

# 1

*Los Angeles*  
*Summer 1961*

ROSEMARY'S BOYFRIEND changed my life. I never met him, but he changed the course of my personal history as carelessly as a smoker scars a meadow, oblivious to any connection between his stroll through the dry grass and the wildfire that follows. I never knew his name. Rosemary called him "my black boyfriend," relishing the seismic activity this set off in people's eyes.

She and I had crap jobs in the basement of McCullough Worthington, a huge legal chop shop for anyone with deep pockets to protect. The temperature down there careened between sub-zero and a steam bath, and the sole arteries linking us to our masters above were a pneumatic tube and a series of dumb waiters. Our orders arrived with a whoosh and a thump. After a day of steady whooshing and thumping—sending us repeatedly into the file room to retrieve or return manila folders—Rosemary flung herself at the tube, shrieking,

“We’re seventeen, for Christ’s sake. We’re too young to die of boredom!”

I liked her. She made me laugh and she often told me I was pretty, which, of course, I never believed, not least of all because of the way she would tell me: “Your eyes might be on the small side but your nose is small too and that’s good. And, it could be your features only look small because your forehead’s wide. So chin up, girl, because all the parts go together pretty good.”

“Think I should cancel my audition with MGM?”

“C’mon, Jeri, you know you’re a fine looking woman. So go already! The worst they can do is turn you down,” she grinned.

If Rosemary had gone on the march with me, if she’d been sitting next to me in the church, things would’ve turned out different. Rosemary never permitted anyone to be serious about anything. She’d tickle you if you tried not to laugh. But instead of keeping our date, she let her boyfriend talk her into heading over to Griffith Park. “A loaf of bread, a jug of Thunderbird, and a cow,” she told me two days later. “Turns out, I was the cow.”

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So I gave up waiting for her and went by myself. Under the noses of L.A.’s Finest, somewhere around two hundred marchers and I limped into the Sixth Street AME Zion Church. For several minutes, we did a lot of mumbling and shuffling, looking for an available place to squat. I’m fairly athletic but after two hours of dodging all those work boots and saddle shoes, I wanted a nap.

I half-dozed until the pastor boomed, “God has his eye on the sparrow!” At that point Rosemary, I’m sure, would’ve snorted, “That’s why the planet’s so fucked up. God’s busy

bird-watching.” A few moments later I was jolted into attentiveness again when he beseeched heaven: “Remove the scales from their eyes, dear Lord, that they shall see the paths of righteousness.”

“Turn left at Sanctimony and Tedium,” I mouthed to my AWOL buddy. But I hadn’t mouthed it, I’d spoken the words. Someone hissed, “Hush!” and somebody else clicked her tongue. A few rows ahead, a grim-faced woman turned around, seeking the offender. I pretended to look around too.

The church was big enough to hold the crowd, but just barely, and the building had seen better days. The windows, overlaid with “stained-glass” contact paper, needed a good scrubbing. There were no cushions on the wooden seats, no rug on the scarred floor. Everything was dingy and cramped. Even the pews were small. Whichever way I twisted, the hymnal rack dug into my knees. I pulled out a torn green paper fan on a stick, imprinted with HARDY FUNERAL HOME, and used it to move the humidity around. When I shifted again, I scraped my knee and winced. I blamed my mother for my long legs. T.J., my grandmother, was practically a midget.

I longed to get out of there. After all, I’d gone on the march, I’d made my statement. *God has his eye on the sparrow? Please.* I looked up and down the row. With four people on one side and five on the other, there was no escaping without ruffling a lot of feathers. Since a majority of those feathers belonged to pious black people—I saw only a scattering of white faces—I could well picture the scene if I got up, bumping into knees, muttering, “Excuse me, excuse me,” until nearly every pair of brown eyes in the church glared at my white face.

The Reverend Wilcox finally took a seat in one of the high-backed chairs facing us. He looked rather disappointed, I thought. I hoped he hadn’t heard my blooper. A bony, bird-

beaked woman who had been pecking the air at each chant of *amen* turned to beam at him. He gave her a distracted nod, his eyes scanning the audience. I scrunched down a bit.

Next to them on the dais sat an old man, bent over his cane, his misshapen hand moving back and forth over its smooth wood. One shoulder bulged under his shiny brown suit jacket. That bulge and the worn suit jacket made me wish I could put my arm around him and tell him everything would be okay.

In one of the last two chairs, a man of about thirty sat, looking uneasy. His clothes hung off him as if he'd lost a great deal of weight recently but, judging by the distant look in his eyes, it was more likely he'd never paid any attention to what he put on.

At the pulpit, a stocky fellow with wild gray hair signaled for us to stand and then led us through several choruses of *Keep Your Eyes on the Prize*. When I was a kid, my grandmother sometimes sang protest songs to me at bedtime. Lullabies might've been more restful but T.J. was never much into tranquility. I remember her belting out, "You Got to Go Down and Join the Union!" I'm pretty sure she didn't know the melody had started life as a Negro spiritual.

When the singing was over, the stocky man said, "Now I have the pleasure to introduce to you Mr. Dasante Mitchell. Mr. Mitchell has come to us from the struggles down South and he has a great deal to share with us this afternoon. Please give him your full attention." I wondered if he was directing this last request to me.

The dark young man in baggy clothes took the podium.

I have just come back from Monroe, North Carolina. It's hot in Monroe. You could fry an egg on the sidewalk, that's how hot it is. For Negro children,

the heat don't let up a single hour from June through September. White children get themselves cool in the city swimming pool. Negro children has to turn a hose on each other, if they got a hose. If they don't, they are welcome to swim in one of the filthy holes around town, swimming holes where a good number of their kinfolk have perished.

He paused to give us some time to locate those drowned bodies in our minds, small brown arms and legs that would never wiggle again. Somebody gulped back a sob. A few seats away a broad-faced woman, mopping her brow with a large yellow handkerchief, met my eyes. My smile faltered when she didn't return it. She'd probably heard my wisecrack.

Everybody pays taxes in Monroe. The city fathers don't say to a colored man, "Hey, boy, y'all ain't getting the same services so it ain't right for y'all to pay the same taxes." No, sir. Doesn't happen. Negroes pay the same income tax. The same property tax. They pay the same sales tax. Taxes. Now that's one place you will see equal rights. Groceries, too, they cost the same. Clothing and shoes cost just what a white family pays. Sometimes a little more, depending on how inclined the storekeeper might be to larceny.

Knowing laughter flitted through the church but ceased as the yellow handkerchief lady pivoted on her massive bottom and hissed, "Y'all be respectful now!" I tried to imagine watching a clerk ring up my groceries for more than was stamped on them, and I tried to imagine shutting my mouth about it because, if I complained, I'd be the one in trouble.

And so it is with public transportation. A worn-out old cleaning lady has to climb up onto the front

of the bus so she can pay her fare. Then she has to climb down and go to the back door to climb up again and get her a seat. But even if she does find some place to rest her bones at the back of the bus, she will have to stand on her swolled-up feet if some white man come along and shoos her out of it. Nevertheless. Nevertheless. She's going to pay the exact same fare he pays.

A cold smile dented his cheeks. Behind him on her perch, bird lady pecked vigorously. Rosemary would've done a riff on bird lady. I was starting to think it might be a good thing she hadn't shown. If the two of us had been sitting there snickering, we would've been tossed out. And now I really wanted to stay.

That is the gracious Southern way of life the Klan has sworn to uphold.

He turned so that light coming through the windows mottled his honey-colored face. I loved him for caring about that old lady. Two Saturdays before, a snotty guy in a suit had shoved T.J. out of the way when we were boarding a downtown bus. He grabbed the last seat. Before my grandmother could tell him off herself—which she certainly would have—I stomped on his foot, telling him, “Get your butt out of my grandmother’s seat or I’ll take out your other Buster Brown.”

Two months ago a group of teenagers went over to the Monroe public pool. *Public* means that pool was part of their community and their folks had paid to build that pool, and their folks was paying still to maintain it. So those teenagers thought they might take a swim. Word went out that some nigras was getting uppity and a hundred or so upstanding white citizens ran down there, saying they was

going to lynch those young ‘uns. But the children would not be moved. Things got ugly and some of those teenagers got their heads busted but they would not be moved. So the city fathers shut down that swimming pool. If that pool had to serve for colored children, well, it just wasn’t going to serve for anybody. That’s how much they abominate integration in North Carolina.

Indiana rushed into my memory, along with the only photograph I’d ever seen of my grandmother as a little girl. The picture had faded, her face almost a blur, but her sagging dress stood out and, behind her, a stretch of barren farmland. In my head, T.J.’s Indiana childhood was all mixed up with a hot December night in L.A. She and I were walking home from the corner store. Near our apartment building, I was half-blinded by a flashing police car light. When my eyes adjusted, I saw a black kid face down on the filthy sidewalk, a cop with his boot pressing on the kid’s back. When T.J. complained, the cop told her to “fuck off,” and we went inside, T.J. shaking with rage. She opened a beer and began to talk about something that had happened when she was a girl, something that had haunted her all her life.

And it’s not just in North Carolina. Y’all know what happened in Alabama this past May. Y’all might think I mean the very first Freedom Ride but you’d be wrong. The first Freedom Ride wasn’t called a Freedom Ride, it was called a Journey of Reconciliation and it took place in the year nineteen and forty-seven. Sixteen people—eight black, eight white—took a Greyhound into Dixie. First place they got in trouble—North Carolina. What made them go on that ride was something called the *Irene*

*Morgan Decision.*

Dasante Mitchell's light eyes darkened to granite.

In the summer of 1944, Miss Morgan—feeling something sick and no doubt sick and tired—was told to get up and give her seat to a white couple on a Greyhound passing through Virginia. The young lady, who was on her way to Baltimore to consult a doctor, said no, she wasn't going to do it. And so the bus driver call in the sheriff. That peace officer try to take Miss Morgan into custody. Before he made the arrest, she kicked him in an indelicate locale. I expect she had not yet heard about nonviolent resistance.

Afterward she say she will plead guilty and pay a fine for committing an outrage on the person of the constable, which she acknowledged she had done, but she would *not* plead guilty and she would *not* pay a fine for refusing to give up the seat she had paid for. Her case went all the way up to the Supreme Court. Thurgood Marshall, a Negro, argued it and won. In a manner of speaking.

The Court did rule that whenever a bus come across a state border, the Constitution say you aren't allowed to make some people sit in back because they the wrong color. Y'all might think that's a strange thing in the law—segregation being perfectly all right inside the state but unconstitutional when it's heading into some other state. Somebody much smarter than me one time said, "The law is an ass." I don't rightly recall who that was but that particular law sure do seem the work of an ass. Yet and still,



even that particular law might be just a bit less of an ass than are at least a few of the people appointed to see that it gets carried out.

I felt as if all of us in that room breathed together. Not one of us coughed or shifted in the pews. The funeral home paper fan I had been waving hung in mid-air, momentarily forgotten.

Because in nineteen and forty-seven, as in nineteen and sixty-one, no one defended the right of a Negro to do what was legal to do. No officer of the law. No, sir. The Negroes that stood up for what was right have been the only ones obeying the law of the land. The only ones.

The old man on the dais closed his eyes. Bird lady placed a claw on his humped shoulder, her expression soft.

This past May Freedom Riders set out once again for Dixie. When the bus carrying the first group of Freedom Riders reached Anniston, Alabama, the Klan was there—hiding, as befits the Klan. When that bus roll into the depot, those good old boys jump out of their hidey-holes and went at it with iron pipes. They slash its tires and smash its windows. They cave in its sides. They want to get on to bust some heads but the driver would not open the door. The local police is standing by, and they just watch. So that bus driver decide to get that bus out of there, but by the time he get a couple miles away, those flat tires made him to pull over. And now here come the Klan. One of those righteous white men throws a firebomb in through a broken window. Then they pin the doors shut with the Freedom Riders trapped inside. Those courageous freedom fighters would've been burnt alive but for one thing: The gas tank

exploded. The Klan ran away like chaff flying out of a thresher. Klan cowardice saved those lives.

He paused and raked his gaze across the faces of his audience. The yellow handkerchief lady dabbed her eyes and when I looked over at her, she gave me a half-smile, maybe because my eyes were spilling over too.

Y'all need to remember that. The segregationists will run away. They will flee our sword of justice—each and every time y'all stand up to them. Might be they can bend us but they won't never break us. And, in the end, the Klan and all who believe as they believe will bow down before our cause. Brothers and sisters, heed my words: *We shall overcome. We shall overcome.* Because we shall *not* be moved!

We leapt to our feet, shouting, our fists pumping the air:

*Segregation, it shall be removed!*

*Segregation, it shall be removed!*

*Just like the garbage standing in the water;*

*It shall be removed!*

Dasante Mitchell waited for us to settle down. He seemed to be listening to something we couldn't hear, but when he looked up, I felt his eyes on me. He spoke directly to me.

We need bodies. Hundreds of bodies. We need them to fill those jails. We need them to empty out their coffers. We need bodies to drain the poison of their corruption. Hear me: We need bodies to seize this victory. And I tell you today we will be victorious. Nothing will turn us around. Nothing. Segregation is on its deathbed.

A wise man once said that all it takes for evil to

triumph, brothers and sisters, is for good men to do nothing. With Freedom Riders inside that bus, their lungs burning up and their lives in sorest danger, our nation's highest officer of the law did—nothing.

He slammed his fist on the podium and I felt my pulse throbbing in my arms and legs. It was difficult to sit still. I wanted to shout, to yell at those politicians in Washington, to make them see how wrong they were to act like injustice wasn't their job to stop.

Don't y'all be those good people who do nothing in the face of such wickedness. Y'all must not continue to endure what should never be endured. Y'all must not stand by and watch. Because, my brothers and sisters, if y'all won't do it, ain't nobody gonna fight for justice.

I saw people clapping but I couldn't hear them over the roar in my head. I thought, *this must be the way it feels to take your vows as a nun or to walk over hot coals without flinching*. A hand reached down and pulled me onto the dais. Dasante Mitchell smiled.

"Thank you, sister," he said. "Thank you for heeding the call."