of *Never Caught*) which prominently featured resources and information about Ona and her noteworthy life.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Never Caught*, historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar tells the story of Ona Maria Judge Staines, who was born into slavery at George and Martha Washington's Mount Vernon plantation. Ona escaped to freedom in 1796, absconding from Philadelphia to New Hampshire. Ona was born in 1773, just days after the death of Martha Washington's daughter Patsy. The daughter of Betty, one of Martha Washington's "dower slaves," or human "property" from her first marriage, and a white indentured servant from England named Andrew Judge, Ona was raised primarily by her mother after her father departed alone once his tenure of servitude at Mount Vernon expired.

In 1789, as Washington ascends to the presidency, the 16-year-old Ona—now in the personal employ of Martha Washington as a **seamstress** and handmaiden, charged with outfitting the first lady in finery each day—accompanies the Washingtons northward to New York, the nation's temporary capital. In New York, as Ona caters to the nervous, recalcitrant Martha, she encounters for the first time communities of free Black men and women living communally and autonomously. Ona—and the Washingtons—begin to realize that Northern attitudes toward slavery are changing.

After a brief return to Mount Vernon in 1790, the Washingtons move from New York to Philadelphia. The new nation is in flux, and Congress has decided to create a new capital in Virginia. While the capital is being constructed, the nation's new temporary capital will be centered in Philadelphia—a place which, due to its Quaker roots, is even more progressive than New York. At the large Executive Mansion on High Street in Philadelphia, Ona finds herself living in a house stuffed to the gills with members of the Washington family (and administration), white indentured servants, and enslaved Black people alike. Ona begins caring for the Washington's grandchildren Wash and Nelly—and after being in close quarters not only with the Washingtons' white servants but with the rapidly-expanding free Black community in Philadelphia, Ona begins to fixate on what freedom would be like.

After several months of living in Philadelphia, a member of Washington's administration informs George and Martha that a Pennsylvania law threatens their power over the handful of enslaved men and women they have brought north with them. According to the law, adult slaves who have lived in Pennsylvania for more than six months are entitled to claim their freedom. In order to work around this law, George and Martha begin "shuffling" their slaves around by sending them back and forth from Mount Vernon every six months—knowing all the while that it is only a matter of time before Ona and her fellow bondwomen and bondmen learn the truth of what they're being denied. Washington's chief of staff, Tobias Lear, is instrumental in organizing the Washingtons' "slave shuffle" for nearly six years—all the while, Dunbar writes, Ona wrestles with the desire for freedom and the fear of being caught or recaptured. Even if she is successful in running away, Ona knows, she will never feel safe from the Washingtons' clutches—and she will likely be forced to take on grueling domestic work that is much more difficult than her duties at the Executive Mansion.

After watching two of Washingtons' enslaved Black drivers, Giles and Paris, fall out of favor, Ona also endures the death of her brother, Austin. Soon after, she's forced to flee alongside the Washingtons from a devastating outbreak of yellow fever. Then, when Martha Washington's granddaughter, Eliza Parke Custis, announces her engagement to a much-older man, Thomas Law, Martha announces her intent to "give" Ona to the young Eliza as a wedding gift. Ona is unable to bear the humiliation of realizing how expendable and replaceable she is. The tragedies she has recently endured motivate Ona to at last begin making plans to run away. Aided, Dunbar writes, by a network of free Black people in Philadelphia, Ona escapes in late May of 1796, fleeing the Executive Mansion while George and Martha Washington eat supper one evening. The Washingtons almost immediately place advertisements in local papers offering a reward for Ona's return—but Ona is already on board a freighter bound for Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

In Portsmouth, Ona keeps a low profile as she secures housing and a domestic job through the small but close-knit network of free Black men and women living in the port town. Though New Hampshire will not legally abolish slavery until 1857, by the time Ona arrives there, few white men and women own slaves. Still, Ona is careful about how she dresses, to whom she tells her story, and how she carries herself. But one day in the summer of 1796, Ona is spotted and recognized by Elizabeth Langdon—the daughter of a New Hampshire Senator named John Langdon who frequently traveled with his family to the Executive Mansion while Ona toiled there. Langdon writes to the Washingtons to tell them of what his daughter has seen.

In September, Washington enlists the help of federal slave-catching agents to try to bring Ona back to Virginia—he believes she has been lured away by a Frenchman, unwilling to even entertain the notion that she has run away of her own free will. One of the men Washington solicits help from is Joseph Whipple, the customs officer in Portsmouth. Whipple puts out a fake advertisement for a domestic, and Ona, in need of work, answers the call. When Whipple interviews Ona, however, she realizes that she has been led into a trap. She appeases Whipple by assuring him she'll board a boat bound for Virginia—but as Whipple awaits her on the docks, she hides out in a nearby town. Whipple writes of his failure to Washington—Washington begins to realize that if he truly wants Ona back, he will be forced to publicly reveal his desperation in the midst of a shifting sociopolitical climate of anti-slavery sentiment.

Ona, safe for the time being, finds comfort and companionship as she marries Jack Staines—a free Black seaman whose work often takes him away from Portsmouth for months at a time. Ona gives birth to a daughter named Eliza—but she is unaware that Washington has decided to redouble his efforts to recapture her. In the summer of 1799, Washington recruits a nephew of Martha's (who's a Virginian senator) named Burwell Bassett Jr. to travel to New Hampshire and bring Ona back by any means necessary. Bassett calls upon Ona at her house and finds her alone with her daughter—but she declares her intent to remain free so firmly that he leaves, determined not to make a scene. The following day, when Bassett returns to the house to take Ona by force, he finds her home empty—she has fled to the nearby Greenland to take shelter with a family called the Jacks.

In December, Washington falls ill with an inflamed throat. His doctors' attempts to ease his condition fail. Washington revises his will on his deathbed, writing into the document a stipulation which will gradually emancipate 123 of the slaves at Mount Vernon from slavery, granting them their freedom upon the death of his wife. Martha is uneasy with the clause—she fears that she will be killed in order to hasten the emancipation of her husband's slaves. She herself emancipates them on January 1st of 1801; upon her own death in 1802, her own slaves pass to her grandchildren.

Ona has two more children with Jack Staines—a daughter named Nancy and a son about whom few records exist but who was likely named William. Jack Staines dies in 1803, leaving Ona and her children in a precarious position. Ona seeks the help of the Jacks once again, but still she is forced to indenture her daughters into servitude to a local white family in order to make ends meet. The girls' work is hard and debilitating, and Eliza and Nancy die in 1832 and 1833 respectively. Having outlived her daughters, Ona continues backbreaking domestic work for low wages. She turns to Christianity for comfort, teaching herself to read and write through studying the Bible. Toward the end of her life, in 1845, the 70-year-old grants two interviews to local abolitionist newspapers before falling ill and dying in 1848.

In a brief epilogue, Dunbar tells the story of Ona's sister, Philadelphia. Like Ona, Philadelphia was born into slavery at Mount Vernon. When Ona fled in 1796, Philadelphia was given to Eliza Parke Custis Law in Ona's place. While still enslaved, Philadelphia married a free Black man named William Costin—believed by scholars to be related to Martha Washington, Costin was a prominent and relatively wealthy member of the burgeoning free Black community in the fast-growing District of Columbia. Costin dedicated his life to purchasing and immediately emancipating slaves from the Washingtons' Mount Vernon estate and other nearby plantations. Philadelphia was emancipated by Thomas Law in 1807. At 28, already the mother of two young daughters, Philadelphia joined her husband in expanding their family, purchasing property, and helping enslaved and recently emancipated members of the District of Columbia's Black community to make their way in the world. Ona, Dunbar writes, likely knew nothing of her sister's fate—a sad but necessary casualty of Ona's pursuit of freedom above all else.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines – Ona Maria Judge Staines is the protagonist of Erica Armstrong Dunbar's *Never Caught*. Born into slavery at George and Martha Washington's Mount Vernon estate in 1773, Ona was, as a teenager, assigned to a position in the Washingtons' home, where she worked as Martha's **seamstress** and personal "go-to girl." When George Washington ascended to the presidency, bringing Martha along with him to New York and Philadelphia as he carried out his duties, Ona accompanied Martha on her travels. Ona's experiences up north changed her, according to Dunbar—there, Ona was exposed to communities of free Black men and women. A combination of desire for freedom—and a sense of betrayal after Martha Washington attempted to "give"

Ona to her granddaughter Eliza upon Eliza's marriage—led Ona to abscond from the Washingtons' Philadelphia Executive Mansion in 1796. For the next several years, Ona would become the subject of several searches and attempts to recapture her. As the book's title suggests, Ona was twice discovered but never caught—she valued her freedom more than anything, and each time one of Washington's emissaries attempted to lure her back to Virginia, she outwitted and outran them. Ona's story is little-known to the public—even Dunbar, a seasoned historian, was shocked when she uncovered Ona's tale of resistance. In bringing Ona's biography into being, Dunbar seeks to interrogate how notions of slavery and paternalism have echoed through the years and informed contemporary American society—and to shed light on the complicated origins of American society. As Dunbar reconstructs Ona's story, she paints Ona as a strong-willed woman forced to make impossibly difficult decisions about what freedom truly was. In securing freedom for herself, Ona left behind many family members who were held in bondage at Mount Vernon for years to come—including her mother, Betty, who died in enslavement there and never knew freedom. Yet Ona was also able to carve out a new family for herself, marrying a free black man named Jack Staines with whom she had three children, Eliza, Nancy, and William. Headstrong; empathetic; and, later in life, deeply religious, Ona overcame impossible odds and endured unspeakable tragedy. She ultimately became a beacon of hope to those who saw how one of the most "visible" bondwomen in 18th-century America made a decisive stand against the institution of slavery.

Erica Armstrong Dunbar – Erica Armstrong Dunbar is a historian, scholar, and Pennsylvania native whose scholarship and academic career, in her own words, have focused on "the lives of women of Africa descent who called America their home during the 18th and 19th centuries." In *Never Caught*, Dunbar seeks to probe a little-known facet of George Washington's legacy: the escape of Washington's wife Martha's "dower slave" Ona Maria Judge and Washington's fervent but ultimately failed attempts to recapture Ona from New Hampshire, strip her of her freedom, and return her to slavery at Mount Vernon. Dunbar's historical narrative fuses information gleaned from letters and diary entries with fictionalized speculation rooted in sociopolitical mores of the late 1700s. The result is a book which seeks to examine themes of slavery and paternalism, freedom and agency, the failed promises of America, and whose stories get preserved in the historical record. Ona Judge's story is one that is rarely told—and in bringing it to light, Dunbar seeks to interrogate the enduring effects of slavery, paternalism, and racism on American society. Dunbar uses her deep, expansive knowledge of Pennsylvania history and emancipation studies to reconstruct what life must have been like for Ona Judge as she traveled from Mount Vernon to Philadelphia, encountering for the first time thriving communities of free Black men and women and considering what price she might be willing to pay for freedom. Dunbar's reverence for Ona's bravery is evident in the pages of *Never Caught* as she charts Ona's enduring dedication to making her own way in the world and maintaining her hard-won freedom at all costs. Dunbar provides careful, empathetic imaginings of what not only Ona but also her enslavers, the Washingtons, might have felt as their lives shifted rapidly in time with the changing and developing United States. She thereby offers readers an unprecedented glimpse into a complex, fraught, and pivotal moment in American history.

George Washington – George Washington was a Revolutionary War hero and the first president of the United States of America. Pressured into public life after the 50-year-old was already weary following his involvement in the American Revolution, Washington reluctantly ascended to the highest office in the land in 1789. Washington, who lorded over a sprawling estate called Mount Vernon in Virginia, nonetheless constantly teetered on the brink of financial insolvency. Washington and his wife, Martha, were firmly dependent upon slave labor to maintain their land and their finances—over 300 slaves toiled at Mount Vernon, and Washington brought along a small, trusted group numbering fewer than 10 enslaved men and women up north when he moved to New York and then Philadelphia to begin his presidential duties. Up north, Washington encountered rapidly-shifting sentiments regarding the institution of slavery—together with his wife Martha and his trusted white secretary Tobias Lear, Washington began prevent their ability to benefit from a law that would allow them to claim freedom after six months in Pennsylvania. After George and Martha planned to bequeath Ona Judge, one of Martha Washington's "dower slaves" and personal attendants, to their granddaughter Eliza upon her marriage, Ona fled—and Washington spent a considerable amount of time and energy over the next several years trying to recapture Ona and return her to bondage. In exposing readers to a little-known—and morally repugnant—aspect of Washington's life, Dunbar seeks to complicate her audience's understanding of how the U.S. was founded, who America originally sought to protect, and what the country's legacy of paternalism and racism means today. Dunbar presents Washington as a reluctant yet powerful figure who, in spite of his famous emancipation of his slaves on his deathbed, nonetheless clung to the institution of slavery fiercely while he lived (and while it benefited him).

Martha Washington – Martha Washington was the first first lady of the United States of America, and the wife of George Washington. After the death of her first husband, Martha remarried George—but when George became a Revolutionary War hero and the clear choice for the first president of the fledgling United States, Martha found herself facing a public life she never dreamed of. The wealthy widow Martha, in possession of an enormous number of "dower slaves," or human

"property" inherited upon the death of her first husband, was of a nervous constitution, perhaps brought on by the deaths of several of her children from her first marriage. Martha and George together doted upon the children of Martha's children, particularly Wash, Nelly, and the mercurial but favored Eliza. As Martha and George moved north from Mount Vernon to New York, and later Philadelphia, Martha relied heavily upon the bondwomen who served her as housemaids and personal attendants. She was determined to do anything she could to retain her "property" once Northern anti-slavery sentiments and laws alike threatened her ability to maintain ownership of the enslaved men and women whom she viewed as personal assets. Martha attempted to give Ona, one of her personal attendants, to her granddaughter Eliza on the occasion of Eliza's marriage. This careless shuffling of Ona from one "owner" to another, Dunbar asserts, was a crucial moment in Ona's journey—and the deciding factor in her choice to run away and pursue freedom in spite of all its attendant dangers. Martha's attitudes were indeed a product of her social class, her upbringing, and the era in which she lived—yet Dunbar is careful to remind readers that Martha and George alike subscribed to harmful, racist ideas of paternalism and collectively refused to see the men and women they kept enslaved as capable (or even worthy) of independence, autonomy, and freedom. Martha's anxious disposition, reluctant approach to her visible role in politics, and her refusal—even upon her death—to emancipate the slaves willed to her by her first husband cast her as a complex, antagonistic force in Ona's life story.

Betty – Betty was Ona Judge's mother. An enslaved woman born in or around 1738, Betty was a "dower slave," or "property" owned by Martha Washington's first husband. Betty, a talented seamstress and spinner, was reportedly among Martha Washington's favorite slaves. After the death of Martha's first husband—and Martha's remarriage to George Washington—Betty traveled with Martha to Mount Vernon, bringing her young son Austin with her. Betty gave birth to several more children while at Mount Vernon—including Ona Judge. Dunbar paints Betty as a complicated figure, a woman who knew that her precarious position—and her children's futures—depended upon the whims of the people who owned her. Betty lived out her life at Mount Vernon, dying as the result of an unknown illness in January of 1795.

Andrew Judge – Andrew Judge was Ona Judge's father. An English-born white man who traveled to America in July of 1772 as an indentured servant—likely to escape difficult circumstances or even a prison sentence back in England—Judge soon found himself in the employ of George Washington at the man's vast Mount Vernon estate in Virginia. Judge became a trusted and respected tailor, making **fine clothes** for the most important occasions in Washington's life. While it is unclear whether Judge carried on a genuine, prolonged love affair with one of the Washingtons' slaves, Betty, or whether Judge raped Betty, what is clear is that Judge fathered Betty's daughter Ona and gave the child his last name. Judge did not feel indebted or bound to his child or to Mount Vernon, however, and by the 1780s, he'd left the estate for a property of his own.

Tobias Lear – Tobias Lear was George Washington's trusted secretary. Over the years in which he served Washington—he took care of Washington's most intimate affairs until the president's death in 1799—Lear was responsible for scouting suitable housing for the Washingtons up north; for handling Washington's more delicate correspondences; and for assembling the staff, both enslaved and indentured, who would care for the Washingtons in their many residences. Lear later assumed the role of chief of staff once Washington ascended to the presidency and moved with his wife and young son to the Executive Mansion at High Street in Philadelphia, the nation's temporary capital. Lear handled matters of the utmost discretion for the Washingtons—including the controversial decision to "rotate" or "shuffle" the Washington's slaves between Philadelphia and Mount Vernon after learning of a law which allowed any adult enslaved man or woman to claim their freedom after six months of living in Pennsylvania. Lear, in his letters to his employers, revealed a certain ambivalence about the institution of slavery—yet his mind was governed by a deeply-ingrained sense of paternalism, or the erroneous and racist belief that white slaveholders knew what was best for the Black men and women they kept enslaved. He, like the Washingtons, believed that freedom would be too great a burden for any Black man or woman to bear.

Elizabeth Parke "Eliza" Custis Law – Elizabeth, or Eliza, was one of George and Martha Washington's grandchildren. As one of the eldest—and their favorite—the volatile Eliza was able to bend her grandparents' wills to suit her needs. When Eliza was still a teenager, she married the controversial figure Thomas Law—a much-older British businessman who already had three illegitimate children from an affair that took place in India. The demanding Eliza, however, secured her grandparents' blessing—and after only a few years of marriage, began a legal separation from her new husband which forced her into a nomadic existence. Dunbar uses examples of Eliza and Ona's extremely different (yet contemporaneous) paths to marriage and motherhood to demonstrate just how profoundly unequally early American society treated its free and enslaved populations.

William Lee – William Lee was an enslaved man at Mount Vernon who was sold to the Washingtons when he was still a teenager. Lee was of a light complexion, and, for this reason, George Washington made Lee his personal butler. Washington outfitted Lee in **fine clothing**—he wanted his personal valet to look good—and often took Lee with him out riding on horseback. Lee—who was known as "Billy" in his youth—began

changing after several trips up north, where, Dunbar writes, he no doubt saw thriving communities of free Black men and women for the first time. Lee adopted the surname of the man he must have believed to have been his father and asked to be addressed as "William," demonstrating his desire for greater autonomy and individuality. Lee married a free Black woman, Margaret Thomas, and his new wife returned to Mount Vernon with him—but there is no record of her being there, suggesting that as a free woman, she found the risks of living in the South too great to bear and returned northward. After shattering both kneecaps in two separate incidents, William Lee became physically incapacitated and turned to drinking to soothe his constant pain. In his final will, Washington liberated William Lee immediately but offered him the option of staying on at Mount Vernon and receiving an annuity of $30. Lee's alcoholism sent him to an early grave; he perished in 1810 and was buried in the slave burial ground at Mount Vernon.

Giles and Paris – Giles and Paris were a pair of enslaved men at Mount Vernon who won George Washington's favor after attending the Constitutional Convention with him in 1787. After the convention, Giles and Paris, having proven themselves reliable, began working as drivers for the Washingtons. Given Giles and Paris's visible positions, Washington outfitted them in **fine clothes and hats** in order to make sure their appearance reflected well upon him. Giles and Paris eventually fell out of favor with the president—Giles after an injury which made his work as a driver impossible, and Paris after beginning to seem to the president "lazy, self willed & impudent." Paris later died at Mount Vernon; there is little record of what became of Giles.

Hercules – Hercules was one of George Washington's slaves and a famed chef known for his cooking skills. Washington brought Hercules and Hercules's young son Richmond along to Philadelphia to run the kitchen at the Executive Mansion on High Street. The Washingtons favored Hercules and allowed him to earn an income by selling kitchen scraps. Hercules used his savings to purchase **fine clothing and accessories** for himself, and, in Philadelphia, he socialized with a community of Black men and women. When Washington learned of the statute that allowed slaves over the age of 28 who had resided in Philadelphia for more than six months to claim freedom, Washington became nervous that Hercules would seek freedom and run away. Though Hercules put on a great show of "theatrics" to convince Washington that he valued his position, Hercules eventually escaped bondage in 1797—on Washington's birthday, no less.

Thomas Law – Thomas Law was a British businessman who was relatively new to life in America when he began courting George and Martha Washington's granddaughter Eliza Parke Custis. Law, who had lived in India for many years, was the father of three illegitimate children born to an Indian woman. His scandalous reputation made it difficult for him to obtain George and Martha Washington's blessing to marry their granddaughter, yet he eventually secured it. Law and Eliza separated after fewer than 10 years of marriage and later divorced. Law emancipated many of the enslaved individuals his wife inherited after the death of her grandmother in 1802.

John Langdon – John Langdon was a Revolutionary War hero turned New Hampshire senator. One of the most powerful men in the nation, Langdon felt indebted to George Washington and bound to reveal to the former president that his fugitive slave, Ona Judge, was residing in Portsmouth, New Hampshire after discovering her whereabouts.

Elizabeth Langdon – Elizabeth Langdon was the daughter of John Langdon. Elizabeth spotted Ona Judge on the streets of Portsmouth in 1796 and recognized her even though it had been years since they'd last come into contact at Washington's High Street mansion in Philadelphia. Elizabeth Langdon quickly returned home and told her father that she'd seen Washington's fugitive slave, leading to Langdon contacting Washington with information as to Ona's whereabouts and setting in motion a chase to bring Ona back to Virginia.

Joseph Whipple – Joseph Whipple was the customs officer in Portsmouth, New Hampshire when Ona Judge arrived there in 1796. George Washington himself appointed Whipple to the post in 1789. In the fall of 1796, Washington entreated Whipple to find Ona Judge in Portsmouth and convince her to return to Virginia. Whipple put out a fake call for a domestic helper in order to interview Ona—but when she caught wise to his ruse, she was able to evade his attempts to secure passage for her on a ship bound for the South. Whipple somewhat passively-aggressively urged Washington, in his letters to the man following his own failure to recapture Ona, that Northern attitudes toward slavery were changing rapidly, and that emancipation might be the only way forward.

Austin – Austin was Ona's brother. He accompanied Ona up north when she followed the Washingtons to New York and Philadelphia following Washington's ascendance to the presidency. Austin later died in a terrible accident while traveling south to Mount Vernon alone during one of the trips in which he was being "rotated" or "shuffled" back and forth between the Washingtons' residencies to prevent him from earning his freedom after six months up north.

Jack Staines – Jack Staines was a free Black seaman who married Ona Judge in January of 1797, less than a year after her arrival in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Together, they had three children, Eliza, Nancy, and William Staines. Jack was often away from home due to the unpredictable nature of his seafaring occupation. He died of unknown causes in 1803, leaving Ona with three children to raise.

Burwell Bassett Jr. – Burwell Bassett Jr. was a Virginian senator and a nephew of Martha Washington. Martha and George sent Bassett to New Hampshire to apprehend Ona

Judge Staines and return her to Mount Vernon—but Bassett's two attempts to cajole Ona into giving up her freedom and returning to the people who enslaved her were unsuccessful.

William Costin – Believed by many scholars to be the son of one of Martha Washington's interracial half-sisters, William Costin was a free Black activist who married Ona Judge Staines's younger sister Philadelphia. Costin used his social capital and comparatively sizable finances to purchase and immediately emancipate enslaved Black men and women throughout the District of Columbia, fighting all the while against the stringent slave codes in the fledgling city.

Philadelphia – Philadelphia was one of Ona Judge's younger sisters. Born into slavery at Mount Vernon, Philadelphia nonetheless married a free Black man named William Costin while enslaved there. Though Philadelphia was given to Martha Washington's granddaughter Eliza Parke Custis Law in Ona's place, Philadelphia was emancipated by Eliza's husband Thomas Law in June of 1807. She lived out the rest of her life with Costin, eventually becoming a prominent member of the free Black community in the District of Columbia.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Eliza Staines – Eliza Staines was the eldest of Ona Judge Staines and Jack Staines's children.

William Staines – Though few records of Ona Judge Staines and Jack Staines's son exist, many scholars believe that William Staines, an intrepid young Black seaman, was their child, born in or around 1800.

Nancy Staines – Nancy Staines was the youngest of Ona Judge Staines and Jack Staines's two daughters.

Moll – Moll was a 50-year old enslaved woman at Mount Vernon who worked as a **seamstress** and served Martha Washington alongside Ona as a personal attendant and housemaid. Moll shouldered the additional responsibility of caring day in and day out for the Washingtons' young grandchildren Wash and Nelly.

John Bowles – John Bowles was a sailor and the operator of a freight transport business which brought lumber, fish, and sundry dry goods up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Bowles captained the ship which carried Ona Judge from enslavement in Philadelphia to freedom in New Hampshire.

Eleanor Parke "Nelly" Custis – "Nelly" was one of George and Martha Washington's young grandchildren.

George Washington Parke "Wash" Custis – "Wash" was one of George and Martha Washington's young grandchildren.

Nancy (Ona's Sister) – Nancy was one of Ona Judge's sisters. Ona would later name one of her daughters for the sister she left behind at Mount Vernon.

Betty Davis (Ona's Sister) – Betty Davis was one of Ona Judge's sisters and an enslaved woman at Mount Vernon.

Dr. James Craik – Dr. James Craik was George Washington's trusted physician. Craik worked tirelessly to try to save Washington during his final illness in December of 1799, but his attempts to ease Washington's inflamed throat and constricted air passageways through bloodletting were unsuccessful, and Washington passed away.

Martha "Patsy" Parke Custis – Martha "Patsy" Parke Custis was one of Martha Washington and her first husband's daughters. The sickly Patsy died in June of 1773, likely as the result of a seizure, at just 17 years old.

Richmond – Richmond was Hercules's young son.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SLAVERY AND PATERNALISM

In *Never Caught*, historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar tells the story of Ona "Oney" Judge Staines. Born into slavery at George and Martha Washington's Mount Vernon plantation, Ona was the daughter of one of Martha Custis Washington's slaves and a white indentured servant. Throughout the book, as Dunbar explores the ravages of slavery and the devastating effects of a life lived in bondage, she also shows how slaveholders cruelly and wrongly used the rhetoric of paternalism, caretaking, and benevolence to defend and maintain the abhorrent institution of slavery. By demonstrating the ways in which slaveholders claimed that slavery somehow saved enslaved individuals from a more difficult life, Dunbar argues that the institution of slavery was maintained through the creation of the illusion that freedom was, for Black people throughout America's history, too large a burden to bear.

Throughout *Never Caught*, Dunbar demonstrates how paternalism was used to perpetuate and deepen slavery's role in America from the earliest days of the country's creation. Essential to maintaining the institution of slavery, paternalism is "the policy or practice on the part of people in positions of authority of restricting the freedom and responsibilities of those subordinate to them in the subordinates' supposed best interest." By telling themselves—and their human property—that slaves were better off under the "care" of their masters, slaveholders were able to justify their own actions while belittling their slaves' desire for freedom, agency, and liberty. Although George Washington famously emancipated his slaves on his deathbed, Dunbar interrogates Washington's

larger legacy by illustrating how the Founding Father's own paternalism decimated and derailed the lives of his numerous slaves. Washington, Dunbar writes, "held fast to paternalistic assumptions about African slavery, believing that enslaved men and women were better off with a generous owner than emancipated and living independent lives." It's unclear if Washington truly subscribed to this belief, or if he used this rhetoric to stave off his own moral interrogation of his slaveholding ways and to attempt to mollify his slaves. What is clear, however, is that paternalistic attitudes about white people knowing what was "best" for their slaves erased Black people's agency and liberty for centuries and helped perpetuate slavery throughout the nation. In believing—or acting as if he believed—that freedom was too large a burden for Black people to bear, Washington and countless other slaveholders like him justified and even attempted to make noble the practice of owning other people's lives and destinies.

Dunbar goes on to demonstrate how Washington's paternalistic attempts to mollify Ona by making her feel that her position was a uniquely good one (and that she was an especially valued member of their household) were ultimately exposed for the insidious control tactics they truly were. When Martha Washington's granddaughter Eliza married, the Washingtons announced their intention to give Ona to Eliza. Ona "now knew for certain that in the eyes of her owner, she was replaceable, just like any of the hundreds of slaves who toiled for the Washingtons." Ona was never being protected or given unique opportunities while in bondage—all along, the Washingtons' held condescending, cruel, and racist belief that a life lived under enslavement to a powerful, prominent family such as theirs was preferable to freedom. Controlling slaves like Ona was simply a tool meant to further fuel slavery's stronghold in America.

Dunbar shows how deep-seated the rhetoric of paternalism was within those who perpetuated slavery by focusing on Washington's reaction to Ona's escape. When George and Martha learned of Ona's flight—and later discovered that she was living in Portsmouth, New Hampshire—they declared that she must have been seduced away from their estate by a Frenchman. "In Washington's mind," Dunbar writes, "there was no possible way that Judge could or would have engineered her own escape under the watchful eyes of her owners." Washington even wrote in a letter to an acquaintance that "not the least suspicion was entertained of [Ona] going, or having formed a connexion with any one who could induce her to such an Act." Dunbar uses Washington's baffled reaction to Ona's escape to demonstrate just how deeply the rhetoric of paternalism inhibited slaveholders from seeing their slaves as capable of making rational decisions for themselves—and how this cruel, racist line of thought perpetuated the system of slavery for years.

The deeply ingrained rhetoric of paternalism—racist, dehumanizing, and cruel as it was—nonetheless permeated American society for centuries and led to the widespread proliferation and protection of the institution of slavery. By suggesting that enslaved Black people were completely dependent upon their owners for care and guidance, paternalism ignored the burgeoning successes of free Black communities throughout the North and created dangerous stereotypes that fueled slavery for years to come. Dunbar showcases the bravery of Ona—and, by extension, that of countless former slaves whose names and stories have been forgotten—in rebelling against this rhetoric, taking control of her own destiny, and refusing to relinquish her freedom. This was profoundly important in the long road to abolishing the paternalistic ideas that furthered slavery's inhumane agenda.

NARRATIVE AND HISTORICAL ERASURE

In *Never Caught*, historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar seeks to tell the story of Ona "Oney" Judge Staines, one of George and Martha Washington's slaves. As an enslaved Black woman, Ona was denied freedom, agency, and autonomy throughout her entire life, even after she escaped from bondage and began living as a "free" woman in New Hampshire. Throughout the book, Dunbar attempts to restore what was lost of Ona's story. As Dunbar uses historical records and social contexts of the time to fill in the gaps in Ona's experiences, she ultimately argues that because history has erased Ona's journey—and the journeys of countless enslaved Black women like her—from the record, it is scholars' duties to piece these stories together the best they can and use their platforms to make narratives like Ona's heard.

Throughout *Never Caught*, Dunbar demonstrates the many factors that lead to the erasure of the narratives of women, particularly the narratives of Black women, throughout history. Dunbar, a prominent scholar whose studies focus on "the lives of women of African descent who called America their home during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," has stated in interviews that she was surprised the first time she came across the story of Ona Judge Staines—it didn't make sense to her that a renowned, hardworking historian such as herself hadn't heard Ona's tale. In an author's note at the beginning of the book, Dunbar writes that "enslavement, racism, and sexism often discarded [Black] women from the historical record, and as historians we are frequently left unsatisfied with scant evidence. Much of the earlier historical record was written by other people, typically white men, who were literate and in positions of power." Dunbar attributes the erasure of Ona's story to the structural mechanisms of "enslavement, racism, and sexism." Because history, as the aphorism goes, is written by the victors—and because white men, due to the privileges of their race and sex, are so often victorious—written historical records often ignore or even actively seek to expunge Black narratives that indict the morality of history's "victors." Dunbar

is able to recognize the cruelty in these erasures, and in *Never Caught*, she seeks to rebel against them by extending to Ona the attention, care, patience, and gratitude that Ona never received in her lifetime.

Dunbar uses elements of informed speculation in order to further underscore just how profoundly absent enslaved Black women's stories are from the historical record. Many sections of the book are speculative—that is to say, they use historical context, emotional intelligence, and instinct to piece together Ona's experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Because Ona stated in her own words that she "never received the least mental or moral instruction of any kind" from the Washingtons and could neither read nor write, there are no extant letters or documents in which she tells her story from her own point of view. A pair of interviews she gave to two newspapers toward the end of her life are the only instance in which Ona tells her story in her own words. In attempting to reconstruct what it must have felt like to make a hasty escape from the Washingtons' home or approximate what Ona must have been feeling as she tasted freedom for the first time in Portsmouth, Dunbar seeks to give Ona's story the platform, respect, and attention it never received while she lived. Stories like Ona's have just barely endured throughout the years, and Dunbar argues that unless historians, scholars, writers, and storytellers use their privilege and their platforms to amplify these stories, patterns of erasing Black women's voices from history will only continue on.

The erasure of the narratives of countless enslaved Black women from the historical record is, for scholars like Dunbar and for countless Americans, a painful and regrettable reality. Structural racism, enforced illiteracy, and the control and suppression of slaves all have their parts to play in these erasures. Yet Dunbar's necessary, vital work seeks to do justice to stories like Ona's by taking the imaginative leaps of empathy necessary to reconstruct what Ona's journey must have been like as she fought tirelessly for her freedom.

THE CREATION OF AMERICA

When many people think of the founding of United States of America, words from the Declaration of Independence come to mind: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." In *Never Caught*, however, historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar demonstrates how equality; liberty; and the chance to pursue happiness, fulfillment, and agency were off-limits to the slaves owned by the Founding Fathers. The enslaved individuals who served the Founding Fathers and who built the nation's capital from the ground up bore witness to the creation of a new country in which they could not hope to take equal part. Ultimately, Dunbar argues that the creation of America was a fundamentally flawed process that excluded and dehumanized the very people who built the nation.

In telling a little-known story about George Washington's moral failures relating to upholding the institution of slavery, Dunbar seeks to expose the racism, inequality, and cruelty that have been present in America's social, political, and economic systems since its inception. As the first president of the United States of America, George Washington assumed great power at a time of intense turmoil and fragility. America, as a fledgling nation, did not even have a fixed capital that all lawmakers could agree on—and yet "rigid laws" in the South fiercely protected the institution of slavery. America, then, was founded on abstract concepts of liberty and freedom but did not extend even the possibility of such things to its vast population of enslaved Black people. Instead, the nation actively sought to keep oppressed and enslaved those whose labor was needed to continue constructing America. Slaveholders knew how essential slave labor was to the growth of America's economy, so rather than ending slavery, lawmakers sought to deepen the gulf between the free and the enslaved. Edicts such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, signed into law by Washington himself, classified enslaved Black people as property and denied them their essential humanity. Washington's relentless pursuit of his slave Ona Judge Staines for nearly a decade after her escape from his estate (the central story of *Never Caught*) is an extended and profoundly disturbing metaphor for the ways in which America's foundational laws and institutions erased the humanity of an entire swath of this new nation's population. Even as America sought to write life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness into its core laws, it actively dehumanized its enslaved population and denied them the chance to participate in the same freedoms enjoyed by white Americans. In demonstrating the fundamental flaws written into the American constitution—and American society more largely—Dunbar shows how America failed (and continues to fail) its most vulnerable citizens on its most basic promises. Black people then and now, Dunbar suggests, were and are forced to play pivotal roles in the construction of a society which has never sought to protect or prosper them.

Later on in the book, Dunbar turns to the construction of the nation's capital upon the swamps along the banks of the Potomac in Virginia. The capital's grand buildings, Dunbar writes, were built using slave labor. Slaves, then, were forced to toil in miserable conditions in order to build the infrastructure for a city that would never serve, protect, or even acknowledge them. Slave labor essentially create the American economy through the work enslaved people were forced to complete on large rice, tobacco, and cotton plantations. And with the construction of the capital, the labor of enslaved Black people would also birth the place that would create and govern the social and political foundation of American life. As Dunbar cryptically writes, "black men and women's unpaid labor would

lay the foundation for what would become the seat of America's power."

In excavating the rampant injustices which have been present in American society since the nation's inception, Dunbar indicts revisionist versions of history that portray the Founding Fathers as warriors for justice and liberty. In fact, Dunbar argues, America was built on the backs of those who were not free in order to cater to those who were free; in other words, America is and always has been fundamentally unequal. In telling Ona's story of enslavement, oppression, and escape, Dunbar suggests that the slaves who worked hard to support the lives of men and women like George and Martha Washington played a fundamental and profound role in the creation of America. Yet, tragically, these individuals were never given credit, glory, or even fair and equal treatment in the society they helped to create.

FREEDOM AND AGENCY

For centuries, American slaveholders used the rhetoric of paternalism and benevolence to justify the maintenance of the institution of slavery—especially as Northern states began to push back against the strict, unjust laws that held Black people in bondage for life. Throughout *Never Caught*, historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar shows how the growing free Black communities in New York, Philadelphia, and New Hampshire aided Ona Judge Staines in her quest for liberty, helping her to realize the freedom and agency she craved but struggled to feel was possible or tenable. Ultimately, Dunbar argues that the inalienable right to exercise control and agency over one's own fate is the most important thing in life and the most basic condition necessary for a full existence.

Dunbar first demonstrates how pivotal freedom and agency are by showing how arduous and dehumanizing Ona's life was before she escaped from bondage. While Ona lived as the property of Martha and George Washington, Dunbar writes, she had only "moments of stolen privacy" when the Washingtons were busy with social engagements—the rest of her life revolved around making their existences easier and more luxurious. As Martha Washington's bondwoman, Ona had a full schedule that revolved around the first lady from sunup to sundown. Though Ona's work—brushing Martha's hair, mending her **dresses**, and watching over her grandchildren—was, in comparison, not as grueling and painful as the work of slaves who labored in the fields at Mount Vernon, Dunbar underscores how relativity does not necessarily apply to the lives of enslaved people. Just because Ona's work was simpler than that of others doesn't mean she longed any less for her freedom. In spite of her owners' paternalistic beliefs that enslavement benefited and shielded Ona from the hardships free Black people faced out in the world, Ona knew that she would never live a full life until she achieved freedom. Though hard labor was not a part of Ona's life, the simple fact of her enslavement was a cruel, dehumanizing, and brutal reminder of her inability to exercise any agency over her own existence. In escaping—likely with the help of a network of free Black people in both Philadelphia and New Hampshire, the place where she would seek freedom—Ona definitively declared that her own agency was more important than anything else, even her own survival. As Dunbar writes, "it mattered not if a slave was well dressed and offered small tokens of kindness, worked in luxurious settings or in the blistering heat. Enslavement was never preferable over freedom for any human being, and if given the opportunity, a slave, even the president's slave preferred freedom."

Ona's existence was still painful and difficult in New Hampshire after fleeing there from the Washingtons' residence in Philadelphia—the fear of being recognized, caught, and returned to slavery came to govern much of Ona's "free" existence. Yet Dunbar shows how the little agency she did have in her later years made it possible for her to begin to steer her own destiny at last. In New Hampshire, Ona was able to marry a man of her choice, have children, and earn compensation for her work. Ona's life was by no means easy—but up north, away from the Washingtons, it was at least her own. As Dunbar relays the difficulties Ona faced in New Hampshire, including a life of grueling domestic labor for low pay and a series of tragedies when her two eldest daughters died at young ages, she underscores how Ona's liberation was only partial. At the same time, Dunbar shows how tightly Ona clung to her freedom when Washington sent multiple emissaries to the town of Portsmouth to try to bring Ona back under the Washingtons' ownership. Ona stood staunchly against these men, declaring "I am free now and choose to remain so." This demonstrates that even though Ona's life was complicated by the more difficult labor she undertook as a free woman and by the constant threat of being hunted and returned to slavery, Ona was unwilling to sacrifice her agency and liberty for any reason.

Under slavery, Black people had no control over their own destinies: every waking moment was dedicated to carrying out tasks to make their white owners' lives easier. Ona Judge's hard-won freedom was not perfect, nor was it entirely complete, yet Ona herself declared that she would rather have "suffer[ed] death" than returned to slavery. Ona's liberty and that of her children was more important to her than her own life. Thus, in relaying Ona's story, Dunbar underscores the importance of agency and control over oneself and one's destiny as a necessary precursor to a truly fulfilled existence.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CLOTHING

Clothing symbolizes the unattainable wealth and freedom to which slaves like Ona Judge were constantly exposed but were hardly ever allowed to imagine for themselves. As Martha Custis Washington's bondwoman, Ona dressed, readied, and pampered the first lady of the United States every day, brushing Martha's hair and mending Martha's muddied shoes and dresses. While this work wasn't as laborious as the work of slaves who toiled in fields or kitchens, the material of Ona's work—Martha's finery—served as a constant reminder of the fact that she wasn't (and might never be) free. Though Ona received considerably nice clothes of her own to wear while accompanying Martha on carriage rides, Dunbar demonstrates how Ona's possession of material things associated with wealth, security, and freedom only reminded her of how distant she truly was from attaining those things.

Ona's dresses—many of which she made herself—allowed her to adopt the trappings of luxury and freedom even as she remained enslaved. When Ona at last escaped to freedom from Philadelphia to New Hampshire, she brought along the fine dresses she'd made for herself—yet even as a woman living in a state where Black people could be free, she hardly ever wore them as she worked difficult jobs to support herself and her growing family. Ona knew that to seek work as a seamstress, she'd need to show off the things she'd made—but revealing her finery to the community could reveal her as the fugitive she was, destroying all the progress she'd made toward freedom. Clothing thus represents the ways in which Ona was limited as a Black woman, even after she escaped slavery.

Alongside Ona's experiences, Dunbar also includes anecdotes about how the Washingtons' other slaves attempted to elevate themselves by saving up rare gifts of money to purchase fine clothing and accessories such as hats and canes. Clothing, to these enslaved people, symbolizes the chance to change their circumstances. Yet because of cruel laws enforcing slavery (many of them enacted by George Washington himself) which held them in bondage, many surely knew that no matter how proximal they were to wealth and freedom, they'd never be able to fully enjoy such things. Clothing, then, symbolizes the painful, inescapable ways in which uncountable slaves in Ona's position struggled toward freedom from bondage—and how, even once free, they continued to fight against the forces of racism and the danger of being dragged back into enslavement.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the 37Ink edition of *Never Caught* published in 2017.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ The business of slavery received every new enslaved baby with open arms, no matter the circumstances of conception.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Andrew Judge , Betty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Erica Armstrong Dunbar contextualizes the conflicting emotions that Ona Judge's mother, Betty, must have felt upon her daughter's birth. While bringing a new child into the world was no doubt a source of joy, the fact that every child born to an enslaved woman was born enslaved themselves likely made that joy bittersweet at the least. As Dunbar describes the cruelty of "the business of slavery"—an institution which sought to erase the stories and indeed the humanity of every Black man, woman, and child caught in its web—she shows how dehumanizing and brutal life under slavery truly was. In telling Ona Judge's story, from the moment of her birth to the moment of her death, Dunbar seeks to restore to Ona the agency, dignity, and respect her remarkable tale warrants. Dunbar uses this passage to point out racism, paternalism, and greed as forces which began to erase Ona's narrative and indeed personhood from the moment of her birth.

❝ Ona Judge learned valuable lessons from both of her parents. From her mother she would learn the power of perseverance. From her father, Judge would learn that the decision to free oneself trumped everything, no matter who was left behind.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Andrew Judge , Betty , Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout Dunbar's book about Ona Judge's remarkable escape from enslavement, she continually points out the importance of agency, freedom, and autonomy—yet she also suggests that for enslaved Black men and women to attain these things, they often had to make tremendous sacrifices. As the book progresses and Ona weighs the benefits of

freedom against the pain of leaving behind her family, this quotation will echo throughout Dunbar's storytelling (and, by proxy, throughout Ona's own thought process).

This passage shows that from an early age, Ona learned that perseverance and endurance were powerful tools in and of themselves. At the same time, however, Ona realized as a young girl that the draw of freedom often "trumped everything." As Ona grows older and faces a pivotal decision—whether to secure her freedom but leave her family behind, or whether to remain in bondage to prevent losing touch with those she loves—Dunbar suggests that the lessons she learned from her father's abandonment will prove instructive of the fact that often, freedom is more important than what one leaves behind in pursuit of it.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ With George and Martha Washington hundreds of miles away, their lives were now in the hands of George Augustine and the overseers. Would the slaves at Mount Vernon be treated decently? Would the nature of their work change, and if so, how? The uncertainty of life and the involuntary separation of family members reminded every black person at Mount Vernon that the system of slavery rendered them powerless.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Martha Washington, George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23-24

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar contemplates what the enslaved Black men and women left behind at Mount Vernon when George and Martha Washington traveled northward to live in New York must have been going through internally. In enduring this change, the slaves' already-precarious circumstances shifted even further. While these men and women were largely illiterate and thus unable to leave behind written records of their feelings and experiences, Dunbar uses an imaginative leap of empathy to reconstruct what such a jarring shift must have meant both practically and emotionally for those enslaved at Mount Vernon.

For enslaved Black people, Dunbar suggests, every such shift was a profound reminder of how "powerless" they were in terms of steering their own destiny. As Dunbar interrogates the racism, paternalism, and greed which fueled the institution of slavery, she demonstrates the practical effects of these hateful forces by showing how enslaved Black people's agency and narratives alike have been erased. While they still lived, enslaved people's stories were not their own—and in the centuries since, history has continued to erode their tales. Dunbar's endeavor to reconstruct these stories is an attempt to return agency to these men and women—such is the duty, she suggests, of all historians.

❝ The president and his wife were well aware that the practice of slavery was under attack in most of the Northern states. They also knew that though New York's residents still clung to bound labor, public sentiment regarding African slavery was changing. Unwilling to even think about abandoning the use of black slaves, the president and the first lady were careful in their selection of men and women who traveled with them from Mount Vernon. Their selections involved only those slaves who were seen as "loyal" and therefore less likely to attempt escape.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Martha Washington, George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar uses a combination of historical context, written record, and indeed imagination to reconstruct the decision-making process behind George and Martha Washington's choice to bring enslaved Black men and women north with them to New York as Washington ascended to the presidency of the United States. In the Northern states, the Washingtons knew, public attitudes toward the institution of slavery were shifting rapidly—yet the Washingtons still believed that they could do what they wished with relative impunity. The Washingtons believed that as long as they brought along "loyal" slaves, they could circumvent not only a public reaction to their use of slave labor but also any private conflicts with the men and women they enslaved.

Throughout the book, Dunbar will go on to highlight how paternalistic ideas allowed slaveholders to justify their actions. One such example of this attitude is the idea that a truly "loyal" slave would never even consider running away or otherwise betraying the Washingtons, and that enslaved Black men and women employed by the president and the first lady were better off than their free counterparts. Paternalistic sentiments like this fueled the institution of

slavery for decades, even as people from all echelons of society publicly and privately wrestled with the moral reprehensibility of slavery.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Although private correspondence reveals Martha Washington's personal struggles with the new demands placed upon her; Ona Judge, an illiterate teenager, left behind no such trace. We can only imagine what Judge's transition to Northern life must have felt like; it had to have been terrifying or at the very least, unsteadying. Yet the young bondwoman handled the abrupt change like a seasoned slave. […] [Ona] was Martha's "go-to girl" for just about everything, and it was Judge's duty to know the desires of her mistress before Martha Washington knew them herself. A slave always had to be prepared, for anything.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines, Martha Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar delves more deeply into her intent regarding *Never Caught*. Dunbar acknowledges the indignity of Ona's inability to garner the tools to tell her own story or leave behind any record of her emotions or thoughts—even as she was forced to anticipate the internality, needs, and feelings of the woman who owned her. Dunbar highlights the cruelty of a system which required enslaved Black men and women to relegate their own feelings and stories to the background even as their "dut[ies]" to remain constantly attuned to the whims of their enslavers took hold of their day-to-day lives.

In the midst of a time of great turmoil, anxiety, and uncertainty, Ona was unable to hold space for her own experiences—as Martha's "go-to girl," her primary responsibility was anticipating the first lady's every need. Dunbar laments the forces of racism and narrative erasure which have resulted in much of Ona's story being lost to time. She therefore seeks to use her position as a historian to restore nuance, agency, and immediacy to Ona's tale of bravery and perseverance in the face of unimaginable odds.

❝ Coming from a family of talented seamstresses, Judge was responsible for Martha Washington's appearance. She selected her gowns, made small repairs on aging skirts, removing stains whether they be from food or the dirt from the unpaved streets, and then dressed her. What appeared to be the mundane task of wardrobe selection for the first lady was actually quite important. A wardrobe lay at the root of one's appearance, and the mistress and her slave girl fashioned an image for the new American aristocracy.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Martha Washington, Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar introduces one of the book's central symbols: clothing. Throughout the book, clothing symbolizes the luxuries of freedom—and the ways in which enslaved Black men and women often used clothing and other finery as a way of approximating the freedom that many of them would never know. Ona's work as a seamstress and dresser for Martha Washington meant that she was constantly in proximity to markers of wealth, comfort, luxury, and self-expression—even as she was denied access to those things herself.

Dunbar delves even further into the inequity represented by Ona's role as the first lady's dresser by showing how even as Ona labored to shape "an image for the new American aristocracy" by sewing, mending, and putting together Martha's outfits, she was barred from either participating in that image herself or receiving credit for the ways in which her individual actions impacted early American culture. One of the major themes throughout the book is how slavery underpinned the creation of America: the ways in which enslaved Black men and women played foundational, pivotal roles in the construction of a new nation, all the while being barred from fully participating in that nation's society equally or fairly. Ona's role in Martha's life, then, was one which further underscored the erasure of her agency and her personhood.

Chapter 4 Quotes

When the carriage returned Judge to the curved driveway at the Mount Vernon estate, the bondwoman would alter her frame of reference. Her eyes would miss the spotting of free black men and women in the marketplace, and her ears longed for discreet conversations about black freedom. On her return trip to Virginia, Judge would confront the fixed reality of her life as a slave. While her lifestyle and duties may have appeared desirable, even glamorous, to the enslaved at Mount Vernon, Judge knew that black Northerners could enjoy much more than she could.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar imagines—and attempts to reconstruct through speculation—what it must have been like for Ona Judge to return to Mount Vernon after living in the North. As Dunbar compares Ona's existence in Philadelphia and New York to her existence at Mount Vernon, she highlights how having witnessed Black freedom up north has forever changed Ona's point of view. Up north, Ona sees free Black men and women taking charge of their own lives—but here at Mount Vernon, Ona finds herself living again in a world of "fixed reality" where freedom is unattainable and where agency is erased. In spite of her family members' and fellow slaves' envy of her "glamorous" duties, Ona knows that she is nowhere close to true freedom.

Dunbar points to this instance as a major turning point in Ona's story: whereas her youth at Mount Vernon provided only one context or point of view, after living up north, Ona begins to see that other ways of life are possible—and that if she is willing to risk everything, she may just find that freedom is in reach after all.

The Federal City would be splendid, and the hands of slaves would build it. The new federal government rented hundreds of slaves to clear the land, making way for paved streets and thoroughfares. These same slaves would bake the bricks and saw the lumber needed to erect buildings on what had been a desolate swamp. Black men and women's unpaid labor would lay the foundation for what would become the seat of America's power.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51-52

Explanation and Analysis

As Erica Armstrong Dunbar discusses the hard-fought decision to establish a new capital for the nation in a brand-new Southern city free of association with any state government, she highlights how the "Federal City" meant to serve America was built by enslaved Black men and women—men and women who had no hope of benefiting from the buildings, infrastructure, and shining streets they labored to build. In many ways, *Never Caught* is a book about the ways in which Black men and women have, throughout American history, been profoundly from excluded from the institutions they themselves built through unjust, backbreaking labor. This passage highlights the cruel irony of the fact that the center of American government was built by people barred from participating in the government or benefiting from its protections. Dunbar highlights the rotten core of the foundation and creation of America, suggesting that a country built on the dehumanization and exploitation of an entire race will never truly be able to serve all of its people.

Chapter 5 Quotes

The president worried that his own slaves were in danger of exposure to the epidemic of black freedom, and although Washington believed that his slaves were better served and cared for in his possession, he understood the power and the allure of freedom. Washington wrote, "For although I do not think they would be benefitted by the change, yet the idea of freedom might be too great a temptation for them to resist."

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Erica Armstrong Dunbar examines a crucial moment in Washington's political career (and personal journey) as she reconstructs what he might have been thinking, feeling, and plotting after learning of a Pennsylvania law requiring the emancipation of all enslaved

Black men and women who had lived in the commonwealth for more than six months. Washington, who was residing in Philadelphia during the construction of the nation's new capital in Virginia, realized that this law signaled jeopardy for his finances and indeed his entire way of life. If his slaves could be freed, the "epidemic of black freedom" might swiftly spread through his estate. As Washington worried about losing his "property" to the uncontrollable "epidemic" of freedom, insidious notions of paternalism permeated his thoughts about his slaves' potential emancipation.

As Dunbar quotes from a letter Washington himself wrote, she reveals a deep-seated belief that he knew what was best for the Black men and women he kept enslaved—a cornerstone of racist, paternalistic thought which framed freedom as a "temptation" rather than an inalienable human right. Washington's correspondence seems to indicate that he was concerned freedom would be too much for his slaves to handle, and that they would not "benefit" from the rapid "change" of sudden freedom—this condescending, racist, and paternalistic sentiment, Dunbar asserts, fueled the proliferation of slavery in America for decades to come.

❝ Imprudently believing that he could prevent his slaves from hearing about the laws, Washington insisted that the utmost discretion be used regarding their plan of slave rotation in and out of Philadelphia. More than a loss of labor was at stake. If Ona Judge and her enslaved companions uncovered the truth about their slave status in Philadelphia, they would possess knowledge that could set them free. Power would shift from the president to his human property, making them less likely to serve their master faithfully, and eventually, they might run away.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines, George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Erica Armstrong Dunbar delves even deeper into George Washington's nefarious attempts to keep the Black men and women he enslaved from learning the truth about their right to freedom under Pennsylvania law. Washington's plan to rotate his slaves back and forth from Philadelphia to Mount Vernon every six months in order to prevent them from claiming their freedom, Dunbar demonstrates, was the height of racism, paternalism, and greed. Slaveholders relied upon their "property" for labor which made the enslavers' lives easier and increased their finances.

Without his slaves, Washington knew, his estate would suffer. And yet he employed paternalistic rhetoric about freedom being too much for his slaves to bear in order to justify his decision to enact a plan which would cruelly keep his slaves just short of ever claiming the freedom to which they had an inalienable human right. Washingtons' irredeemable actions—attempts to keep the Black men and women he enslaved from attaining any measure of agency or self-determination, erasing their stories, and purposefully deceiving them—are a little-known part of the story of the creation of America.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Judge stayed on in the President's House as Washington served his second term, becoming accustomed to her episodic trips back to Mount Vernon. Following the death of her mother and brother, the world that she once knew so intimately at Mount Vernon had vanished, perhaps reminding Judge that Mount Vernon was less a home to her than was the North.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Giles and Paris , Betty , Austin , George Washington, Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar attempts to imagine what it must have felt like for Ona Judge to travel back and forth from Philadelphia to Mount Vernon again and again in the midst of tumultuous, dangerous times. Earlier in the book, Dunbar imagined the cognitive dissonance that must have taken place as Ona returned to Mount Vernon from the North for the first time—having witnessed free Black men and women constructing communities and determining their own fates, it must have felt jarring to return to the South, where slavery was not only the norm but enforced.

As the years go by and Ona continues making this arduous journey back and forth at the behest of her enslavers, who want to keep her from claiming the freedom to which she's entitled after six months of living in Pennsylvania, Ona encounters even more rapidly-accumulating factors which make the prospect of a lifetime of enslavement unbearable. After witnessing the deaths of her brother Austin and her mother, Betty, Ona likely felt less and less attached to the

idea of Mount Vernon as any kind of home. And after seeing how two of Washington's most "valued" slaves, Giles and Paris, quickly fell out of favor, Ona must have realized the precariousness of her position—and the utter expendability of her existence in the eyes of her enslavers.

After watching an enormous percentage of Philadelphia's free Black residents perish in the midst of an outbreak of yellow fever, Ona must have understood the fleeting nature of life—and the ongoing struggle for the right to autonomy, respect, and dignity even free Black men and women faced. All of these factors, Dunbar suggests, compounded to create an instability within Ona—an instability which would spur her to abandon the Washingtons and the prospect of ever returning to Mount Vernon in order to pursue her own freedom at any cost.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ In an effort to help Eliza ease into her new matrimony, Martha Washington stepped in, and offered Eliza the support she needed: she would bequeath Judge to Eliza Law as a wedding gift.

If Judge ever believed that her close and intimate responsibilities for her owner yielded preferential treatment, she now understood better. The bondwoman now knew for certain that in the eyes of her owner, she was replaceable, just like any of the hundreds of slaves who toiled for the Washingtons.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines, Martha Washington, Elizabeth Parke "Eliza" Custis Law

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Erica Armstrong Dunbar, having laid out all the factors contributing to Ona Judge's desire to run away from the Washingtons' service, describes the final straw in Ona's decision-making: Martha Washington chooses to "bequeath" Ona to her granddaughter Eliza. This instance, Dunbar asserts, showed Ona with finality that to her enslavers, she was not only expendable but replaceable.

Having toiled for the Washingtons for years—all the while being denied the chance to claim the freedom which was rightfully hers according to Pennsylvania law—Ona finally realizes that no matter how long she stays with the Washingtons or how hard she toils on their behalf, she will never be seen as an autonomous or worthy of even basic care or respect. This moment represents a major point of no return for Ona—all of the other factors that have been weighing on her as she considers running away are now pulled into relief by this final insult. The only thing for Ona to do, she now knows, is to risk everything for the chance at freedom, autonomy, and control over her own life.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ But still, she was willing to face dog-sniffing kidnappers and bounty hunters for the rest of her life. Yes, her fear was consuming but so, too, was her anger. Judge could no longer stomach her enslavement, and it was the change in her ownership that pulled the trigger on Judge's fury. She had given everything to the Washingtons. For twelve years she had served her mistress faithfully, and now she was to be discarded like the scraps of material that she cut from Martha Washington's dresses. Any false illusions she had clung to had evaporated, and Judge knew that no matter how obedient or loyal she may have appeared to her owners, she would never be considered fully human.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Elizabeth Parke "Eliza" Custis Law , Martha Washington, George Washington, Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Erica Armstrong Dunbar uses a combination of historical context, historical record, and imaginative empathy to reconstruct what Ona Judge must have been feeling as she considered running away from George and Martha Washington in a bid for her own freedom. Ona, Dunbar asserts, likely would have known the frightening and indeed life-threatening risks associated with running away. Her "fury" and disappointment, however, outweighed these fears and preoccupations.

Dunbar uses this passage to illustrate her assertion that freedom and agency are—and always have been—the most vital components of a human's life. The ability to determine one's own fate and future is necessary for one to thrive—and under slavery, Ona Judge was unable to experience this part of life. The only way for Ona to live a truly full life in which she could "be considered fully human"

was to radically assert her right to freedom by any means necessary, all the while accepting the attendant risks of making such a dangerous choice.

Chapter 9 Quotes

The beautiful and expensive clothing that she wore to serve the Washingtons was packed away, and instead, Judge would have dressed in inconspicuous clothing, allowing her to hide in plain sight. She was a hunted woman and would try to pass, not for white, but as a free black Northern woman.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

As Erica Armstrong Dunbar imagines what Ona Judge's early days of freedom must have been like immediately in the wake of her escape from the Washingtons' Executive Mansion, she invokes the book's central symbol of clothing in order to illustrate Ona's precarious position. While Ona would have worn beautiful things while serving the Washingtons, her possession of nice clothing and other finery only falsely approximated the benefits of freedom—she had no real agency as an enslaved person. Now that Ona has made a bid for freedom, she is at last in charge of her own fate and fortune—but life as a free Black Northern woman will be difficult in many ways, and Ona will be barred from certain aspects of her life as she knew it while enslaved by the Washingtons. Freedom does not come without its own costs, Dunbar asserts, while at the same time affirming that nothing is more valuable than freedom, agency, and individual liberty. There were certain things lost in the search for freedom—and though Ona, too, recognized this fact, she chose to risk everything in the name of securing for herself the freedom she deserved.

That Judge elected to become a domestic, that she chose to endure physically punishing work in New Hampshire, rather than remain a slave, says everything we need know about how much she valued freedom.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Erica Armstrong Dunbar describes the difficult road Ona faced while living as a free (but hunted) woman in New Hampshire, she points to the grueling nature of Ona's work as a domestic as proof of how deeply and profoundly Ona valued her freedom. Earlier on in the chapter, Dunbar used the symbol of clothing to illustrate and foreshadow the compromises and hardships Ona would face as she bravely, radically chose to risk everything in the name of freedom. Now, Dunbar focuses more concretely on the day-to-day reality of Ona's difficult life in New Hampshire. The work she must undertake in order to make a wage and survive is arduous and painful—yet Ona's choice to undertake such work, Dunbar argues, shows just how committed she was to staying free at any cost. Even grueling labor undertaken of Ona's own volition, Dunbar asserts, was preferable to enslavement because liberty, agency, and the right to choose one's own fate are the most important things of all.

Chapter 10 Quotes

While her walks about town were a reminder of her newfound freedom, they were always accompanied by the concerns of recapture. Judge never forgot that she was a hunted woman. Ever vigilant and alert, she knew she'd be a fool to dawdle in the narrow streets of her new city, for she might be asked to present freedom papers. Black men and women needed to walk with purpose in Portsmouth, lest they be questioned about their business, attracting unwanted or perhaps hostile attention from their white neighbors.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar continues using a combination of historical context and empathetic imagination to

reconstruct what Ona Judge's early days in Portsmouth, New Hampshire must have been like. Ona was finally free—but as a fugitive, she was never allowed to forget that she was a "hunted woman." As Dunbar lays out the restrictive nature of Judge's existence in Portsmouth, she contrasts the pressures of life on the run against the relative freedoms of living apart from the crushing institution of enslavement. Things were by no means easy for Ona as a free Black woman in Portsmouth, and Dunbar is careful to remind her readers of the lingering effects of slavery, paternalism, and racism which permeate even Northern society. Still, Dunbar continues to suggest, as she did in earlier chapters, that freedom is worth any sacrifice. The simple fact of being able to determine one's own fate, Dunbar asserts, outweighs any danger, trial, or tribulation.

❝ Why would any of the Washingtons' slaves run away, especially Ona Judge? Hadn't she been treated well, clothed, and fed? […] Even though John Langdon was no longer a slaveholder, he knew what must be done. Not only were the Washingtons family friends, but as a senator of the United States, he was obligated to follow the law. Ona Judge was a fugitive and the Washingtons were entitled to their property.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Elizabeth Langdon , John Langdon , Martha Washington, George Washington, Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as New Hampshire senator John Langdon's daughter Elizabeth recognizes Ona Judge on the streets of Portsmouth, Dunbar imagines how the rhetoric of slavery, paternalism, and racism would've informed the Langdons' feelings about encountering one of George Washington's escaped slaves. Though the Langdons themselves were, in comparison to the dominant discourse of the time, anti-slavery, they, too, made assumptions and inquiries rooted in paternalism.

The Langdons—even in spite of their own personal divestment from the institution of slavery—were still more aligned socially, politically, and ideologically with slaveholders like Washington than they were with Black men and women. Thus, Dunbar argues, the Langdons could not see through the veil of paternalism and understand that for a formerly enslaved person, anything—even a life on the run—was preferable to the indignity and inhumanity of being enslaved. The Langdons' inability to consider things from Ona's point of view illustrates just how deeply-ingrained paternalistic rhetoric was in society—and how hard it was for white men and women to imagine what life under slavery was truly like.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ In Washington's mind, there was no possible way that Judge could or would have engineered her own escape under the watchful eyes of her owners. Someone else must have lured her away and planned her escape, for as Washington wrote to Wolcott, "not the least suspicion was entertained of her going, or having formed a connexion with any one who could induce her to such an Act."

Over time, Washington grew adamant that a boyfriend was at the center of Judge's getaway. The president believed that a known acquaintance of the first family, a "Frenchman" to be exact, was involved in Judge's escape.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines, George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Erica Armstrong Dunbar continues her interrogation of the notions of paternalism and racism as they relate to the institution of slavery. In the wake of Ona's disappearance, this passage shows, George Washington was literally incapable of imagining that Ona could have engineered—or really even desired—her own escape. Washington, and countless other slaveholders like them, were so divested from any recognition of the humanity or agency of their human "property" that they found it impossible to imagine that the men and women they enslaved had the drive or the wherewithal to plan and carry out their own liberation.

Washington's racist ideas intersected with his paternalistic point of view, leading him to believe that someone must have enticed Ona away from him—and that only another man, a white man in particular, could have done so. Washington and other slaveholders of his social standing believed that the lives their slaves had were better than the lives they would have had otherwise. These paternalistic white men failed to see that freedom, liberty, and agency were far more important than the "comforts" they

erroneously believed they were providing.

If Washington wanted his slave woman back, he would have to follow the law and consequently expose himself to the growing antislavery sentiment in New Hampshire and across New England.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Joseph Whipple , Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines, George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

As Washington's repeated attempts to hunt Ona down and return her to a life of enslavement at Mount Vernon failed time and again, the president found himself coming up against rapidly-shifting anti-slavery sentiment in the North. Washington attempted to pay or hire people to discreetly coax Ona back to Virginia—but when these efforts failed, Washington, Dunbar asserts, started to realize that in order to recapture Ona, he would need to show his hand. Washington's political reputation, he knew, could be sullied by the depths of his attachment to the institution of slavery more than it could be by the relative embarrassment of having had a slave escape. Dunbar suggests that for the Founding Father, every move made was made in the spotlight—and that to "expose himself" as a man who would resort to coercion or violence to bring back one of his many slaves could be a politically and socially devastating move.

Chapter 12 Quotes

With no extra money to purchase a new wedding dress, Judge would have selected to wear something from her existing wardrobe. For months, the fugitive dressed inconspicuously, wearing plain clothing appropriate for a domestic. But on her wedding day she would have pulled out one of her nicer dresses, one that she used to wear while serving the Washingtons.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Jack Staines , Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Dunbar uses a combination of historical context and imagination to reconstruct the occasion of Ona Judge's marriage to Jack Staines, Dunbar invokes the symbol of clothing to illustrate the meaningful nature of the wedding. Clothing is, throughout the book, a symbol for the yearning to attain—or at least approximate—freedom, agency, and individual liberty. During the early months of her time in Portsmouth, just after escaping enslavement, Ona Judge could not wear the fine dresses she'd sewn while enslaved by the Washingtons—they would draw too much attention to her.

Now, however, as Ona takes a major step in building a new life for herself as a free woman, Dunbar suggests that Ona likely would have pulled out her finest clothes for the occasion. Symbolically, this demonstrates Ona's joy in finally being able to enjoy her freedom—she no longer needs to merely approximate or imagine freedom but instead can enjoy the liberty and agency that she was denied her entire life. Though Ona's freedom was not easy to obtain—nor will it be easy to maintain—in this moment, she reclaims and remakes her own narrative, donning the clothes she once wore to serve her enslavers as she embarks on a new chapter in her life.

Righteous indignation and a belief in her right to be free prompted her final and fierce response to Bassett, telling him, "I am free now and choose to remain so."

Related Characters: Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines, Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), George Washington, Martha Washington, Burwell Bassett Jr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar describes an encounter between Ona Staines and Burwell Bassett Jr.—a nephew of Martha Washington, a Virginian senator, and an emissary of George Washington sent to Portsmouth to convince Ona to return to enslavement at Mount Vernon. According to the letters Bassett would write to Washington in the wake of his visit to Ona's home, Ona told Bassett plainly and "fierce[ly]" that

she would not give up her freedom at any cost.

This quotation is significant because it demonstrates that Ona's freedom was indeed more important to her than anything else. The agency she obtained for herself after running away from the Washingtons was so precious to her that even when faced with the threat of one of her former enslavers' emissaries, she refused to bend or break. Dunbar recreates this moment in detail in order to restore an additional measure of agency to Ona's story by reimagining what this instant must have been like for her. Though Ona's feelings about what transpired in this moment are lost to time, Dunbar can approximate what it must have been like for Ona to stand up so staunchly for her own rights in such a precarious situation—and doing so for Ona and women like her, Dunbar suggests, is the duty of all historians.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ Archibald published this first interview on May 27, 1845, in the *Granite Freeman*, an abolitionist newspaper. The article appeared on the forty-ninth anniversary of her escape—almost to the day. With her children deceased, the elderly Ona Staines no longer hid from the spotlight. Now in her early seventies, the fear of being returned to the Parke Custis heirs had finally been vanquished.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Martha Washington, George Washington, Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar describes the release of a major interview Ona gave to an abolitionist newspaper toward the end of her life. This passage is significant because it represents a major instance of Ona reclaiming her own agency and taking charge of her own story during her own lifetime—an unthinkable thing for someone who had been born into enslavement and fought for years to obtain (and maintain) freedom in a hostile, racist, paternalistic world.

Ona's ability to give an interview telling her own story represents in many ways the final milestone in her journey to freedom. Even after escaping the Washingtons' household, Ona lived in fear for many years that she'd be apprehended and returned to a life of enslavement—even after George and Martha's deaths, she knew that Martha's heirs might try to stake their claims on her life. Now, however, in her old age, Ona feels emboldened by the passage of time and the shifting of social mores surrounding slavery—and she is at last about to share her story with the world. This interview will allow future generations of historians (like Dunbar) to access and amplify Ona's voice through the ages.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ "When asked if she is not sorry she left Washington, as she has labored so much harder since, than before, her reply is 'No, I am free, and I have, I trust, been made a child of God by the means.'" Although she never regretted her escape, she could not forget her family members who still lived at Mount Vernon. Leaving them behind was the greatest of sacrifices.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar, Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines (speaker), George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar reproduces to a quotation from an interview Ona gave to an abolitionist newspaper toward the end of her life. Though Ona told the interviewer that she never regretted leaving Mount Vernon, Dunbar opts to interrogate this sentiment and dig deeper into what Ona left behind when she escaped to freedom.

Dunbar has, throughout the novel, pointed to freedom and agency as the most important, vital parts of a person's life—things necessary to meet the barest conditions of liberty and happiness. Now, however, Dunbar wants to explore the nuance behind what it means to leave everything behind in pursuit of freedom—and to examine exactly what and whom Ona left when she made the choice to run away. Dunbar, as a historian, knows that the historical record has largely erased the voices of Black women throughout American history—especially Black women who lived under slavery. Now, Dunbar wants to use the benefits of time, privilege, access, and imagination to reconstruct Ona's life as fully as is possible.

Only sixteen years old, Philadelphia was saddled with the responsibility of serving the new Mrs. Law. Perhaps Philadelphia had proven herself to be trustworthy and reliable and was therefore the natural replacement for her older sister. Or maybe, in a fit of anger, Mrs. Washington purposely selected Philadelphia to serve the new Mrs. Law, a duty that would require her to leave Mount Vernon and head for a new home in the Federal City. If vindictiveness was her motive, Martha Washington was successful. Philadelphia followed in her older sister's footsteps, leaving behind the world she knew at Mount Vernon.

Related Characters: Erica Armstrong Dunbar (speaker), Ona Maria "Oney" Judge Staines, Martha Washington, Elizabeth Parke "Eliza" Custis Law , Philadelphia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dunbar describes the life of Ona's younger sister Philadelphia—who was also born into enslavement at Mount Vernon, and who may have suffered Martha Washington's "vindictiveness" after Ona's escape. Dunbar introduces Philadelphia's story in order to point out all that Ona left behind. Not only did she know that upon her escape she would likely never see her family again—but she also had to know that her escape would result in the Washingtons doling out punitive, retributive behavior toward her family members still at Mount Vernon out of their frustration with their own inability to punish or recapture Ona herself. By highlighting all of this, Dunbar shows just how dear, precious, and non-negotiable Ona's pursuit of freedom for herself truly was. Adding this new layer of historical context deepens the profundity of Ona's search for freedom—and sheds light on yet another story of a woman's hard-won escape from bondage at Mount Vernon.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar describes a remarkable event which took place in June of 1773 in Virginia: surprisingly, it snowed. Colonel George Washington recorded the odd weather event in his diary with a bemused tone—but Dunbar suggests that for the slaves who lived and worked on George and his wife Martha Washington's Mount Vernon, Virginia estate, the snow must have appeared as a terrible omen.

Dunbar sets the scene for the beginning of the book by showing how her blend of fact and imagination will function as the narrative progresses. Dunbar describes a historical episode that occurred and then takes the facts a step further by imagining what it must have been like to truly live through that episode, including the perspectives of those who weren't typically given a voice.

Eight days later, on June 19th, 1773, Martha Washington's daughter from her first marriage, Martha "Patsy" Parke Custis, succumbs to what is most likely a seizure and dies. Martha has already lost two children years ago—now, Patsy's death renders the already-fragile Martha even more emotionally frayed. The Mount Vernon house slaves, Dunbar writes, no doubt notice Martha's deterioration and begin treading carefully around their mistress.

Dunbar paints a picture of an uncertain, painful moment in the Washingtons' family history and shows how the Washingtons' familial strife no doubt affected the enslaved Black men and women who toiled on their behalf. By reimagining the narratives and emotions of those who have been erased from history, Dunbar strives to create a fuller portrait about what life was like—not just for the social elite but for those who lived in their shadows.

Just days after Patsy's death, one of Martha Washington's "dower slaves," owned by her first husband, delivers a baby girl. The mother of the child, an expert seamstress and spinner named Betty, is among Martha Washington's "favorite" slaves (or bondwomen), having served Martha for over 20 years. Betty followed Martha to Mount Vernon after Martha's marriage to George Washington—a mutually advantageous arrangement for both George and Martha—and joined the hundreds of other slaves who worked the huge Mount Vernon estate.

Throughout the book, Dunbar will continually point to these moments of coincidence, mirroring, or reversal between the parallel existences of the Washingtons and the people they enslaved. In a moment of great turmoil for the Washington family, Betty enjoys the bittersweet arrival of her daughter.

Given the fact that families were often split apart in such transitional times—and that for enslaved Black women in particular, a new master meant added threats of rape and assault—Betty was likely nervous to come to Mount Vernon. She was, however, allowed to bring her first child, Austin, with her. Within a few years of arriving at the plantation, Betty gave birth to two more children—their father was likely a white weaver named Thomas Davis. Betty, as a "valued" and "favored" slave, worked inside the main house as a seamstress.

By providing background about Betty's life, Dunbar returns to her the agency and humanity she was denied in her lifetime. Dunbar is not only telling Ona's story—she is telling the stories of the many women who toiled in obscurity under the cruel and inhumane institution of slavery.

Now, in 1773, Betty gives birth to another child, Ona Maria Judge, whose father, Andrew Judge, is an English-born white man and indentured servant who works as a tailor at Mount Vernon. Dunbar suggests that while love and romance may have brought Betty and Judge together, it is just as likely that Ona was the product of either a single rape or extended, repeated nonconsensual sexual encounters. By 1780, Dunbar writes, Judge will leave Mount Vernon—and Betty and Ona—behind, seeking his fortune on a tract of land elsewhere in Virginia.

Because the narratives of Black women—especially enslaved Black women—have been frequently erased from the historical record (and because enslaved Black women were hardly ever taught to read or write), there are no definitive records of Betty's experiences. Dunbar, then, is forced to blend cultural knowledge of relations between Black women and white men at the time with the few records that do exist. With this in mind, the hypothesis that Ona was likely conceived through rape implies that it was common at this time for white people to sexually abuse Black slaves.

During the early days of Ona's childhood, she lives with her siblings and their mother in a structure known as the Quarters, or House for Families. Ona learns to fend for herself during the long days alone while Betty works in the main Mansion House as a seamstress and spinner. Though many slave families are split up, either when individuals are sold or moved to another property, Ona remains with her mother at Mount Vernon. From Betty, Dunbar writes, Ona will learn how to persevere; from her absent father, Ona will learn that "the decision to free oneself trump[s] everything."

In this passage, Dunbar shows how Ona's experiences and choices will be shaped by the behaviors she witnesses in her formative years. She learns from her mother that to fight for survival in the midst of unimaginable circumstances is a worthy pursuit—but she also learns from her absent father's example that sometimes, one's personal liberty must come before all else.

CHAPTER 2

On Christmas Eve of 1783, George Washington returns home from his post as commander of the Continental Army, having led more than 100,000 men to victory against the British. Washington has witnessed terrible things in the Revolutionary War—now a man of 50, his experiences have aged him. He longs for a quiet life, yet he is in high demand to be the leader of the fledgling United States of America. In 1789, in spite of Washington's hesitations, he agrees to ascend to the presidency—he has been unanimously elected. The election makes Washington even more weary: he will need to borrow money to keep Mount Vernon afloat as he travels to New York to live and serve in the nation's capital.

Dunbar provides some historical context for Washington's emotional, financial, and political positioning at the start of this particular part of his life's story. Washington is financially strapped, emotionally exhausted, and wary of setting a political precedent at the start of a new nation's trajectory—yet he is so beloved that he reluctantly ascends to the role his public expects of him. Dunbar shows how these factors tie in with Washington's predisposition toward paternalism—and with his feelings about duty, freedom, and responsibility.

Ona Judge, now 16, is among the seven slaves who are to accompany George and Martha Washington to New York. Washington, in his diaries, describes the departure as full of "anxious and painful sensations." Upon his arrival in New York, Washington does his best to keep his head down and focus on his demanding and unprecedented new position. Life in New York is different than life at Mount Vernon—as the second-largest city in America, it is home to around 30,000 people and still growing. The city is home to both enslaved and free Black people—and its "northeastern" section is in the present-day Lower East Side.

Dunbar demonstrates the intense contrasts between life at Mount Vernon and life in New York. If Washington himself is this rattled by the shift, Dunbar suggests, the change will be all the more jarring for the enslaved men and women who will become responsible for caring for Washington's affairs, and those of his family. Dunbar also sets the stage for Washington's forced reckoning with social mores about slavery in the South versus those in the North.

Martha Washington stays behind at Mount Vernon to settle affairs before joining her husband in New York—she even misses his inauguration on April 30th, 1789. On May 3rd, Tobias Lear—Washington's trusted personal secretary—writes to a relative of Martha's left in charge of Mount Vernon to urge the man to "hasten" Martha in traveling to New York. Martha, however, is reluctant to leave—and Ona, who is among the first lady's favored house slaves, senses better than almost anyone else Martha's deeply conflicted feelings. Ona's own uncertainties and fears, Dunbar writes, likely mirror Martha's—Ona has never left Mount Vernon, and, in traveling to New York alongside her mistress, she will be leaving behind her own family members to serve her owners.

Dunbar uses this passage to show how while Martha Washington and Ona Judge both experienced, fear, anxiety, and resistance as they confronted the idea of moving northward, only Martha's feelings were deemed even remotely valid or worthy of concern. As a piece of "property," Ona would never be given a choice about whether to stay or go or afforded the luxury of stalling, dragging her heels, or expressing any negative emotion about the impending move.

Washington sends a nephew, Robert Lewis, to escort Martha and her slaves from Mount Vernon to New York. Lewis arrives at the estate to find things in disarray—both Martha and the "servants of the House" are agitated. Dunbar writes that Betty, Ona's mother—who is sending not only Ona, but also Ona's brother Austin, to New York—must have been one of the anxious individuals milling about Mount Vernon. This episode, Dunbar writes, no doubt reminded every Black person at Mount Vernon that under slavery, they had no rights, no power, and no say over their own destinies.

Again, Dunbar uses this passage to demonstrate that while Martha was allowed to express agitation, anxiety, and hesitancy, her slaves were unable to assert their own fears about being separated, moved, or controlled. Dunbar hammers home just how cruel and inhumane the physical and emotional treatment of enslaved Black men and women truly was.

At the same time, Dunbar writes, it is likely that there was some excitement among the slaves chosen to travel to New York—news of Northern emancipation, Dunbar suggests, would likely have reached Mount Vernon. The idea of traveling northward to a place where Black people could be free, she suggests, would have compounded the stories of runaway slaves that many of the enslaved Black people at Mount Vernon would have already been familiar with. The Washingtons, too, would have known that mores and public feeling about slavery were changing up north—and thus they'd likely have chosen to bring with them slaves whom they felt were especially "loyal."

Dunbar shows how even as the enslaved men and women at Mount Vernon began viewing a sojourn to the north as an opportunity to be a bit more proximal to a free Black community, the Washingtons were already seeking to tighten their grip on the people they viewed as their rightful "property." Paternalism, greed, and racism were all fuel for the Washingtons' careful calibration of their slaves' trajectories.

William Lee, George Washington's body servant, is one of the slaves, or bondmen, traveling north. As Washington's valet, Lee is responsible for dressing Washington's hair and preparing the man's clothing. Washington favors Lee heavily and often goes out riding with him. Fifteen years ago, Lee traveled with Washington to Philadelphia, a trip on which Washington purchased **new shoes and garments** for his trusted manservant. After the trip, William—who had previously been known as Billy—adopted the full name William Lee.

This passage introduces clothing as one of the book's most important symbols. Fine clothes, shoes, and other accessories represent the ways in which enslaved Black men and women fought to place themselves in proximity to freedom by saving, working, and toiling to obtain these emblems of prosperity—knowing all the while that true freedom would likely elude them forever. William Lee, as one of Washington's most trusted slaves, sought to elevate himself and make his life as dignified as possible—yet Dunbar will go on to show how Lee's life was, unfortunately, perpetually defined by his enslaved status.

It is also significant to note, Dunbar adds, that on this previous trip, Lee met and fell in love with a free Black woman named Margaret Thomas—Thomas made the "dangerous" choice to move south with Lee and live with him at Mount Vernon. There is, however, no record of what became of Thomas after she moved south—Dunbar suggests that perhaps Thomas changed her mind about walking "into the mouth of the slave-hungry South" and ultimately chose to return north, where her freedom would not be threatened.

Again, Dunbar shows how freedom is often more important than anything else in one's life. When Lee's wife's freedom was threatened simply by her existence in the South, she most likely chose to protect herself above all else.

Now, as Lee prepares to travel to New York, he ignores his failing health—the result of two shattered kneecaps which have never fully healed, leading Lee to begin drinking heavily—in order to seem up for the job. On the road, Lee falls behind the caravan and splits off toward Philadelphia to see a doctor. He will join Washington months later in New York after being fitted for braces at Washington's expense. Washington also makes sure that two of his other slaves—Giles and Paris, who work as drivers—are **well-outfitted**. Washington knows that his slaves' appearances reflect upon him, and he is determined to make sure they look "handsome" as they arrive in the new city.

This passage demonstrates how Washington valued his slaves' appearances over their actual emotional or physical well-being. Washington knew Lee was suffering, yet made no special accommodations for him before it was absolutely necessary, instead choosing to focus on making sure that his most visible slaves' appearances made Washington himself look moneyed and benevolent.

The only two bondwomen to travel to New York are Ona Judge and Moll, an older seamstress of about fifty. Together, Ona and Moll will serve Martha as housemaids and personal attendants. Ona is to be responsible for **dressing**, bathing, and readying Martha, while Moll is to look after the Washingtons' grandchildren. Though the two women are domestics, their work is still grueling, and their private time is fleeting.

Ona's specific job, too, allows her proximity to markers of wealth and finery—yet Dunbar will go on to show how she and Moll are both regularly used, dehumanized, and forced to de-center their own lives to serve the people who legally own them.

During a short rest in Philadelphia on the way to New York, Ona has her first experiences in a northern city. Though there are still hundreds of slaves living in the city, they are in the minority—there are nearly 2,000 free Black people living there, and antislavery activism is on the rise. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society is hard at work printing materials that indict the transatlantic slave trade and expose the brutality of slavery. Bolstered by the Quakers, many prominent Philadelphia statesmen actively oppose slavery and seek its end. Martha Washington, however, avoids contact with these prominent figures—including Benjamin Franklin—as she has no interest in releasing her slaves or exposing them to "the contagion of liberty." After just a short time in Philadelphia, the first lady's party moves on from Philadelphia toward New York—and a new life for Ona.

By contrasting the sociopolitical environment in the South—a place where slavery is common and enforced—against the North—a place where many people are actively working to dismantle an inhumane and cruel institution—Dunbar shows how exhilarating it must have felt for Ona to travel North even as she demonstrates how fraught it must have felt for Martha to do so. Martha Washington, unable to function without the help of enslaved Black men and women yet reluctant to expose them to the "contagion" of freedom, found herself in an impossible and precarious situation.

CHAPTER 3

Dunbar describes how difficult things are, even in New York, for fugitive slaves who have run away from their masters and mistresses in an attempt to secure freedom for themselves. Organizations like the New York Manumission Society—a group which seeks to persuade New Yorkers to release their slaves—try to put their bodies between slave catchers and the fugitives they seek, to offer legal aid to escaped Black people, and to open schools for Black children. White reformers and Black activists alike seek an end to slavery—and justice for free Black people—but it will be decades before New York truly ends slavery.

Dunbar describes the changing social, political, and cultural environment in New York in order to set the stage for the collision of ideas and morals that will take place as the Washingtons arrive in the nation's temporary capital. Things are changing fairly rapidly—and the Washingtons are at odds with the new environment into which they are moving.

On May 27th of 1789, three days after leaving Philadelphia, Martha Washington and her coterie arrive in New Jersey. Washington meets his wife and grandchildren—Eleanor Parke "Nelly" Custis and George Washington Parke "Wash" Custis—and travels with them across the river to Manhattan. As the Washingtons begin adjusting to the demanding social scene in New York, Ona becomes one of the most well-known, even "high-profile" bondwomen in the nation. Dunbar suggests that though the transition to Northern life must have been difficult and frightening at times, Ona swiftly adapted to her new life and became Martha's "go-to girl."

Dunbar has already set the stage for the fact that the Washingtons are, in a way, arriving in an entirely different world as they begin their lives in New York. Though the Washingtons can take their time adjusting, Ona must swiftly and seamlessly do all that is required of her without any hesitation or difficulty.

A large part of Ona's job in New York is taking responsibility for Martha Washington's appearance—deciding what garments the first lady will wear, cleaning her **shoes and fine dresses**, and helping Martha to create a more cosmopolitan image through her wardrobe. In the Washingtons' expansive Cherry Street residence, there is more work than the seven slaves the Washington have brought along can handle, so Tobias Lear begins to bring in additional white servants. This, Dunbar writes, is likely the first time that Ona has ever lived in such close quarters with free white servants. As Ona witnesses the benefits of freedom, she also likely bears witness to its demands: the threat of poverty, lack of opportunity, and constant fear of the future. Still, these white servants are free while Ona is not.

Ona experiences greater proximity to freedom than she ever has through exposure both to the free Black community in New York and the white indentured servants who work alongside her. But she also begins to see the complexities that define freedom for Black people—especially Black women—of her era. Ona understands that there are additional responsibilities and potential pitfalls that accompany freedom—and she'll need to weigh these fears in the months and years to come.

As Martha continues struggling to adjust to the new demands of life in New York, Ona struggles, too, to accept her increasingly visible, formal, and public role as the first lady's most trusted slave. Martha's fast-paced social calendar—and George and Martha's open audiences at the Cherry Street house once a week—mean that Ona begins interacting with increasingly prominent people including foreign ministers, senators, and congressmen. These occasions also keep the Washingtons occupied and busy—allowing Ona precious private time in which she can enjoy stolen moments for herself.

Even as Ona's responsibilities multiply, she finds herself experiencing new things—and indeed enjoying moments in which she can sharpen her sense of self and reckon with the fast-paced changes that are defining her life in New York.

New York, Dunbar notes, is not yet quite as progressive as Philadelphia. In spite of abolitionist rhetoric on the rise, no one bats an eye at Washington bringing along a group of slaves to serve him at Cherry Street. Dunbar suggests that Ona and the six other enslaved men and women who traveled with her to Philadelphia—and then on to New York—must have felt a kind of whiplash as they went from a brief stay in a more open-minded city to an extended stay in one that was still far behind in terms of attitudes toward the end of slavery. Dunbar writes that when Ona compared her observations of Northern slavery to the practices of Southern slaveholders like George and Martha Washington, who owned hundreds of enslaved people, she likely would have been surprised by the stark differences.

Though Dunbar discusses the rise of anti-slavery rhetoric and action in the North, she is also careful to point out that there are not yet massive structural challenges or obstacles standing in the way of slaveholders doing as they please. The tide of public opinion has not yet turned radically enough to cause George or Martha to feel a sense of shame about owning human "property."

A month after Martha Washington arrives in New York, George Washington becomes ill with fever. Surgeons are forced to remove a large tumor from his left leg. The Washingtons try to keep the president's condition private—but the apprehensive, agitated mood at Cherry Street deepens as the president begins his long road to recovery, adding stress and pressure to Ona's already-massive workload.

This passage again demonstrates how the personal problems of white slaveholders often affected their slaves just as acutely—and sometimes even more profoundly or in radically different ways.

Once Washington is recovered, the family moves to a larger home on Broadway. Martha is frequently left alone as George resumes travel from state to state. Soon, the president becomes ill again as influenza season descends upon the city. In late April of 1790, needing a respite from the city, the Washingtons prepare to return home to Mount Vernon for an extended visit and a rest from Northern life. Ona will return to Virginia a changed woman. Though she is only 16, she has seen things her family members and fellow slaves back at Mount Vernon have never imagined.

The Washingtons' return to Mount Vernon is, for George and Martha, a respite from the strenuous demands of public life and a chance to rest after the illnesses that have plagued their home. For Ona, however, the trip holds a very different meaning: having been changed by the things she's seen and done, returning home is less of a chance to rest and more of a confrontation with the two very different worlds of which she's now a part.

CHAPTER 4

In the summer of 1790, the Washingtons return to Mount Vernon for a long, nearly three-month visit. The nation's capital is being moved from New York to Philadelphia, and most of the Cherry Street house's contents are packed up and shipped there. Though Ona is only 16, she has experienced more of the world than anyone else in her family—including her sister back at Mount Vernon, Betty Davis, who has recently given birth to a daughter named Nancy. Dunbar writes that the return to Mount Vernon must have made Ona consider the "fixed reality" of a life lived in enslavement—though her family members may have seen her special duties and valued work as glamorous, Ona now knew that up north, Black people enjoyed true freedom.

Dunbar uses this passage to unpack how profoundly Ona's time away must have changed her. Ona, like her family members, may have previously viewed her role in the Washingtons' lives as glamorous, special, or otherwise proximal to certain luxuries. Now, however, having seen what true freedom looks like, she is forced to reckon with the fact that no matter how envied her duties, her life is a "fixed reality"—it's still not her own.

Martha Washington is once again anxious and on edge as she prepares for yet another move to the new capital. Where the nation's epicenter should be is a point of great debate. Congress has decided to build a Federal City which exists independently from any other city or state government—and Washington has pressured his fellow statesmen to locate this city in a Southern location. The capital, then, is temporarily moving to Philadelphia while the federal government begins forcing hundreds of slaves to clear the land over the desolate swamps of Eastern Virginia and begin building the resplendent infrastructure which will house "the seat of America's power."

This passage exemplifies how marginalized the very people who built America—enslaved Black men and women—were, as they were forbidden from enjoying the freedoms America promised to its privileged white citizens. Enslaved Black people were forced to do the backbreaking labor of clearing swampland and building infrastructure to create "the seat of America's power," yet that power did not extend them equal rights. In showing how Black Americans have always been excluded from the very places, social structures, and institutions they themselves built, Dunbar highlights the flawed creation of America.

As the Washingtons prepare to return north, they choose to bring more rather than fewer slaves along with them, even though they have realized that Northern sentiments about slavery are shifting. Martha chooses to bring along Ona, and Washington assigns a slave named Hercules who possesses great culinary skills to work in the kitchen at the grand new house in Philadelphia. Hercules's son Richmond is also allowed to come along. William Lee, however, is left behind amidst worsening physical disabilities. Altogether, eight slaves will move to Philadelphia with the Washingtons. Though the move is full of uncertainty for all of them, not a single one of the Washingtons' slaves is able to express the fears and hopes they most certainly feel.

Dunbar briefly highlights the names and stories of many of the slaves who accompany the Washingtons to Philadelphia in order to show how their humanity, agency, and feelings are collectively denied time and time again. In a time of rapid change for everyone, the Black men and women who keep the Washingtons' affairs running smoothly are not given a chance to catch their breath, gather their feelings, express their anxieties, or feel their experiences validated.

At the large, imposing Executive Mansion on High Street, Washington builds additional accommodations for his "entourage" of slaves—as well as for Tobias Lear, Lear's wife Mary, their son Benjamin, and the Lear's 20-odd slaves and servants who will also live at High Street. For the slaves and servants who will live in the sprawling yet full President's House, privacy and autonomy will be impossible to come by.

Dunbar shows how quickly the Executive Mansion fills up in order to highlight the great melting pot of people and experiences who will populate it. This will likely inform Ona's experience of life up north, exposing her to perspectives, opportunities, and hopes that she's never conceived of before.

Ona and Moll are assigned to sleep in the room with the Washingtons' grandchildren. The children are primarily Moll's job, but Ona, too, will be responsible for soothing the youngsters in the middle of the night. Dunbar writes that when it comes to sleeping arrangements, living and resting in the same quarters as their owners was never preferable for slaves—especially female slaves—who were, while in their masters' houses, more vulnerable to sexual attacks. Ona is on "constant jeopardy"—yet as long as she sleeps with the children, she is comparatively safer, shielded by their young bodies.

Dunbar provides historical context surrounding the perils facing enslaved Black women who lived and slept in close quarters with their white owners and their white owners' relatives. She does so in order to approximate how Ona must have felt as she moved to a new place. Her anxiety about the "constant" threat of rape would likely have been tempered by the fact that she shared a room with children—yet Dunbar suggests that no enslaved Black woman could ever feel completely free from fears of violence.

As George Washington packs his mansion with Black slaves and white servants alike, he does not realize that putting the two groups in such close proximity to one another will jeopardize his fortune. By watching their "comrades" receive pay for their work, move about town freely, and make decisions for themselves, the enslaved Black men and women in Washington's home will become even more aware of the injustices that define their own existences.

Dunbar foreshadows how the profound shifts and unlikely encounters taking place at the Executive Mansion will reverberate throughout the lives not just of the enslaved Black men and women who begin to imagine different futures for themselves, but throughout the lives of the Washingtons as well.

CHAPTER 5

After settling his family in Philadelphia, Washington begins a tour through the south, stopping in Mount Vernon to rest between visits to Southern cities. In April of 1791, Washington begins to realize that his finances are in trouble. The Attorney General (and former governor of Virginia) Edmond Randolph visits the President's House to speak with Martha Washington and to inform her of a threat to the Washingtons' ability to hold slaves in Philadelphia. The law of Pennsylvania states that all adult slaves who are brought into the commonwealth for more than six months are free at the end of that period. Though many slaveholders rely on the tenuous idea that their ignorant slaves will simply never learn of the law, several slaveholders have recently had trouble with runaways—and Randolph himself has lost "property."

In this passage, Dunbar introduces a concrete and serious threat to the Washingtons' seemingly untouchable, unchangeable engagement with the practice of slavery. The Washingtons believed that their status as slaveholders would never be contested—but here in Pennsylvania, they are beginning to see that shifting social attitudes toward slavery are not merely abstract. The country that George Washington leads is moving on without him in many ways—and he will soon be forced to choose how he wants to appear to his constituents and what his legacy will come to mean.

Martha Washington enlists the help of Tobias Lear in coming up with a system that will discreetly yet effectively allow their family to bypass Philadelphia's law. Washington himself is not naïve enough to believe that his slaves are especially grateful or loyal to him—he knows that the promise of freedom will entice them away from bondage should they learn of the law. Together with Martha and Lear, Washington creates a plan to circumvent the law by rotating slaves between High Street and Mount Vernon every six months.

The Washingtons are too reliant upon slave labor to consider letting their slaves benefit from Philadelphia's progressive laws, and they immediately get to work on a plan to avoid granting their slaves the freedom that they deserve under Pennsylvania law. Dunbar introduces the Washingtons' actions here not only as morally indefensible but illegal, calling into question what her readers know about the legacy of the most famous Founding Father.

Pennsylvania has had a long and difficult relationship to the institution of slavery, and in 1688, a group of Germantown Quakers in the state declare slavery an inhumane contradiction to their religious beliefs. The financial benefits of slavery to slaveholders, however, outweighed the Quakers' protests against the inhumanity of holding fellow humans in bondage for many years. But in March of 1780, the first antislavery law in the United States is passed—after their 28th birthdays, enslaved Black people are to be freed.

Dunbar uses this passage to contextualize the long struggle against slavery which has been taking place in Pennsylvania for nearly an entire century. She wants to illustrate just how profoundly the Washingtons' actions fly in the face not just of modern concepts of right and wrong, but even of their contemporaries' conceptions of good and evil.

Washington discreetly writes letters from Virginia to Martha in Philadelphia, encouraging her to hastily plan a trip home—and to bring with her the adult slaves whose six months are almost up. At the same time, Washington knows that as he is only two years into his first term, he needs to protect his reputation amidst growing antislavery sentiment in the North. He urges Tobias Lear to keep his missives secret, and he urges Martha to keep her slaves in the dark about what is happening to them (or, rather, what is not).

Dunbar shows how even in the midst of a profound moment of reckoning with the institution of slavery—and the possibility of freedom for enslaved Black men and women—the Washingtons choose only to focus on how the absence of slave labor in their lives would affect them. Washington wants to protect his wealth, his reputation, and his right to own human "property," compromising his moral and legal standings in order to do so.

On April 19th, Martha sends Ona's brother, Austin, back to Mount Vernon with just over $11 for the trip. Soon after, she begins making arrangements for herself and the rest of her slaves—even the underage Ona, whose status as a minor does not exempt her from the six-months law—to make the sojourn home. Washington, in his correspondences with his wife and his secretary, urges them both to use the utmost discretion when making plans so as to prevent the slaves from learning the truth about how close they are to freedom. Washington is determined to keep power from shifting from himself to his human property. The loss of slaves would be both embarrassing and dangerous for the already nearly-financially-insolvent president.

Washington is determined to prevent his slaves from acquiring any power or agency over their own lives. The loss of his slaves would be both embarrassing and dangerous for the already nearly-financially-insolvent president—and he is willing to shadily circumvent the law (and bar fellow human beings from attaining the freedom they deserve) in order to protect his own interests.

The Washingtons begin hurrying many of their slaves out of Philadelphia—but they remain concerned about their chef, Hercules, whom they have recently allowed to start making an income for himself by selling kitchen scraps. Hercules has used his pay to purchase **fine clothing** for himself, buying velvet coats, shiny shoes, and a pocket watch. Refusing to risk losing the emboldened Hercules, the Washingtons hurry him to Mount Vernon—a controversial move given his prominent role at the High Street house.

Again, Dunbar highlights how Hercules's attainment of monetary and material assets signals not only to other enslaved Black men and women but indeed to his enslavers that he desires freedom. This, in the Washingtons' eyes, makes Hercules a liability and a threat to their careful plans to circumvent Pennsylvania law.

Hercules's departure raises questions at the house—and it leads to an information breach. Hercules learns of the six-months law and realizes that he has a decision to make—not just for himself, but for his daughters back in Mount Vernon and for Richmond. Hercules promises Tobias Lear that he has no intention of taking advantage of the opportunity for freedom, which would require him to leave his family behind. Hercules desperately works to assure the Washingtons of his loyalty to them. Six years later, however, in February of 1797, Hercules will run away on Washington's birthday. He will never be seen again.

Dunbar shows how even for an enslaved person like Hercules—who receives relatively "good" treatment—there is nothing more vital, more important, or more necessary than freedom. Countless enslaved people like Hercules were forced to make impossible decisions concerning the pursuit of freedom—and, like Hercules, Ona will one day choose the uncertainty and danger of freedom over the continued inhumanity of bondage.

The Washingtons' "slave shuffle," as Dunbar calls it, is successful for many years. Tobias Lear is instrumental in helping the Washingtons to keep their plot going. Lear reveals in private correspondence that he assists the Washingtons so carefully because he believes that the Washingtons' slaves are better off with the Washingtons than they would be if they were free. This paternalistic sentiment is a common attitude of the time and will be used to justify slavery for decades to come.

As Dunbar points out, the paternalism that Lear exhibits in his private correspondence was a common justification for slavery. The inability to accept that Black men and women had not just a right to freedom but the capacity for agency and self-determination associated with paternalism allowed slavery to progress and proliferate over the years.

As Washington continued shuffling his slaves—including Ona—back and forth between Virginia and Pennsylvania, Dunbar suggests, Ona must have begun using the long journeys between the two places to consider the growing divide between her life in the North, with its promises of freedom, and her life down South in bondage.

Dunbar again uses this passage to create a narrative extrapolation about Ona's emotional state based on the historical context of what was happening to her and those around her. Dunbar seeks to illuminate the parts of Ona's story that have been erased from history and to imagine what her existence might have been like in the midst of such turbulent times.

CHAPTER 6

One June evening, George and Martha Washington attend a performance at a theater in Philadelphia. They like the comedy so well that the following night, they give Ona, Austin, and Hercules permission to attend the long, intricate performance. Throughout their stay in Philadelphia, Ona and her fellow slaves are afforded several such opportunities to attend the circus, to use money given them by the Washingtons to do Christmas shopping for their friends and family, and to experience life in Philadelphia—though they cannot join Black mutual aid societies or participate fully in the world of their free Black counterparts.

Even as Ona and her fellow bondmen and women take part in certain aspects of city life, the constant reminder that they live beneath the watchful eyes of their enslavers prevents them partaking of true freedom. Dunbar shows that no matter how "well" enslaved Black men and women were treated, the simple fact of their enslavement was too egregious to overcome—freedom, for many such as Ona, became the only thing worth fighting for.

For nearly six years, as Ona travels back and forth between Philadelphia and Mount Vernon, she slowly begins learning about the laws of Pennsylvania—and the growing movements among free Black people in the north. She no doubt knows that running away carries unbelievably high risks, and that should she be forced to indenture herself to a family other than the Washingtons to survive, she may face threats such as rape or dangerous kinds of labor. Ona, Dunbar writes, likely struggled mightily: though she no doubt would have preferred freedom, she chose to stay, for the time being, in a place where she felt relatively secure.

As Ona weighs the risks of running away against the pain and humiliation of remaining enslaved, Dunbar attempts to reconstruct how Ona must have been feeling and what thoughts might have been running through her head. Using historical context from the time, Dunbar offers practical information about the risks and the rewards of pursuing freedom.

Though the number of free Black men and women in Philadelphia continues to rise, by 1790, they comprise only 5 percent of the city's population. Slave owners are quicker to emancipate male slaves, and the smaller population of emancipated Black women is often forced into grueling domestic labor or rag picking. Ona understands that freedom is, for the time being, not easy by any means. Ona witnesses the organization of free Black communities in Philadelphia from afar.

Dunbar uses even more historical context to show how Ona would no doubt have begun to feel envious of her free Black counterparts—no matter how difficult the work they undertook as free people was. Ona could bear witness to—but could not participate in—the growing Black community in the city in which she lived.

Two of the Washingtons' slaves, Giles and Paris, fall out of favor—Giles due to an incapacitating injury and Paris due to laziness and disrespectful behavior. They are left behind at Mount Vernon and do not return to Philadelphia. The absence of two slaves at the High Street house, then, means more work for the remaining slaves—including Ona, who likely begins to realize with an even deeper acuteness that her life is not her own. Her circumstances, she begins to understand, are completely subject to the whims of the people who own her.

Dunbar continues to chart the growing internal and external pressures weighing upon Ona as she considers more and more what it would actually mean to pursue freedom by running away. With each passing day, it seems that Ona becomes increasingly aware of how entirely her life and the lives of her fellow enslaved people are dictated and defined by their enslavers' whims.

The difficulties of life in Philadelphia are compounded during the summer of 1793, when an outbreak of a mosquito-borne illness, yellow fever, sickens and kills thousands. The Washingtons, along with Ona, escape home to Mount Vernon to avoid the epidemic, which ravages the city until the mosquitos die off with November's first frost. The epidemic is devastating—particularly to the Black community—and 5,000 Philadelphians perish. Grief and racial tensions collide in the winter of 1793 as free Black leaders in Philadelphia confront just how dehumanized and ignored Black Philadelphians still are compared to the city's white citizens.

Dunbar demonstrates how yet another unpredictable, unforeseeable factor begins to highlight for Ona—and for the free and enslaved Black populations of Philadelphia alike—just how unjust, unequal, and racist the treatment they receive truly is. The yellow fever outbreak, in Dunbar's estimation, weighed on Ona's mind as she attempted to decide what to do about her future.

In 1794, Ona's brother Austin dies, drowning in a river while on the way from Philadelphia to Mount Vernon. Austin was Ona's only family member up north, and now Ona must now navigate Philadelphia life alone. Ona's mother, Betty, passes away in January of 1795, and her loss marks another huge blow to Ona's family. With the loss of two family members in such rapid succession, Dunbar suggests that Ona perhaps begins to believe that the North is more her home than Mount Vernon is.

Dunbar implicitly points to Austin and Betty's deaths as additional compounding factors in Ona's decision-making process regarding her pursuit of freedom. The tragedy of two of her most beloved family members' deaths must have made Ona feel more alone and thus more desperate to make a life for herself outside the sphere of Mount Vernon and the Washingtons.

CHAPTER 7

For Ona and her fellow slaves at the High Street residence, the days are marked by their enslavers' moods. The future is unpredictable and always entirely beyond their control. In February 1796, Martha Washington's unpredictable nature deepens even further when she and the president receive news that Martha's granddaughter, Elizabeth Parke Custis (or Eliza to her friends) is being seriously courted by a much-older suitor. Thomas Law is a British businessman who has lived in America less than two years. Law, who lived in India for a long time, already has three illegitimate multiracial children. His heart is set on Eliza, who knows that her grandparents' blessing can make or break the tentative union.

Dunbar continues to chart how the personal lives and trials of the Washingtons, Ona's enslavers, affected Ona's own existence in ways she likely resented and detested. No one can control the future—but for enslaved Black men and women, whose freedom and agency were withheld from them at all turns, the future must have felt especially frightening, unstable, and inhospitable. Dunbar foreshadows in this passage the unwelcome and unhappy ways in which Ona will soon find her future impacted by her enslavers' personal problems.

As George and Martha have no children of their own, Martha's grandchildren are their world—especially in the case of the first lady, who only has one surviving child of her own. As Eliza's news arrives, the Executive Mansion becomes full of tension and anxiety. Washington soon receives a letter from Thomas Law himself asking for the president's blessing. Washington grants his blessing somewhat reluctantly. As Martha and the president begin preparing for the nuptials, they try to effect happiness and excitement—yet Law inspires gossip amongst their friends, acquaintances, and political rivals. Martha begins discreetly making plans for Eliza's future—plans which will disrupt Ona's life.

The Washingtons find their lives thrown into turmoil with the news of their granddaughter's controversial choice for a husband. Again, Dunbar foreshadows how the Washingtons' personal problems will soon become the burden of the men and women they enslave.

By the time Eliza's wedding arrives on March 21st, 1796, it is clear to both the staff at the Executive Mansion and to the public that Washington is planning on retiring from public life and returning to Mount Vernon. Ona knows this means she, too, will return to Virginia. She must decide whether it is time to seize the opportunity to escape, even though doing so would mean leaving her family at Mount Vernon, including her sisters Philadelphia and Betty, behind—perhaps forever.

Ona is already considering running away—yet she still feels that there are things tying her to Mount Vernon, things that she cannot so easily abandon. Slaves like Ona often had to decide between remaining close with one's family and attaining personal freedom—an inhumane choice that no one should be forced to make.

Ona is further shocked when Martha Washington announces that she is planning on bequeathing Ona to Eliza as a wedding gift. Ona now understands that she is, in the eyes of her owners, utterly replaceable. There is nothing Ona can do to change the first lady's mind—she must resign herself to serving the "stormy" Eliza for the rest of her days. The Washingtons' relative stability, Ona knows, will soon be replaced by her new mistress's unpredictable rage. Moreover, Ona knows that her new master, Thomas Law, has had three illegitimate children by an Indian woman—and this suggests that he sleeps with nonwhite women and doesn't care who knows it. She does not want to be the next target of his interests. Ona sees now more than ever that she is expendable, replaceable, and barely even human in the eyes of her owners.

In this passage, as Martha betrays Ona by casually, callously giving her away, Ona understands profoundly that years of intimate proximity to Martha and her exceptional service have not made her special or valued—she is simply property. This, Dunbar suggests, is the final straw for Ona, who has already contended with tragedy, illness, and the simple humiliation of being barred from determining her own fate. The dangers of the unknown—and the fact of having so intimately witnessed what true freedom looks like—begin to put greater and greater pressure on Ona to run away.

CHAPTER 8

Throughout the spring of 1796, as the Washingtons begin preparations to return to Virginia, Ona is anxious and fearful—yet she knows she must remain attentive to Martha and focused on her work lest she draw attention to herself. Ona is aware of the existence of runaway slaves—but she knows just how difficult it is to live life as a fugitive, especially in unforgiving Northern climates. She is also aware that if she runs away, as one of Martha Washington's dower slaves, she will be an extremely high-profile fugitive—the world will not be kind to her. Added to the stressful thoughts of surviving on the run is the fact that Ona is illiterate and has no hope of reading a map even if she could obtain one.

Again, Dunbar uses this passage to show that while Ona's actual thoughts and feelings have been erased from the historical record, there are still ways to use the historical context of the time—and an imaginative leap of empathy—to reconstruct the thoughts that must have been running through the frightened, conflicted Ona's head as she considered escape.

Newspapers run frequent ads placed by masters seeking the return of runaway slaves, most of whom are Black men—often, enslaved Black women have children and cannot make the journey alone. News of these ads, Dunbar writes, would have surely made their way to Ona and her fellow slaves—yet the fear the existence of the ads inspires is tempered by stories of successful escapes that spread just as quickly by word of mouth.

Enslaved men and women know how dangerous it is to run away—and someone like Ona, who "belongs" to a high-profile family, would likely feel that danger even more acutely. Still, Dunbar shows how inspiring stories from the free Black community in Philadelphia and beyond would have proved inspiration and given her strength to go on.

Washington himself is a watchful slaveholder constantly ready for the disappearance or escape of one of his slaves. Two years into his presidency, in February of 1793, he signed into existence the Fugitive Slave Act, which made the capturing and reclaiming of fugitive slaves legal. Even Northern states, where the practice of human bondage is waning, were forced under federal law to comply with the act—and, as a result, passed "personal liberty" laws of their own to provide a trial by jury for any Black person accused of being a fugitive. Ona and her fellow slaves at High Street, Dunbar writes, would no doubt have known about the Fugitive Slave Act—and the resistance to it up north.

Dunbar uses this passage to show how Washington's actions reflect a need to retain what he believes is his rightful property at all costs. Washington's reputation as a benevolent Founding Father, Dunbar suggests, often obscures his darker deeds—and his ironclad grip on the enslaved men and women whose lives he sought to control with totality.

Around this time, Ona decides to risk everything in order to be free—she is afraid, but she is determined not to become Eliza's slave, and she is furious with the Washingtons for treating her so poorly after so many years. One evening in mid-May of 1796, while George and Martha eat dinner, Ona takes advantage of her rare alone time and slips out of the High Street house, disappearing into Philadelphia's free Black community—likely into the arms of a network of free people ready to come to her aid.

In this passage, Ona decides once and for all that her freedom is more important than her safety. She cannot abide living with a family who has treated her so poorly—and she cannot imagine being traded away. While no record exists of how Ona made her plans for escape, Dunbar knows that she must have had the help of a community of free Black men and women who could assist her in hiding.

There remains today no record of when or how the Washingtons realized that Ona was missing. Yet on May 23rd, just two days after her escape, the steward for the Executive Mansion places ads in two local papers seeking the return of a runaway slave belonging to the President of the United States. The ads describe her as light-skinned, freckled, and slender—and in possession of "many changes of **very good clothes**." A $10 reward is offered for Ona's return. Ona knows she cannot stay in Philadelphia, where she will be vulnerable and visible, and that she cannot flee to New York for similar reasons. Ona decides to escape the city by boat and head north to Portsmouth, New Hampshire—likely at the suggestion of the Philadelphian community of free Black men and women.

Dunbar highlights the Washingtons' description of Ona's "very fine clothes" to symbolically demonstrate their resentment of her new proximity to freedom. The Washingtons' quick and quite public reaction to Ona's escape shows that they are not as concerned about saving face as they are about returning Ona to their possession—they are willing to display their continued investment in slavery to the public, even as broad anti-slavery sentiment is on the rise.

John Bowles is a sailor and the operator of a freight business which transports lumber and fish up and down the eastern seaboard. Ona boards Bowles's boat sometime between May 10th and 21st, likely paying for passage to New Hampshire either out of her own savings of the small gifts the Washingtons gave her over the years, or with the help of the free Black community in Philadelphia. By May 21st, Bowles's ship, the *Nancy*, is on its way north. The shipmaster turns a blind eye to Ona, though it is odd for a Black woman of her age to travel alone. Ona is now a fugitive—but for the time being, she is free.

Again, Dunbar uses a combination of historical context, sparse remaining records, and imagination to recreate Ona's pivotal journey to New Hampshire. Ona is free for now—but her trials are just beginning.

CHAPTER 9

Ona has never been on a freighter such as the *Nancy*, and her journey to New Hampshire is likely jarring, nauseating, and arduous. The journey lasts about five days—Dunbar writes that intense anxiety about being caught, or met by emissaries of the Washingtons in Portsmouth, likely dictated Ona's emotional state throughout the trip. Ona dresses plainly, packing away her **fine clothes**; she is determined to blend in and pass for a free Black Northern woman. Ona has been connected, most likely, with a person or small network of people who will care for her in New Hampshire—but even with a group of supportive allies and friends, Ona knows that it's only a matter of time before her owners send slave catchers to find her and return her to bondage.

Dunbar uses imagination to reconstruct Ona's journey northward to New Hampshire. She knows that Ona could not possibly yet have been able to enjoy her freedom—too much is still at stake, and there are still too many things that could swiftly go wrong. This is a time of high anxiety for Ona—and as she packs away her fine clothes, Dunbar uses the symbol of clothing to externalize Ona's desire to not yet rest on her laurels. Ona has escaped—but true freedom is still a long way off.

There are, Dunbar writes, fewer free Black people in Portsmouth in 1796 than there are slaves at Mount Vernon. Ona is housed by an unknown member of this small community. She begins looking for work. She is an accomplished seamstress—but she cannot show off the **beautiful clothes** she has made during her years working for the Washingtons for fear of exposing where she's come from. As a result, Ona is forced into domestic labor—she must take on arduous new tasks she was never assigned while in the Washingtons' service. Carrying heavy loads of laundry, washing clothes in boiling-hot water, plucking chickens and slicing vegetables, stoking hot fires, and other wearisome tasks become part of Ona's daily life.

Ona's decision to accept the realities of a small community, unstable housing, and back-breaking labor day in and day out illustrates just how dearly she values her freedom. Things are objectively harder for Ona in Portsmouth—and added to her grueling labor is the constant threat of being found and recaptured—yet even this life is preferable to a life of enslavement.

Though New Hampshire has a long history of using slave labor as an integral part of its economy, by the time Ona arrives, the state is on its way to ending slavery. The process of emancipation is slow and gradual—but by 1805, Dunbar writes, the practice of holding humans in bondage will have disappeared from Portsmouth (though New Hampshire will not formally, legally abolish slavery until 1857). The atmosphere in Portsmouth when Ona arrives is cautious and skeptical yet hopeful—and with the help of her new community, she quickly adjusts to life in a new place governed by new rules.

Dunbar uses historical context to reconstruct what Ona's early days in New Hampshire must have been like. Ona likely would have been nervous, cautious, and fearful of being apprehended—yet the changing social mores of the state and anti-slavery sentiments must have bolstered Ona's sense of having done the right thing and arrived, at last, in the right place.

CHAPTER 10

As weeks and months pass, Ona falls into the rhythm of her new life. Though marked, no doubt, by exhaustion, anxiety, and a fitful sense of fear, Ona is free and surviving in Portsmouth. She receives wages for her work, and she can move about her new city as she wishes. When not at work, Ona tries to be careful about where she goes and how she presents herself, fearful of being recognized for who she is and dragged back into slavery. Ona may or may not be aware that one of New Hampshire's most prominent families—the Langdons—are a direct threat to her freedom.

Even as Dunbar presents a happy image of Ona learning to not just survive but thrive in Portsmouth, she foreshadows the fact that forces beyond Ona's control are about to impact all the progress she's made for herself.

Senator John Langdon, a ship captain turned Revolutionary War hero turned New Hampshire politician, is one of the most powerful men in the nation—and his daughter Elizabeth is friendly with Washington's granddaughter Nelly. In the 1790s, Elizabeth even visited the High Street mansion in Philadelphia—and Ona no doubt looked out for them as chaperone. In the summer of 1796, Ona is walking through Portsmouth when she finds herself face-to-face with the now 18-year-old Elizabeth. Elizabeth recognizes Ona instantly, and though Ona avoids Elizabeth's gaze, Elizabeth hurries home to alert her father as to what she's seen.

While no historical record exists of the particulars of Ona and Elizabeth's run-in, Dunbar uses her deep understanding of how tense and high-stakes the encounter must have been to reconstruct the painful moment in which Ona realizes that there is a direct threat to her freedom: someone from her old life has recognized her.

For slaveholding and non-slaveholding elites of the time—including the Langdons—paternalism creates an inability to recognize Black agency. The Langdons see themselves—and the Washingtons—as benevolent slave owners. Thus, the Langdons contact the Washingtons to tell them that Ona is hiding in Portsmouth. On August 21st, when the Washingtons return to Philadelphia, they know precisely where to look for Ona.

Ona's chance encounter with Elizabeth Langdon leads to a new wrinkle in her bid for freedom. Though the Langdons live in a state where slavery is falling out of favor, they are still loyal to the slaveholding Washingtons—and they have no respect for Ona's agency and independence.

CHAPTER 11

In the late summer of 1796, Washington is preparing to step down as president—he wants to return to Virginia. He entreats the publisher of a prominent Philadelphia newspaper to print his farewell address. On September 19th, the address is printed. It is time for America to select its next president. Amid all this, however, Washington never loses sight of his need to discreetly recover his fugitive slave, Ona. Washington is ungrateful for the reminder that just as abolitionists have long warned, enslavement is never preferable to freedom—and that even if he catches Ona, he will face a public relations nightmare.

Dunbar provides historical context as to what is happening in Washington's personal and professional spheres as the new information about Ona's whereabouts reaches him. He is still determined to recapture her—even though he knows that public sentiment about slavery is rapidly shifting.

The Washingtons bring only Moll and one other slave back to Philadelphia from Mount Vernon in the wake of Ona's escape, relying primarily on the labor of their white servants. In September, Washington begins enlisting the help of federal slave-catching agents to bring Ona back to Mount Vernon. In letters to these agents, Washington describes the reason he has come to believe is behind Ona's escape: he suggests that she has been lured away from bondage by a seductive Frenchman known to the Washington family.

Washington's inability to recognize that Ona ran away of her own accord demonstrates how deeply-ingrained within him are the notions associated with paternalism. He doesn't believe that Ona, as a Black woman, could have any agency or desires of her own—he assumes that she must have been seduced or cajoled away by another person.

Washington asks one of his secretaries to contact the customs officer in Portsmouth, Joseph Whipple. Washington gives Whipple written permission to sidestep the due processes for returning a slave laid out in the Fugitive Slave Act, urging Whipple to rely upon the Langdons to positively identify Ona—and to then place her on a ship bound immediately for Virginia. Washington promises to compensate Whipple handsomely for his assistance even though Washington's own finances are in disarray, surely a fact which fuels his rage at Ona's escape.

Washington knows that he is in a precarious position both in terms of his reputation and his finances. Nevertheless, the humiliation of letting Ona get away seems to be more acute than the potential blow to his image that might transpire once the public realizes that Washington has sent officials to bring Ona back into slavery.

Whipple, an educated businessman who has emancipated all the slaves his family once held, was appointed to the station of customs collector by Washington himself in August of 1789. Now, with the formal request from Washington to aid in the recapture and the return to bondage of Ona Judge, Whipple finds himself in a difficult position: he is torn between his abolitionist views and his duty to the president.

Whipple does not believe in the institution of slavery—and yet he is indebted to the former president, the man who gave him his position and the power that comes with it. Just as Washington has had to consider whether he will protect his private financial and material interests or his public reputation, Whipple must now make the same hard decision.

Whipple begins his investigation into Ona's whereabouts, using subterfuge and misleading questions to try to discern where she's living and for whom she's working. Through the network of free Black men and women in Portsmouth, Ona learns that the customs collector is "in need of a domestic"—she leaps at the opportunity to go to work for such a prominent man, knowing such a job will carry a higher wage and perhaps greater comforts. Ona agrees to meet with Whipple to discuss the position—but during the meeting, when Whipple begins asking increasingly intimate, probing questions of Ona, Ona catches on to the fact that she's been deceived. There is no position available—Whipple simply created one in order to lure Ona in.

Whipple ultimately decides to serve Washington rather than stand up for his own beliefs. He uses deceit and cruelty to draw Ona in—but he is no good at maintaining his ruse once he meets with her. Dunbar uses imagination to reconstruct the high-stakes meeting, leaning on emotion rather than strict fact to recreate what must have transpired.

Whipple realizes that Ona has caught wise. He begins attempting to discuss the reasons she ran away—and potential alternatives to returning to slavery. Ona speaks her mind, telling Whipple that she will not return to a live of enslavement under any circumstances. Whipple tries to tell Ona that he will negotiate with the president on her behalf and try to get Washington to agree to emancipate Ona in the future. Ona, however, refuses to begin discussing a return to bondage. She lies to Whipple, telling him that she will return to the Washingtons. Whipple tells Ona that he will arrange passage on a ship to Virginia for her, and Ona agrees to meet at the docks at the appointed time. She leaves his presence, however, with no intention of following through.

As Ona and Whipple's tense, fraught meeting progresses, Whipple tries to essentially con Ona into returning to slavery. Ona, however, has come too far to turn back now—she has been deceived, and now she uses deceit to get herself out of a difficult situation. Ona is still fighting radically for her freedom and refusing to believe that anyone but her has her own best interests at heart.

Whipple waits for Ona on the docks on the appointed day, but when she fails to show up, he is apprehensive rather than angry. He writes a letter to one of Washington's secretaries explaining that his attempt at recapturing Ona has failed. In his letter, he writes that Ona was not lured away from bondage but is rather in possession of "a thirst for compleat freedom." Whipple includes in his letter the belief that Ona would return to the Washingtons if she were promised eventual emancipation—and also somewhat passive-aggressively reminds Washington of changing attitudes regarding slavery in the North. It is now clear that if Washington wants Ona back, he will be forced to make clear his disregard for these shifting sentiments.

Though Whipple has done Washington's reprehensible bidding, in this passage, as he writes a letter to the former president, he expresses a wariness of Washington's ways. By telling Washington that Ona ran away of her own accord, Whipple does transfer some agency back to Ona and seems to empathize with her "thirst" for freedom. Dunbar uses this passage to interrogate the complicated legacy of early America—and those who were a part of its social fabric.

Washington receives Whipple's news with a resigned disappointment, writing a letter stating that he doesn't feel that emancipation is practical at this time. He urges Whipple to continue on with his assignment and urge Ona to come back by using any tactic necessary. Washington instructs Whipple to place Ona on a ship bound for the South rather than try to negotiate with her further—but to use discretion all the while. Washington also indicates in his letter that he believes Ona may be pregnant—in which case he is hunting additional "property."

In spite of Whipple's even-keeled letter, Washington reacts by doubling down on his own personal views on slavery as well as his plan for recapturing Ona. He even goes so far as to suggest that Ona could be pregnant—and is thus withholding "property" from him. Washington continues to let paternalism dictate his plan of action and inform his thinking about Ona's choices.

Whipple does not reply to Washington's missive until the end of December—in his reply, he apologizes for his failure to apprehend Ona and assures the president that he is doing everything he can to maintain the utmost discretion as he carries out Washington's wishes. He agrees to continue his pursuit of Ona but offers the president, who is due to leave office in a few months, a word of advice. He suggests that the only way to stop the increasing number of fugitive slaves is to begin a process of gradual abolition. Whipple's reply makes clear that Washington cannot rely on officials in New Hampshire to return Ona to Virginia—he never replies to Whipple's last letter. Washington turns his attention to the transfer of power to John Adams, to finding another slave to serve Eliza, and to relocating his family smoothly to Mount Vernon.

Washington has doubled down on his subscription to the logic of paternalism and the institution of slavery—but in this passage, he begins to realize that perhaps such views and protocols are about to become painfully outdated. Washington realizes that for now, recapturing Ona is not only a dead end but a political and social liability.

CHAPTER 12

Just days after Whipple sends his December response to Washington, Ona celebrates her first Christmas in Portsmouth, likely pushing aside yearning for her family back at Mount Vernon in order to focus on the holiday—and the new man in her life, Jack Staines. By January of 1797, Ona and Jack are married. Her freedom has allowed her to choose the person she will spend her life with—and draw from him a measure of security, protection, and perhaps even prosperity.

Ona, free but tenuously so, knows that she must secure certain protections for herself as a fugitive Black woman carving out a new life for herself. Dunbar leaves room for the idea that Ona's marriage to Jack Staines was one rooted in love—but she also calls attention to the practical benefits of marriage for Ona at such an uncertain time in her life.

Jack Staines is, like many other free Black men in the Northeast at the time, an experienced seaman. Though many white men see seafaring jobs as "unstable and unseemly," to Black men, the freedom of the sea and the decent wages of these jobs represent opportunity, protection, and a chance to see other parts of the country (even though journeys to the South or the Caribbean carry danger and the threat of capture or enslavement.) For married seamen like Jack, the unpredictable, demanding nature of their work means long absences from their homes, their spouses, and any children they might have.

In providing context for the nature of Jack Staines's work, Dunbar points out the duality of seafaring life. On one hand, free Black men are able to secure jobs unpopular with their white counterparts and thus find security and opportunity—but on the other hand, journeys at sea are often perilous. That danger is compounded by hostile attitudes toward Black people in large swaths of the country.

Whipple soon learns that Ona has married Jack Staines when Whipple hears that the two of them have applied for a marriage certificate at the county clerk's office. Whipple tells the clerk about Ona's background—and exactly who her powerful "owners" are. The clerk, then, makes it all but impossible for Ona and Jack to finalize their marriage. In response, Ona and Jack travel to a town called Greenland a few miles outside of Portsmouth and obtain their marriage license there on January 14th of 1797. Ona, Dunbar writes, likely chooses to wear one of her **fine dresses** from her time with the Washingtons for the ceremony.

Even in a state like New Hampshire, Ona and Jack face cruelty, discrimination, and senseless red tape. Ona is free, but her past—and her illustrious, powerful enslavers—continue to follow her wherever she goes. As Ona goes against the county clerk's discrimination, she dons fine clothes for her wedding day—a symbolic act of resistance and a declaration of her freedom.

Ona adopts her husband's last name and begins settling into married life. The census from 1797 records Ona and Jack as living with two other roommates—likely boarders or individuals in need, perhaps even people who have recently escaped from slavery, just like Ona. Soon, Ona becomes pregnant, but she continues working as a domestic up to the very end of her pregnancy. In 1798, Ona delivers a baby girl—she and Jack name the child Eliza.

Even as Ona experiences new, thrilling aspects of freedom, with each step she takes toward cementing her life in New Hampshire, the stakes should she be found and recaptured become higher and higher. She stands now not only to lose her freedom—but her husband and indeed her daughter.

Meanwhile, back in Mount Vernon, Eliza Parke Custis Law gives birth to her first child. On January 19th of 1797, Eliza welcomes a daughter, whom she gives her own name. Both Ona and Eliza are newly married women, and both now have daughters who share the same first name.

Dunbar highlights the peculiar parallels between Ona and Eliza's lives to conversely emphasize just how drastically different their circumstances are.

By July of 1799, Washington has been a private citizen for about two years. He decides to resume his attempts to recapture his "runaway property." He recruits Martha Washington's nephew Burwell Bassett Jr., a Virginian senator, to take up the search again. Washington still believes that a mysterious Frenchman is responsible for luring Ona away from bondage—and he urges Bassett not to accept any of her attempts to negotiate. Under the guise of a visit with Senator John Langdon, Bassett travels to New Hampshire—but in the years since he first reported Ona's whereabouts to Washington, Langdon has become more vocal about his own personal opposition to slavery.

Dunbar highlights Washington's relentless pursuit of Ona—seemingly carried out under the guise of saving her from the will of a dangerous "Frenchman"—as an example of how paternalism often functioned as an excuse for the cruel, unjust, and racist upholding of slavery. Washington wanted to assert his power over Ona by bringing her back to Mount Vernon, and he used the cover of paternalistic concern to justify and carry out his will.


One day, Ona opens the door to find Bassett standing before her—she recognizes him, knowing members of Martha and George's family well after her years of enslavement. Ona knows she cannot run—her husband is at sea, and her young daughter is in the house. As Bassett tries to convince Ona to return with him to Virginia, Ona refuses to listen to him—she states, once again, that she will not return to slavery, even as Bassett tries to assure her that the Washingtons will set her free immediately upon her return. According to Bassett's notes, Ona utters the words "I am free now and choose to remain so." Bassett knows he has little recourse—he cannot take Ona by force, which would draw attention to what he is doing. Bassett simply walks away from the Staines household, his pride dented but his resolve still burning.

Bassett corners Ona, using both the threat of his physical presence and the false promises of emancipation to try to cajole her into coming with him. Ona, however, refuses to give up her freedom—even though she knows full well what Bassett could do to her with impunity. Ona's staunch refusal works—yet Bassett, unwilling to fail his powerful uncle, decides not to give up on his promise to bring Ona back to Mount Vernon. Ona's freedom is more important to her than her own life—and yet the cruel, damaging rhetoric of paternalism endures.


Bassett returns to Langdon's house and informs the senator he will not leave New Hampshire without Ona—even if he has to take her by force. Either Langdon himself—or, more likely, one of Langdon's Black domestic servants—sends word to Ona that her life is in danger. The next day, Bassett returns to the Staines house to confront Ona yet again—but he finds her home empty. Ona has outrun and outmaneuvered the president once more. Ona and her daughter travel to Greenland to take shelter at the home of a free Black family, the Jacks.

Though it is unclear exactly how Ona learned of Bassett's intention to return and take her by force—or whether she deduced on her own that she would no longer be safe in Portsmouth—Dunbar shows Ona's desperation to remain free as she flees the place that she has come to see as home.

Bassett returns to Virginia in October of 1799 and delivers the news of his failure to George and Martha Washington. He also relays information about Ona's present circumstances—her child, the result of her marriage to a free Black man—not a Frenchman. George and Martha realize that now that Washington is no longer president, his powers of influence are waning—especially amongst former political allies whose views no longer align with theirs.

George and Martha Washington receive the news of Bassett's failure with measured disappointment. Though Bassett tells them clearly that their assumptions about Ona are wrong—and that their influence in New Hampshire is negligible at best—it is unclear whether they are truly able to internalize or accept their failure to exert the power they believe they have the right to wield over another human life.

CHAPTER 13

On December 12th of 1799, Washington takes a ride on horseback across Mount Vernon on a cold, rainy day. Washington returns to the main house at dinner time and stays in his damp clothes throughout the meal. Washington begins complaining of a sore throat soon after dinner, and by the morning, it is clear that Washington needs a doctor. Tobias Lear calls a friend of Washington's, who lets some of Washington's blood—an 18th-century medical practice—before a physician, Dr. James Craik, arrives. Washington begins convulsing and struggling mightily for breath.

Washington has not been healthy for a long time—but in this passage, as he falls suddenly and seriously ill, it is clear that something is different about this sickness. The incapacitation of the first president of the United States marks the end of an era in early American history—and it leaves open the question of what will happen next to the fledgling nation.

Craik, seeing the former president's serious state, bleeds him yet again and then calls for more doctors to come. The team of physicians tries out several home remedies—as well as therapies such as enemas and emetics—but Washington is beyond help. Washington calls Martha to his side. She helps him to revise his will. He commands her to burn the old copy of it. On December 14th, Washington dies surrounded by his wife, his friends, his doctors, and four of his slaves.

Dunbar points out that Washington dies surrounded not only by his wife, friends, and doctors, but also by a handful of slaves, in order to show how even as Washington discounted his slaves' humanity, they were nonetheless an essential part of his life up until the bitter end. Washington's slaves were a part of his life story—and thus the story of the creation of America—even though their narratives have been erased from history.

Washington's final will emancipates 123 of the slaves at Mount Vernon from bondage. For slaves, the death of an owner always represents a major shift or turnover—but for many of Washington's slaves, their owner's final act is a welcome surprise. For others, who have created familial bonds with slaves belonging to Martha Washington—who has not emancipated her slaves—it represents more uncertainty, violence, and rupture. Washington's will stipulates that older slaves will receive assistance in the form of food and clothing, and that younger slaves will be assigned servant positions in which they'll be taught to read and write. Washington leaves to William Lee an annuity of $30 in exchange for his "faithful services during the Revolutionary War." Lee chooses to remain on at Mount Vernon—his drinking problem has proven too debilitating.

Dunbar delves into the details of Washington's "famous" emancipation of his slaves on his deathbed. Rather than setting them free immediately, he placed conditions on their freedom—and he was only able to apply the new will to the slaves he himself owned, while his wife's slaves remained her "property." For many enslaved Black men and women living at Mount Vernon, Dunbar shows, their years of forced labor had taken too great a toll on their health and well-being for emancipation to mean anything. Washington's actions, Dunbar suggests, were far too little and far too late.

Washington does not free all of his slaves instantly, however—he stipulates that they will be emancipated only upon the death of Martha Washington. This fact makes Martha uneasy and, in her own words, "unhappy"—she knows that her bondmen and bondwomen are now eagerly anticipating he death. Martha, fearing for her life, emancipates her late husband's slaves on January 1st of 1801—but she retains her own slaves, numbering nearly 200, in bondage.

Martha emancipates a portion of her slaves only out of fear for her own life—not out of any sense of goodwill or recognition of the humanity of the men and women she has enslaved for years. She still retains a huge number of enslaved men and women, demonstrating that she wants to receive credit for a good deed without actually doing an actionable amount of good.

News of Washington's death—and of his decision to emancipate his slaves—surely reaches Ona in New Hampshire. However, she knows that she is technically the property of Martha Washington, and that she cannot let her guard down yet. There may yet be attempts, she knows, to drag her back to Virginia. In May of 1802, Martha succumbs to an illness and dies. Her estate is transferred to her heirs, and her slaves are divided up and relocated to several different farms.

Dunbar demonstrates how even in the midst of major upheaval at Mount Vernon and the emancipation of a great number of men and women, the institution of slavery is still so predominant and insidious that Ona cannot allow herself to feel safe or protected.

Ona's life, meanwhile, continues to move forward. She and her husband have two more children together and become prominent members of Portsmouth's free Black community. Perhaps because Ona is a fugitive, she leaves behind few records of major details of her life: where she lives, who she works for, from whom she and Jack rent their home, and when and where her third child (and only son) was born. Her third child may have been William Staines, who may have been born around 1800 or 1801. In 1819, there are records of a young 19-year-old seaman, Black with a "light complexion," who began sailing out of New York and Portland, Maine. The young man's birthplace is listed as Portsmouth; the only family with the surname Staines in Portsmouth was that of Ona and Jack.

Dunbar uses this passage to described part of the reasoning for why there are so few records of the concrete facts of Ona's life. As someone who was always on the run—and always feared being apprehended and dragged back into slavery—Ona had to temper her hard-won freedom with privacy, anonymity, and erasure of her own experiences.

Ona's husband Jack dies suddenly in 1803—a local paper lists his death notice but does not supply a cause of death. Ona is now forced to raise three young children alone on a maidservant's wages. With the help of the Jacks—the landowning free Black family who took Ona and Eliza in back in 1799 after Bassett's visit—Ona finds refuge in a difficult time. The Jacks are also mourning the passing of their matriarch, and as Ona moves onto the family's property, she joins two other free Black women in their thirties, Nancy and Phillis, in pooling their resources to help their two families remain float.

As time passes and Ona's life becomes larger and fuller, the constant fragility and uncertainty even free Black people across the North face continues to define her life. Tragedy and loneliness are entwined with community and collective effort—for women like Ona, her daughters, and the Jacks, life and freedom are never easy.

By August of 1816, however, Ona is still in the midst of such hard times that she is forced to place her two daughters into indentured servitude to a family who lives about a mile away. Ona's eldest daughter, Eliza, and her second daughter, named Nancy, continue to pull in odd jobs over the next several years as they struggle to support their mother, the Jack household, and one another. Eliza dies in February of 1832 at just 34 years old; in September of 1833, Nancy dies. Ona, in her late 50s, is alone once again, having outlived both of her daughters.

Dunbar has spent much of the book examining the high price of freedom during times in which Black lives were not valued or even considered entitled to human rights. In this passage, she cements just how difficult it was for free Black people, women especially, to survive in a hostile and difficult world.

Ona finds refuge in Christianity and in the pursuit of literacy. Having never received "mental or moral instruction of any kind" during her youth bound to the Washingtons, she begins teaching herself to read and write, using the Bible as a guide. As Ona finds salvation in the Baptist church, she finds herself questioning privately and publicly the role of religion in the lives of her former owners. Through the church, Ona meets Reverend Thomas Archibald. Archibald publishes an interview with Ona on May 22nd, 1845, in an abolitionist newspaper called the *Granite Freeman*. The article appears nearly fifty nears to the date after her escape. Two years later, another newspaper, the *Liberator*, publishes Ona's life story. In February of 1848, Ona falls ill, and on February 25th, at 74 years old, she dies.

As Dunbar quickly summarizes the final years of Ona's life, she focuses not on the tragedy that marred her later years but on the hope, light, and self-understanding Ona was able to find even as she endured unthinkable circumstances. Despite having received no "mental or moral instruction," Ona is remarkably able to educate herself and to seek solace in religion. And Ona was at last able to share her story in her own words—an act that allowed her to rebel even further against the Washingtons and the ways in which they forever altered the course of her life.

EPILOGUE

During Ona's interview with the *Granite Freeman*, she answered a question as to whether or not she felt "sorry" about having left Washington by stating that she was not regretful—she was meant to be a free child of God. Though Ona never expressed regret for her escape during her lifetime, Dunbar writes, Ona did leave behind many family members at Mount Vernon—family members for whom Ona's freedom would carry a steep price. This was especially true, Dunbar writes, in the case of Ona's younger sister Philadelphia, who was passed down to Eliza Custis Law in Ona's place.

Dunbar is fascinated by the idea of all that Ona left behind, and in this epilogue, she seeks to share with her readers all that Ona sacrificed in the name of her own freedom. In declaring her right to her own autonomy, Ona had to leave behind her family, knowing she would likely never see or even hear from them again—and yet her legacy reverberated through her community back at Mount Vernon in huge, meaningful ways.

Though the Washingtons likely tried to keep Ona's escape a secret from the other slaves at Mount Vernon, Dunbar writes, it is impossible that the Mount Vernon slaves would not have realized that Ona had obtained freedom. It is likely that they revered and admired her even as they missed and envied her. Whether Philadelphia was chosen to serve Eliza Custis Law due to Martha Washington's "vindictiveness" or whether Philadelphia had otherwise proven herself suited to the job is unclear. What is clear is that Philadelphia left Mount Vernon sometime after April of 1797 to live with the Laws in Georgetown, where she no doubt noticed a small but growing number of free Black residents.

While historical records of what Ona's legacy might have meant in the moment to her relatives and friends at Mount Vernon, it is easy for Dunbar to extrapolate how important tales of Ona's escape might have become to the enslaved Black men and women still toiling under the Washingtons' ownership. Martha may even have tried to quell or staunch goodwill toward Ona by punishing her sister.

Philadelphia, like her sister, eventually married a free Black man. Philadelphia's husband William Costin is believed by many scholars to have been the son of Ann Dandridge—an interracial half-sister of Martha Washington's. William's father is believed to be the son of Martha Washington—making him both the nephew and the grandson of the first lady.

William Costin's complex heritage reveals the hypocrisy inherent in white slaveholding families. Martha sought to control the lives of enslaved Black men and women—even as she herself counted Black people among her closest relatives.

As anti-slavery sentiment in the North continued to grow, slavery's laws grew even tighter and more restrictive in states like Virginia and Maryland. The bloody slave rebellion taking place in Haiti inspired uprisings across Virginia, which only served to place even more painful restrictions on enslaved Black men and women.

Even as revolutions and rebellions in other parts of the world (and indeed the country) inspired change in some places, they created even more controlling, punitive laws and restrictions in other places. The lives of enslaved Black men and women were viewed as property to claim rather than dignified lives to liberate and protect.

After Martha Washington's death, Eliza Custis Law inherited 43 of her grandmother's slaves, including Philadelphia. Eliza's sisters and her brother were allotted 38, 33, and 36 slaves respectively. Many slave families formed at Mount Vernon were broken up in the dissemination of Martha's estate—and Philadelphia's mother and sisters were sent to live with the young, unmarried Wash at his estate.

Dunbar shows how the systems of inheritance and privilege which benefited white slaveholders often completely destroyed the lives of the enslaved Black men and women whose fates they controlled.

Eliza Custis Law's marriage began to deteriorate in the wake of her grandmother's death. She had only been married eight years when, in August of 1804, she and her husband Thomas agreed to a legal separation. During some point in the drawn-out, six-year-long separation, Eliza permitted her husband to emancipate some of her slaves—on June 13th of 1807, Philadelphia was freed. She was nearly 28 and married to Costin—together, they already had two young daughters. Law emancipated several other members of Costin's family, and together, the Costins expanded their family, purchased property, and assisted enslaved and recently emancipated members of the District of Columbia's Black population.

Philadelphia was granted the freedom that was all along her human right when she was nearly 30—yet she and her husband did not waste a moment in springing into action to help those whose freedoms had not yet been secured. Dunbar shows how Philadelphia, unbeknownst to Ona, continued Ona's legacy of dedication to freedom above all else and at any cost.

Though Philadelphia was free, slavery would not be abolished in the District of Columbia for another 50 years—she had to understand, Dunbar writes, just how tenuous her grasp on freedom truly was. As Costin became a "one of the pillars of early black society in Washington," Costin continued to serve Eliza Custis Law as a carriage-driver whenever she needed him—he even lent the nomadic, newly-divorced woman financial aid at times. As Black codes in the District grew tighter, Costin began purchasing and immediately emancipating slaves, using his social capital and financial assets to help free family, friends, and other members of his community.

Dunbar shows how, together, Philadelphia and William Costin became prominent members of their community who used their relative privilege to help those less fortunate than them. Freedom was, to Philadelphia and William just as it was to Ona, the most important thing in the world. The Costins wanted to ensure the freedom, agency, and self-determination of as many of their people as possible.

Ona, Dunbar writes, likely knew nothing of her younger sister Philadelphia's life, or the ways in which Philadelphia was connected to the growing fight for emancipation and abolition. Ona may never even have known that one of her sisters named a daughter, Oney Fortune, after Ona herself—and that Oney was later purchased and emancipated by William Costin. Even with the unmitigated uncertainty and regret of leaving family members behind, Dunbar writes, Ona lived a life in which every day it was true that she would rather die than be forced to return to slavery.

Dunbar closes the book by commenting on the impossible, painful, emotionally fraught decisions Ona had to make in pursuit of freedom. Freedom, Dunbar suggests, came at much too high a price for Ona and countless men and women like her. Even while Ona lived, her legacy was already reverberating throughout her family and community—yet she never knew how profoundly her actions affected those who sought the same kind of liberation, freedom, and agency that she did.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Tanner, Alexandra. "*Never Caught.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Jun 2020. Web. 30 Jun 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tanner, Alexandra. "*Never Caught.*" LitCharts LLC, June 30, 2020. Retrieved June 30, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/never-caught.

To cite any of the quotes from *Never Caught* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Dunbar, Erica Armstrong. Never Caught. 37Ink. 2017.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Dunbar, Erica Armstrong. Never Caught. New York: 37Ink. 2017.