

Minty by Alan Schroeder and Jerry Pinkney

“Minty! I know you can hear me. Get in here, gal!”

Crouching in front of the big barn door, Minty listened. Mrs Brodas sounded angrier than usual.

“Get in here, I said! Don’t make me come and get you!”

Minty Giggled and then stuck out her tongue just as far as it could go. I’ll come when I’m good and ready, she thought. But she didn’t dare say it, not out loud. That would mean a whipping for sure.

Pushing back the barn door, Minty crept inside. The barn was her favourite hiding place.

The dray horses watched, restless, as Minty thrust her arms into a large pile of fresh hay. She dug deep down, all the way to the bottom, and pulled out her rag doll. Esther Lavinia Louise was a sorry sight, with one foot missing and a pair of cracked buttons for eye. But Minty loved her just the same.

“Now listen,” she said. Then in a low voice, Minty started to tell an old Bible story, the way her mother had told it to her.

“And then the shepherd boy – David – he picked up this tiny little rock, took aim, and sent it flyin’. Hit the ol’ master smack in the head. Killed him, right there in front of everyone. Then they had a big ol’ party afterwards, and David got to move into this big house with a long table, and he was never hungry or nothin’ again.”

When the story had finished, Minty hid Esther back at the bottom of the haystack. It was getting dark, and she had to light the fire, trim the wicks, and set the table up at the big house.

That evening at supper, Mrs. Brodas was still angry. “Why didn’t you come earlier when I called? I had a mess of peas that needed shelling.”

Minty looked down at her feet. “I didn’t hear any call.”

“Don’t lie to me, girl, ‘less you want a whippin’. Next time, you better jump to when I call.” Mrs. Brodas shook out her cloth napkin. “I’m hungry. Serve the potatoes.”

As Minty reached for the bowl, she accidentally knocked over a pitcher of cider. Mrs. Brodas jumped to her feet. “Now look what you’ve done!” Angrily, she turned to her husband. “Do you see, Edward? It’s spite, pure and simple! Well, I won’t stand for it. I don’t want her in the house anymore. From now on, she’s a field slave. That’ll fix her.” Then, crossing the room, Mrs. Brodas opened one of the high cupboards and took something out.

Minty’s eyes widened. It was her rag doll, Esther.

“You didn’t think I knew, did you?” said Mrs. Brodas. “Here,” she told her husband, “take this and throw it in the fire.”

“No, Missus!” Minty screamed. She lunged forward, but Mrs. Brodas was faster. With a flick of her wrist, she hurled the doll into the open fireplace. Minty kicked and screamed but Mrs. Brodas held her back until the doll was nothing but a pile of white ashes.

“That’ll learn you,” she said. “Now get out of here. And don’t forget – you’re a field slave now.”

Minty ran out, choking back her tears.

Later that night, while her brothers and sisters slept, Minty told her mother and father what had happened. “Well,” said Old Ben, “at least they’re keepin’ you on. What if they’d sold you South? I’ve seen ‘em do it for less than spillin’ a pitcher o’ cider.”

Old Rit put aside her sewing. “Come here, gal,” she said. “There’s somethin’ I got to say t’ you.” Minty laid her head down on Old Rit’s lap. It was soft and warm, and she liked feeling her mother’s hand as it ran gently across her forehead. “Listen to me, Minty. Now that you’re in the fields, you gotta do a good job, ‘cause there ain’t no other place for them to send you but downriver – and you don’t want that. Once they sell you South, you’ll never come back.”

“I’m gonna run away,” Minty mumbled, “I am.”

Old Rit shook her head. “Oh, no you’re not. That’s what you always say, and it ain’t never gonna happen. You know what my daddy done tol’ me? *‘If your head is in the lion’s mouth, it’s best to pat him a little.’* Your head is in the lion’s mouth, Minty, but you sure ain’t doin’ any pattin’. You’re just fixin’ to get your head bit off!” Old Rit bent down to whisper. “Pat the lion, Minty. It ain’t gonna kill you.”

The next morning at dawn, Minty was sent to work in the fields. For the next few months, her job was to plant wheat and rye, and tend to the young corn. It was hard and heavy work, but Minty liked being outside. The breeze felt good on her forehead, and sometimes, when no one was looking, she’d push her toes deep down into the dirt and pretend she was a sunflower, rising up, up, up, all the way up till she could see clear across the Chesapeake Bay, till she could touch the clear, blue sky.