



Tessie's Travels is a captivating historical love story set in the mid-19th century, bridging the opulence of New York City's 5th Avenue and the Gold Rush of San Francisco, where Tessie, a former slave, reflects on her life story.

Tessie's Travels
By Sherry K. Pinchak

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A Story about Survival, Faith and Love



Tessie's Travels

SHERRY K. PINCHAK

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Chapter 1

The Morrison Ranch, Buffalo Ridge, California

October 17, 1902

Tessie was diagnosed with lung cancer. Her constant cough, shortness of breath, and fatigue led to her diagnosis. Her pain was unbearable, but her will to live was unstoppable.

Clara quietly knocked on Tessie's bedroom door. "Tessie, may I come in?"

"Yes, Madam Clara." Tessie could never break the habit of calling people "Madam" or "Master" since she was born enslaved on a North Carolina plantation in 1814.

Clara softly whispered to Tessie, "How are you feeling?"

Tessie muttered, "Today is a good day."

Clara looked around the Victorian-style bedroom for another blanket to cover Tessie and fluffed up her pillow. She straightened the oil painting of the two cowboys on horseback beside Tessie's bed and offered her more water from the pitcher on the dresser. Tessie looked thinner every day.

Tessie wore a green cotton turban wrapped around her gray, curly hair, with spectacles perched on her expressive, aging brown eyes that seemed to read a person's thoughts. Her skin was dry and wrinkled, and her once-robust figure had become frail. However, her mind remained sharp even at eighty-eight, despite her shrunken five-foot-four-inch frame.

Clara and her husband, Dr. Jonathan Morrison, owned Morrison Ranch in Buffalo Ridge, California, located halfway between San Francisco and Coloma. They bought it in May 1849 when they were newlyweds. Jon and Clara had known Tessie for sixty-four years, and they grew old together.

The ninety-acre Western ranch had free-roaming mustangs, quarter horses, cattle, and a pigpen. Several chicken coops dotted the ranch, and Clara collected fresh eggs every day. Ranch hands cleaned the stables and fed the animals.

The house's interior featured mission-style furniture, and the ceiling had exposed wooden beams. Western décor and paintings were scattered throughout the home. There were five bedrooms, each with its own water closet.

At seventy, Clara looked as beautiful as when Jon first met her. Her stunning blonde hair, highlighted with platinum white, was neatly pinned in a bun. Her vibrant blue eyes sparkled, and she had only a few wrinkles on her face, which helped her maintain her youthful appearance.

Today, Clara wore a knee-length blue and white checked calico dress with a wide white collar. The center of her dress was adorned with a blue enameled gold brooch, which her mother had given her on her sixteenth birthday.

Clara's California clothes were quite different from the brightly colored silk dresses and black lace-up boots she had worn in New York City many years earlier. She tied a white lace apron around her waist in the kitchen to protect against grease splatters.

Jonathan remained tall and handsome, a year older than his wife, with a cleft chin. Over the years, his thick brown hair had thinned and turned gray. He wore glasses to correct his nearsightedness. Now retired, he dressed in Levi's blue jeans, a cotton checked shirt, and a Southwestern silver and turquoise bolo tie. Outside, he completed his outfit with a Stetson hat and cowboy boots, marking a significant departure from his former black doctor's uniform and top hat.

Tessie used to go to church with the Morrisons every Sunday. Although attending church was her favorite activity, she stopped going several months ago because of declining health. Now, Chaplain Rory O'Malley visits her each week, reading passages from the Bible that she eagerly looks forward to. Before everyone settled in California, the Chaplain had known the Morrisons for over fifty years; he felt like family and often stayed for dinner with the rest of the household.

Chaplain O'Malley was a cheerful and pleasant man. He was clean-shaven, with green eyes and reddish-blond hair, typical of his Irish roots. At seventy-seven, he still served a community of one hundred fifty members at The Mission of Elegance church. He traveled the world, preaching the Gospel on ships, before settling in Buffalo Ridge in 1848. He had never married.

Clara said, "Tessie, Rachel is coming over for a visit and wants to ask you a question." Rachel was Jon and Clara's daughter. At fifty-three, she resembled a younger version of her mother—petite, blonde, and blue-eyed. She and her husband, Arthur, a solicitor, had two children. Twenty-year-old Charles was handsome and intelligent, while fifteen-year-old Bella was cute and precocious. The Morrisons adored both grandchildren.

Tessie answered, “Madam Clara, do you know what Rachel wants to talk to me about?”

Clara responded, “No, Tessie, I don’t know. Rest now, and I’ll let you know when she arrives.” Tessie nodded and closed her eyes.

When Tessie woke up, it was the next morning. Rachel had already gone home but came back the following day. Tessie put on her glasses and looked at the clock on her dresser, which read 7:00 a.m. She sat up in bed, yawned, and reached for her green chenille robe and wooden cane, which were resting on the rocking chair. After finishing her morning routine in the bathroom, she joined Clara, Jon, and Rachel, who were already having breakfast.

Clara’s kitchen was recently remodeled. Instead of the old outdoor well, a municipal water system was connected to the sink, supplying the home with fresh water. Her old wood stove was replaced with a gas range. Behind the wooden table stood a device known as an “icebox.” These units were made exclusively for the wealthy and were not mass-produced. The icebox could hold up to thirty pounds of ice, which the iceman delivered weekly. The kitchen featured a large rectangular oak table surrounded by six mission-style chairs, each with yellow cotton pads that Tessie had hand-sewn. A large picture window above the sink offered stunning views of the Morrisons’ property.

Clara had prepared eggs, bacon, and biscuits with jam, and arranged them on the white linen tablecloth alongside a vintage pitcher of yellow mustard flowers. Rachel got up from the table

to hold the chair for Tessie and kissed her on the cheek. Tessie sat down, placing her cane next to the chair.

“Good morning, Nana Tessie; I love you,” Rachel said as she gently kissed her. She wore a rust-colored silk dress with a white satin collar and hung her feathered, rust-colored hat on the coat rack by the door. Rachel, a woman of wealth, dressed accordingly, just like her mother had in New York.

Tessie’s eyes gleamed as she said, “Good morning to you, Madam Rachel. I love you, too. Today is a fine day. I am feeling as well as possible.” Tessie always had a positive attitude, even when she felt hopeless.

Clara got up to fix Tessie's breakfast plate with a strong cup of black coffee. “Thank you, Madam Clara.”

“You are welcome, Tessie. I’ll see if I can put meat on those old bones.” Clara joked.

Jon picked up the *Western Outlook*, the local newspaper. He read aloud, “Teddy Roosevelt, our 26th president, was the first president to ride in an automobile in public. Additionally, Orville and Wilbur Wright had just completed a new flying machine named a glider.”

Clara waved and excitedly said, “What will people invent next? The news is so interesting. I just read that Levi Strauss died last month. We owe all of our jeans to him.”

Looking up from her plate, Tessie added, “An automobile and a flying machine, God have mercy.”

Rachel asked earnestly, “Tessie, when you're done with breakfast, I'd like to ask you a question.”

“You can ask me now,” Tessie said, sipping her coffee.

Rachel gazed at Tessie and continued, “I was thinking about writing a story.”

Tessie responds, “That’s very nice, Madam Rachel. You are a very competent writer. What would you write about this time?”

Rachel looked at Tessie intently, saying, “I hoped to write a story about you. Your life struggles with enslavement and the tremendous strength it took to escape that horror would motivate future generations. Also, I'd love to know how you met our family.”

Rachel looked at her father and then back at Tessie, saying, “I'll understand if you do not want to discuss being enslaved. It was an inhumane nightmare, but I'd love to hear about your travels to New York City and how you ended up there, and then came to California from North Carolina. You are truly a world traveler.”

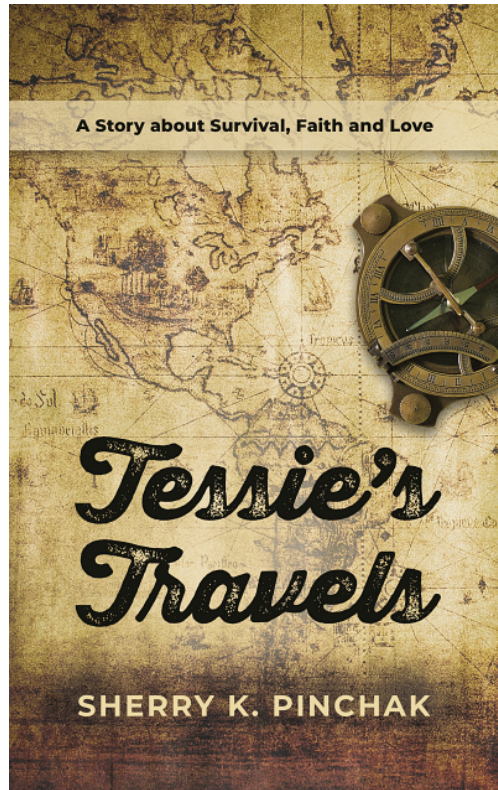
Jon looked back at his daughter and said to Tessie, “I love the idea, Tessie. People who have never experienced slavery need to hear your story. We must make sure history doesn't repeat itself. Slavery was abolished in New York in 1827, but it wasn't until 1863 that President Lincoln declared all enslaved people free.”

Tessie said, "I greatly admire Mr. Lincoln. I can't understand who would ever want to assassinate him."

Jon said, "We can provide any facts you might not recall. Since this story includes the whole family, let's invite everyone over to share in your journey. Everyone can come for Sunday dinner or whenever they're available."

After thinking it over, Tessie agreed, saying, "If you think it's a good idea to share my story with Madam Rachel, I'll do it. It will also let me see the whole family more often."

Tessie knew her time was limited and had unfinished business. As she sipped her coffee, she decided she wouldn't let cancer defeat her. She would fight with all her might to leave a legacy that would be remembered long after she was gone. The stage was set for a story of courage, determination, and the unbreakable spirit of a woman who refused to let cancer define her.



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