

O N E

JO ANN ROBINSON

“Get up from there!”

Get up from there!”

Looking back, she remembered it as the most humiliating experience of her life, “a deep hurt that would not heal.” It had happened just before Christmas in 1949. She was about to visit relatives in Cleveland, Ohio, where she would spend the holidays.

Earlier that day she had driven out to Dannelly Field, the Montgomery, Alabama, airport, and checked her luggage for the flight to Cleveland. Then she drove back to the campus of Alabama State, an all-black college where she had been hired that fall as a professor of English. After parking her car in the campus garage, she took her armful of Christmas gifts, walked to the nearest bus stop, and waited for a ride back to the airport.

Soon a Montgomery City Lines bus rolled into view and pulled up at the stop. Balancing her packages, Jo Ann Robinson stepped aboard and dropped her dime into the fare box. She saw that the bus was nearly empty. Only two other passengers were aboard—a black man in a



Jo Ann Robinson: “I think he wanted to hurt me, and he did.”

seat near the back and a white woman in the third seat from the front. Without thinking, Robinson took a seat two rows behind the white woman.

“I took the fifth-row seat from the front and sat down,” she recalled, “immediately closing my eyes and envisioning, in my mind’s eye, the wonderful two-week vacation I would have with my family and friends in Ohio.”

Jolted out of her reverie by an angry voice, she opened her eyes and sat upright. The bus driver had come to a full stop and turned in his seat. He was speaking to her. “If you can sit in the fifth row from the front seat of the other buses in Montgomery,” he said, “suppose you get off and ride in one of them.”

The driver’s message didn’t register at first. Robinson was still thinking about her holiday trip. Suddenly the driver rose from his seat, went over to her, and stood with his arm drawn back, as if to strike her. “Get up from there!” he yelled. “Get up from there!”

At the bus station in Durham, North Carolina, 1940

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At the bus station in Memphis, Tennessee, 1943

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Shaken and alarmed, Robinson bolted to her feet and stumbled off the bus in tears, packages falling from her arms. She had made the mistake of sitting in one of the front ten seats, which were reserved for white riders only.

“I felt like a dog,” she wrote later. “And I got mad, after this was over, and I realized I was a human being, and just as intelligent and far more [educationally] trained than that bus driver was. But I think he wanted to hurt me, and he did. . . . I cried all the way to Cleveland.”

Robinson was still mad when she returned to Montgomery after the Christmas holidays. She had recently joined the local Women’s Political Council (WPC), an influential organization of African American teachers, nurses, social workers, and other professional women who worked to advance black community interests. But when she told her fellow members what had happened, she learned that her experience was far from unusual. Scores of black passengers, mainly women, had suffered abuse from white bus drivers over the years. Such behavior was a fact of life in Montgomery, she was told. Members of the Women’s Council had protested before, but it hadn’t helped. Robinson made up her mind then that she would do everything in her power to challenge the city’s segregated bus seating.

Every day, as many as 40,000 blacks rode Montgomery’s public buses, along with some 12,000 whites. The first ten seats of every bus were reserved for white riders, with the last twenty-six available to blacks. But the dividing line between the white and black sections wasn’t fixed. The driver had the power to expand the white section and shrink the black section by ordering blacks to give up their seats to whites.

As white passengers boarded the bus and dropped their dimes into the fare box, they took seats in the front. Black passengers were not allowed to walk past the white section after paying their fare. Instead, they had to get off the bus and reenter through the back door. Some-

times a spiteful driver would accept a black rider's fare and then, while the passenger was walking around to enter the back door, would drive off.

"Not all drivers were guilty of such practices," Robinson wrote. "There were some very fine, courteous bus drivers who were kindly disposed and carried out the laws of segregation without offending the riders. . . . There were good and mean drivers, considerate and hateful ones. And black riders had to cope with both types."

The bus system was a bitter daily reminder of enforced segregation in Montgomery. Many black riders were women who rode across town every morning to work as maids, cooks, and nurses in white homes. Other black passengers were students, young children, and old folks. All of them were powerless to challenge white drivers when they were ordered to give up their seats, because the drivers had the force of law behind them. Even when not a single white passenger was on board, the front ten seats in every bus were reserved for whites, just in case one or two did ride. Often black riders jammed the aisle of a bus, standing over those empty seats, where they dared not sit down. And if the white section happened to fill up, then the blacks sitting just behind the reserved seats had to get up as more whites got on. Elderly black men and women were required by law to get out of their seats so that white schoolchildren could take a seat.

Jo Ann Robinson did not take kindly to being pushed around. She had grown up on a small Georgia farm, the youngest of twelve children, had graduated from a segregated, all-black high school as the class valedictorian, and was the first member of her family to complete college. After teaching in Texas, she moved to Montgomery in the summer of 1949,

at the age of thirty-seven, to join the English department at Alabama State, where she earned a reputation as an enthusiastic and popular teacher.

Robinson joined the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, attended by many Alabama State professors. That's when she became a member of the Women's Political Council, which had been founded three years earlier when the local League of Women Voters refused to accept blacks. "We were 'woman power,' organized to cope with any injustice, no matter what," she recalled. "I had suffered the most humiliating experience of my life when that bus driver had ordered me off the fifth-row seat from the front and threatened to strike me when I did not move fast enough. Thus, I was ready to take over the WPC when the time came."

In 1950, she was elected president of the WPC. Under her leadership, segregated seating on public buses became the group's most pressing issue. Joined by other black community leaders, Robinson and the women of the WPC met several times with Montgomery city commissioners and, later, with bus company officials. Their demands were modest. They simply asked for "better seating arrangements." The word *integration* was never mentioned. "To admit that black Americans were seeking to integrate would have been too much," Robinson said later. "There probably would have been much bloodshed and arrests of those who dared to [suggest] such an idea!"

The black leaders complained about abusive drivers. They pointed out that bus stops were farther apart in black neighborhoods than in white areas. And they asked that the bus company hire some black drivers. The white officials listened politely. They reminded the blacks that segregation on public buses was required by both city and state laws. But



A segregated classroom at the University of Oklahoma, 1948. The black student, G. W. McLaurin, is seated in an anteroom, separated from white students.

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they did make a couple of small concessions. The mayor instructed the bus company to begin stopping at every corner in black neighborhoods, just as buses did in white sections of town. And he requested that drivers be more courteous in the future.

Nothing else changed. Then, on May 17, 1954, the *Montgomery Advertiser* carried a sensational front-page headline. In a momentous decision that would affect race relations across America, the United States Supreme Court had declared that segregation in the nation's public schools was unconstitutional. While the ruling had no immediate effect

in Montgomery, many African Americans believed that the same principle applied to other segregated facilities, such as public transportation. Here at last was a real chance to challenge the segregation laws. Jo Ann Robinson was inspired to write to Montgomery Mayor W. A. “Tacky” Gayle, demanding improved conditions for black riders on city buses and mentioning, for the first time, the possibility of a boycott.

“Mayor Gayle, three-quarters of the riders on these public conveyances are Negroes,” she wrote. “If Negroes did not patronize them they could not possibly operate. . . . There has been talk from twenty-five or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of buses.”

To be effective, a boycott would need the united support of the city’s African American bus riders. Most of them could not afford to own automobiles. How would they get to work? Asking blacks to protest for their rights in the segregated South of the early 1950s was asking them to summon uncommon personal courage—to put their livelihoods and even their physical safety on the line. They could be fired from their jobs, harassed on the streets, or worse. The Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacy groups did everything they could to intimidate blacks into submission. And they did not shrink from violence. Blacks who broke the Jim Crow color bar might be terrorized, beaten, or even murdered.

“I did not have the slightest idea how—without involving others who might get hurt—to begin a boycott against the bus company,” Robinson recalled.

But as stories continued to spread about abusive drivers and humiliating incidents on city buses, anger in the black community grew. The

Women's Political Council began to discuss plans for a boycott that would harness that anger and mobilize the strength of Montgomery's black community.

A masked Ku Klux Klansman holds a hangman's noose outside the window of a car as a warning during a Klan parade through an African American neighborhood in Miami, Florida, 1939.

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