



## CHAPTER 1

In the summer of 1928, in a small crossroads town in southern Georgia, a young black man named Joshua stopped for gas. He was on his way to visit friends in Florida during his vacation, and it had been a long drive from his home in New York. He stepped out of his car to stretch as he waited for an attendant to come out and pump the gas. Sitting on the porch of the rundown store near the gas pump was a young white woman, who watched Joshua with narrowed eyes and a scowl.

When Joshua saw the white woman staring at him, he took off his hat and nodded at her with a friendly smile. Immediately, the woman got up and walked into the store, slamming the door loudly behind her. Joshua was puzzled. He'd heard all the stories about how difficult life was for black people in parts of the South,

but surely there was nothing wrong with being polite. Seconds later, two white men walked slowly out of the store. One was carrying a baseball bat.

“You a long way from home, ain’t you, boy?” one of the men said after glancing at Joshua’s license plate. The men continued walking at a steady pace toward Joshua, both of them wearing cruel grins.

“I . . . I just need to get some gas, sir,” Joshua said, backing away nervously and reaching behind him for his car door.

“Don’t serve niggers here,” the other man barked. “Particularly niggers who flirt with our white women.”

Without warning, the bat came down on the back window of Joshua’s car, shattering it. As the man lifted the bat again to break another window, Joshua jumped into his car and started the engine in a panic. As he pressed his foot on the accelerator, he heard another window shatter.

Three months later, in Selma, Alabama, an elderly black woman approached the county courthouse with a look of determination. This was the third time she had tried to register to vote. Every time she had been to the registration office, there had been a new excuse. Most

recently, the young woman behind the desk had told her that they were out of registration forms.

“When will you have forms?” the black woman had asked politely.

“No idea,” the white woman had said, not looking up from filing her nails. “Could be a long, *long* time.”

Now, a few weeks later, the black woman approached the desk again.

“I’d like to register to vote,” she said patiently.

The young white woman barely glanced at her. “Sorry. We’re closed for the day.”

“But,” the black woman began, pointing to the OPEN sign on the door, “that sign there says—”

“Don’t care what the sign says,” the woman behind the desk snapped. “If I say we’re closed, we’re closed. Now get on outta here.”

Two months later on a cold winter morning in Montgomery, Alabama, a fifteen-year-old black girl boarded a city bus for the long ride across town to visit her sick grandmother. The bus was nearly full. There were no seats left in the “colored only” section in the back, and there were only a few near the front. The girl

took one of the last seats, but just as she sat down, a white man boarded the bus.

“All right, girlie,” the white bus driver called back to her. “You know the law. Move on to the back of the bus and stand there. Give the man your seat.”

For just a moment, the girl sat still. *It doesn't seem fair*, she thought bitterly. *I'm no different from him except for the color of my skin.*

“I said *move!*” the bus driver yelled. “This bus ain't goin' anywhere until you get on back there with your kind.”

The girl moved to the back and stood staring out the window as the bus began to roll along again. *Some day*, she thought angrily, *I am not going to move. I'm going to sit in that seat no matter what. Some day, things are gonna change.*

It was into this world that Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929. It had been nearly sixty-five years since the Civil War and the end of slavery in the United States. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had freed black people throughout the country, but, as many black people would discover, freedom did not guarantee equal or even fair treatment.

Particularly in the Southern states, where plantation owners had fought very hard against freeing the slaves, many black people found life to be nearly as miserable as it had been when slavery was legal. They were denied land, decent homes, and the right to have any kind of political power. Many white Southerners were especially nervous about former slaves becoming educated.

“Educate a nigger, and spoil a good field hand” became a popular saying in the South in the decades following the Civil War. Education equaled power, and many white people feared that blacks, who often outnumbered whites in parts of the South, would begin to gain an upper hand.

As a result, if a black man’s crops were too successful, one morning he might find them destroyed. If his house was too nice, it might be burned down. And if he was too smart or demanded to be treated fairly, he could be beaten—or worse. Groups of white men known as “lynch mobs” roamed parts of the South, and sometimes the North, keeping black men, women, and even children in what they considered their rightful place: beneath white people. Too many times, black people were killed by these mobs. The sight of a black

corpse hanging from a tree became a gruesome symbol of racism. It is estimated that between 1882 and 1927, 3,302 black people were killed by lynch mobs in the United States. Rarely were the murderers ever brought to justice.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., was growing up, many of these shocking practices were far too common. Even more common were “Jim Crow” laws. These were laws that enforced “separate but equal” facilities for black people. Many white people did not want to have to see black people in their stores, restaurants, movie theaters, hotels, schools, or even their public restrooms. Therefore, separate areas and facilities for black people were created that were supposed to be equal.

But they were *never* equal.

Until 1954, blacks would have to endure filthy, rundown conditions in public facilities labeled COLORED ONLY. They would be forced to sit in the back of buses and in back rooms of restaurants. Their schools would be rundown and underfunded. If they wanted to travel by train, they would have to board a separate car altogether— usually a car that was dirty, lacking seats, and at the very end of the train.

Back in 1892, when Jim Crow laws had been around for only a few years, a group of

people, both black and white, in Louisiana had seen right away that the laws were unfair. Separating people based solely upon skin color seemed ridiculous. This group came up with a plan to prove how silly and wrong it was. One of the members, a young man named Homer Plessy, bought a first-class ticket to ride on a train in the “whites only” section.

As Plessy boarded the train, no one looked twice at him. He was just another white passenger taking a seat in his designated area. However, after Plessy sat down, he informed the conductor that he was one-eighth black. Immediately, the conductor told Plessy that he would have to move to the “colored only” car near the back. By Louisiana law, someone was considered black if they had any black heritage at all. Plessy refused to move and was arrested.

Homer Plessy and his group took their case to court, claiming that the separation of races was both confusing and unconstitutional. After all, according to the United States Constitution, all citizens, regardless of race, were to be treated equally. However, the judge, John Ferguson, didn't see it that way. Plessy and his group did not give up. They took their case all the way to the United States Supreme Court in 1896. Still, after much consideration, even the highest court in the land decided

that separating races was not illegal as long as facilities and opportunities were equal.

Thus, one of the most famous decisions in American history came about through the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. In 1896, it was declared that racial separation (known as “segregation”) would be protected by federal law. “Separate but equal” became a way of life for many black people for the next sixty years. However, it took very little time for black people to become painfully aware that there was nothing equal about this law.

Despite all of the inequality that surrounded Martin Luther King, Jr., as a boy, his memories of childhood were mostly happy. Looking back on growing up, King would later write, “I had no basic problems or burdens. I was in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present.”

King, or “M.L.” as family and friends would call him all through his youth, grew up in a mostly-black neighborhood of Atlanta known as “Sweet Auburn.” It was an area of working-class black (and some white) families; no one was rich, but there was very little poverty. The centers of the neighborhood were the churches, and M.L.’s father, who was often referred to as “Daddy King,” was the minister of the popular

Ebenezer Baptist Church. Everyone knew and respected the King family, and even though M.L. had been born right at the beginning of the Great Depression, his father had a faithful congregation, so times were never hard.

M.L. was a typical kid in most respects. He played baseball and basketball with neighborhood friends, attended church every Sunday, showed off to girls, and got into a little trouble now and then. M.L.'s parents noticed early that M.L. was a very sensitive child. Once, when they passed a line of poor people waiting outside a soup kitchen, M.L. was moved nearly to tears to think that some people didn't have enough to eat. In the world he had experienced, everyone had what they needed, life was good, and everyone got along.

However, as M.L. became school-aged, several incidents made him painfully aware that people did not get along everywhere as well as they did in Sweet Auburn.

One of M.L.'s best friends was a white boy whose father owned a store across the street from the King home. When the boys started school, they were sent to separate elementary schools—one for whites and one for blacks. This did not surprise M.L., but what happened shortly after the school year began hurt him deeply.

One afternoon, the white boy met M.L. as he crossed the street to come over to play. Without any explanation, M.L.'s friend simply informed him that they were no longer allowed to play together. That night at the dinner table, M.L. asked his parents why on earth his best friend couldn't play with him anymore. Daddy King gently explained that it was because M.L. was black and his friend was white.

"For the first time, I was made aware of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before," King would later write in his autobiography. "I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person."

Of course, as M.L. grew older, he would change his mind about hating white people, but King recalled that, at the time, he wondered, "How could I love a race of people who hated me and who had been responsible for breaking me up with one of my best childhood friends?"

It was Daddy King who reminded his angry son that he must love his enemies. And it was also Daddy King who showed his son that he should never allow others to treat him as though he was worth less because of his skin color. M.L. would always remember the time he and his father went shopping for shoes, and the white salesperson asked them to take a seat

in the back of the store if they wanted service.

“There’s nothing wrong with these seats. We’re quite comfortable here,” Daddy King had said calmly.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to move,” the white clerk had responded.

“We’ll either buy shoes sitting here, or we won’t buy shoes at all,” M.L.’s father had said. At that point, he took his son’s hand and walked out of the store. He looked down at M.L., shook his head, and said, “I don’t care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it.”

As for M.L.’s mother, she gently repeated to her son, during this difficult time of realization, that he was “as good as anyone.” She explained that he would encounter Jim Crow laws, cruel people, and a system that would constantly make him think he was not as good as a white person. Still, he must not let it turn him bitter.

One of M.L.’s favorite things to do was to sit up front at his father’s church and listen to the visiting ministers who came to preach from time to time. M.L. was amazed by the energy, the passion, and the connection with the congregation that these ministers displayed. Dozens of church members would raise their

hands and shout out words of praise when the minister really got going.

One particular Sunday, M.L. listened to a minister speak in a way that he had never heard before. The man used words that sounded like poetry—long, complicated words that M.L. didn't understand. Still, M.L. listened closely. From his earliest years, he had been fascinated by language and by how just the right words could move people to tears or make them jump to their feet in excitement. Now, this minister spoke in a way that fascinated M.L.

That evening, M.L. talked to his father about how the words had made him feel. "You just wait and see," M.L. said confidently. "When I grow up, I'm going to get me some big words."

Not many years later, M.L. got his first opportunity to move people with words. As a fourteen-year-old, he entered a speech contest and won. His subject was "The Negro and the Constitution." The speech began:

**We cannot have an enlightened democracy with one great group living in ignorance. . . . We cannot have a healthy nation with one-tenth of the people ill-nourished, sick, harboring germs of disease which recognize no color lines—obey no Jim Crow laws.**

The speech went on to point out that while the United States Constitution had amendments to protect the rights of black people, their rights were often denied.

The contest had taken place in a town fifty miles away from Atlanta, so M.L. had traveled there on a bus with a teacher accompanying him. Later that evening, the first-place trophy in his hands, M.L. was forced to move to the back of the bus so that white passengers could have his seat near the front. When M.L. hadn't moved quickly enough, the bus driver had yelled rudely at him. The irony of it all did not escape young Martin Luther King, Jr.

Years later, King would write: "I would end up having to go to the back of that bus with my body, but every time I got on a bus I left my mind up on the front seat. And I said to myself, 'One of these days, I'm going to put my body up where my mind is.'"