

The Birthmark

by Helen DenBoer

- 1 "Hey, Jenny Foster! Hey, Butterfly Face."
- 2 "Looks more like an ugly moth."
- 3 "No, no, it's an old crow."
- 4 The taunts of the village children echoed in Jenny's ears as she swung herself up into her favorite apple tree, fighting back tears and tugging her long skirts out of the way. She felt safe, alone here in the dark. Mama had gone to bed early with a fever and wouldn't miss her.
- 5 The tears finally spilled over. Jenny brushed at them angrily, her fingers moving over the deep red birthmark that spread like wings across her cheek.
- 6 The teasing had been worse than ever since Josh had left. In 1861, slavery was a heated topic of conversation. Last week, after months of arguing with Pa, Josh had packed his clothes and headed north. Now people were calling her brother a traitor to Virginia and the South. Pa didn't believe in slavery either, but he said that the folks in Washington should let the states run their own affairs or there might be war.
- 7 This morning Pa had left for Richmond on business, and Jenny had been forced to go to the village alone. "I know it's hard, Jenny," Mama had said, "but you just hold your head high. Words can't hurt you."
- 8 But the words did hurt. What people said to her about Josh hurt almost as much as the taunts about her birthmark.
- 9 A rustling below jolted Jenny from her thoughts. In the distance a dog barked and another one answered. A twig snapped close by. Jenny froze, watching the shadows carefully, her heart thumping. Something was moving directly toward her tree. A voice spoke softly.
- 10 "She can't go much farther. We've got to find a place to hide her."
- 11 Jenny held her breath. The scent of apples drifted in the air about her. The dog howled, sounding closer.
- 12 "Maybe we could make it to the Foster barn."
- 13 Jenny's heartbeat slowed. She knew those voices. It was Robert Jones from the other side of the village and his brother, Harold. Those boys had always treated her decently. But what were they doing in her woods? Who were they trying to hide? Jenny jumped from the tree and landed in front of them. Robert let out a startled shout. Harold grabbed Jenny around the shoulders and clamped his hand over her mouth.
- 14 "Who are you?" he demanded.
- 15 "It's all right, Harold," Robert whispered. "It's Jenny Foster. Let her go."
- 16 As Harold released her, Jenny saw a third figure standing quietly in the shadows. It was a girl about her own size, and in the moonlight that filtered through the trees Jenny saw her dark face twist with fatigue and pain. She looked ready to cry. Jenny's stomach somersaulted.

17 "You can't hide a runaway slave," she hissed.

18 Harold sighed. "Jenny, this here's Rachel. We left the slave catchers on the other side of the stream and backtracked through the water. I don't think the dogs will pick up our scent, but Rachel twisted her ankle. She can't go on."

19 "Do you know how dangerous this is?" Jenny said through dry lips. "You could go to jail."

20 "We know," Robert answered. "Our family's been helping runaway slaves for a year now. When Rachel escaped tonight, friends told her to come to us. She's trying to get to a sister in Canada. She'll be free there."

21 "That's enough talk," Harold whispered. "Rachel needs to rest. We'll come back with a wagon tomorrow night and take her to the next hiding place. People will help her all along the way to Canada. What about you?"

22 Jenny stepped forward and saw Rachel's eyes go to the mark on her cheek. They faced each other across the clearing. Pale moonlight glanced off Rachel's dark eyes and skin. The dogs, the woods, the boys were forgotten as the girls gazed steadily at each other for a long moment. Then Jenny straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath. Like Papa and Josh, she'd have to make a choice.

23 "You'll be safe in my house," Jenny said. "You can stay in my room in the attic." She reached out and took Rachel's hand. "My pa's away, and Mama's asleep. No one will find you."

24 The dog barked again, and Rachel drew in her breath sharply. "All right," she said.

25 Harold grabbed her around the waist, and Robert supported her on the other side. They half-carried, half-dragged her through the woods and across the field. At the edge of the yard Jenny stopped them.

26 "You'd better get home before someone wonders why you're out," she whispered to the boys. "We can manage."

27 She draped Rachel's arm over her shoulders. Rachel groaned softly as they staggered to the back door. From there it was easier. Rachel held on tightly to the handrail on one side as they inched their way up to the attic, where she toppled into the bed. Jenny drew the quilt up around Rachel's shoulders. "I'll get you something to eat," she whispered.

28 "I'm not hungry," murmured Rachel. She raised her hand slowly until her fingers touched the birthmark on Jenny's cheek.

29 "It looks like an angel," she said softly. Her hand dropped away, and she was asleep.

30 Jenny sat all night by the window looking at the stars. She still wasn't sure who was right—Papa or Josh. She didn't know whose side she'd be on if there were war. All she knew was that what she had done was right.

31 No one came to the house that night or the next day. Jenny went quietly up and down the stairs, caring for Mama and for Rachel. Just as the stars peeked out, Harold and Robert drove a wagon to the edge of the field. As Rachel climbed into the wagon, she looked directly at the mark on Jenny's face and smiled.

32 Three weeks later Robert arrived at Jenny's door with a piece of paper in his hand.

33 "It's from my uncle in Canada," he said. "It's for you."

34 Jenny took the paper with trembling hands. There were no words on it, no signature. But in the center was a small, ink-drawn figure of an angel. Warmth spread over Jenny. She knew who had drawn it, and she knew that person was safe.

Use the passage to answer questions 1 – 10.

1. "The taunts of the village children echoed in Jenny's ears as she swung herself up into her favorite apple tree, fighting back tears and tugging her long skirts out of the way. She felt safe, alone here in the dark."

Why is the apple tree Jenny's favorite place?

- A. She hides from her problems up in the tree.
- B. She likes to pick and eat the apples.
- C. She wants to get away from her mother.
- D. She watches the crows and other birds there.



2. Which item below best describes how this story is narrated?

- A. It is told in the first-person by Jenny who uses the pronoun *I*.
- B. It is told by a third-person omniscient narrator who tells the thoughts of all the characters.
- C. It is told in the third-person limited point of view and focuses on Jenny.
- D. It is told in the first person by Rachel.

3. "This morning Pa had left for Richmond on business, and Jenny had been forced to go to the village alone. 'I know it's hard, Jenny,' Mama had said, 'but you just hold your head high. Words can't hurt you.' But the words did hurt. What people said to her about Josh hurt almost as much as the taunts about her birthmark."

Why did what people said about Josh hurt Jenny?

- A. She was ashamed of her brother.
- B. She loved her brother.
- C. She agreed with her brother's position.
- D. Her brother had died in the war.



4. "A rustling below jolted Jenny from her thoughts. In the distance a dog barked and another one answered. A twig snapped close by. Jenny froze watching the shadows carefully, her heart thumping. Something was moving directly toward her tree. A voice spoke softly."

What mood is created by the words and details in the paragraph above?

- A. sadness and gloom
- B. fear and excitement
- C. happiness and joy
- D. humor and amusement



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POINTS

5. On a separate piece of paper, explain the conflict between Josh and his father. Use details from the story to support your response.

6. How does the reader know that this story is fiction?
- A. It takes place just before the War Between the States.
 - B. It contains mostly factual details.
 - C. It was passed down from generation to generation.
 - D. All of the characters and what happens to them are made up.



7. "Jenny stepped forward and saw Rachel's eyes go to the mark on her cheek. They faced each other across the clearing. Pale moonlight glanced off Rachel's dark eyes and skin. The dogs, the woods, the boys were forgotten as the girls gazed steadily at each other for a long moment. Then Jenny straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath. Like Papa and Josh, she'd have to make a choice."

How do Jenny's feelings about Rachel change in the passage above?

- A. Jenny realizes that the girl is an old friend.
- B. Jenny sees Rachel as a person, not a runaway slave.
- C. Jenny gets upset that Rachel is on her land.
- D. Jenny becomes angry that Rachel stares at her birthmark.

8. "She draped Rachel's arm over her shoulders. Rachel groaned softly as they staggered to the back door."

Why does Rachel groan?

- A. She is frightened that she will be caught.
- B. The back door hit her when it closed.
- C. Jenny is holding her too tightly.
- D. She had recently twisted her ankle.



9. How is the conflict Jenny felt at the beginning of the story cleared up at the end?

- A. She knows that her brother was right.
- B. She knows that her father was right.
- C. She knows that she did the right thing by helping Rachel.
- D. She knows that she will not take sides if there is a war.

10. On the answer document on the next page, explain what the birthmark on Jenny's face symbolized for Rachel.



Tell what the drawing Rachel sent Jenny meant to her. Be sure to use details from the story to support your response.