



INTRODUCTION

It was Thursday, December 1, 1955. Rosa Parks left her job at 5 o'clock. She wasn't feeling her best. She had bursitis, a painful swelling of the joints. Her feet hurt badly.

There was a big crowd at the bus stop. Because black people had to sit in the last ten rows of the bus, she knew if the bus was crowded, she would have to stand all the way home. She decided to do some Christmas shopping while she waited for the crowd to thin out.

Later, carrying her shopping bag,

Rosa climbed onto an emptier bus. She found a seat in a row about two-thirds of the way back where three other black passengers were sitting. It felt good to get off her aching feet and to put her shopping bag down.

At the next stop, a number of white people boarded the bus. After they found seats, one white man was left standing.

The bus driver turned around and looked at his black passengers. For the first time, Rosa noticed his face. She realized that it was a driver named James Blake. She remembered James Blake all too well. Twelve years earlier, he had forced her off his bus when she tried to walk through the “whites only” section of the bus to get to a seat in the back.

Blake walked down the aisle. Looking directly at Rosa, he said, “Move, y’all. I want those seats.”

There was only one white man

waiting for a seat. But on the segregated buses, a row had to be either “black” or “white.” All four black people in the row would have to move.

For a moment, nobody moved. Blake raised his voice. “Y’all make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats,” he said again.

The two black women sitting across the aisle got up and moved to the rear of the bus. Then the man sitting by the window, beside Rosa, began to rise. Rosa swung her legs aside so that he could get out.

And then she moved into the empty window seat. Turning her back on Blake, she looked out the window.

Rosa Parks had had enough. She was tired, and her feet hurt. She was going to keep her seat.

Blake said, “Look, woman. I told you I want that seat. Are you going to stand up?”

Rosa said, “No, I am not.”

“Then I’m going to call the police and have you arrested,” Blake said.

Rosa quietly replied, “You may do that.”

And in that moment of quiet defiance, Rosa Parks took the first step in the march that would change the course of history forever.

To understand why Rosa took this courageous stand, it’s important to understand the times she lived in and how she was raised.



CHAPTER 1

Rosa Parks was born Rosa Louise McCauley on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. Her parents were James and Leona McCauley. James was a carpenter. Leona was a teacher.

Tuskegee had been an important city in black American history for a long time. It was the home of Booker T. Washington, the famous black educator who started Tuskegee University in 1881. For many years, the university was the best place in America for black students to get an education. Another

famous black American, George Washington Carver, was a teacher at Tuskegee. Carver was an amazing inventor and scientist. He developed more than 300 products from the peanut and 175 from the sweet potato.

One day, Rosa Parks' name would be as well known as Washington's and Carver's. But that would have seemed unlikely when Rosa was growing up. She was just a little girl who was sick a lot. Her tonsils, lumps of tissue in the back of the throat, were often sore and swollen. When her throat hurt, it was hard for her to eat. Because of her bad health, she was small and thin. In fact, although her little brother Sylvester was two years younger, Rosa was smaller than he was for much of their childhood.

There is a family story about Rosa and her childhood sickness. When she was two and a half, her grandfather took her to see the doctor about her tonsils.

As young as she was, she sat up very straight and let the doctor look down her throat without fussing or crying. The doctor praised her for being a brave little girl. Maybe this was a hint of the courage Rosa was going to show later in her life!

By the time of that visit to the doctor, Rosa and her family had moved from Tuskegee to the tiny town of Pine Level, Alabama. There they lived with Leona's parents on their farm. Because James was often away for long periods, building houses in other towns, Leona needed her parents' help to care for the two children. After a while, James stopped coming home at all. From the time she was five until she was an adult, Rosa did not see her father. Leona began teaching school in a town miles away. She had no car, so she had to stay away all week. As a result, Rosa was raised mostly by her grandparents.

Rosa's grandparents were very important in her life. In their different ways, they both taught her what it meant to be a black person in the South in the early 20th century.

Grandfather Sylvester had been born a slave on an Alabama plantation, a large farm where crops, such as cotton, were grown to be sold. In the South before the Civil War (1861–1865), plantations were worked mostly by slaves. His mother was also a slave, but his father was a white man—in fact, he was the owner of the plantation. Slaves like Grandfather's mother did not have any rights. They were considered property, just like a horse or a wagon. If a slave owner wanted to have children with a female slave, there was nothing she could do about it. If she said “No,” she could be beaten, sold, or even killed. So on plantations, it was not unusual to see slave children who were of mixed race.

Like many of these children, Grandfather Sylvester had very light skin and straight hair.

You might think that a plantation owner would treat his own children better than the other slaves. But the opposite was often true. Owners felt embarrassed to see slaves growing up who looked like them. Everyone who saw those light-skinned children knew that the owners had taken advantage of the children's mothers. Owners' wives were angry to see children that their husbands had fathered with other women. As a result, the half-white slaves might be treated even worse than the black slaves.

That was the case with Grandfather Sylvester. As he was growing up, he was beaten and starved by his white owners. He grew to hate white people. He talked to Rosa about how whites had mistreated him. He warned her that

white people were no good, and that she should stay away from them. He didn't even like it when Rosa played with the white children on the neighboring farm, or went fishing with the elderly white woman who lived nearby.

Grandfather had his own ways of getting back at white people. In the South, there were very strict rules about how blacks were supposed to behave around whites. Blacks were expected to act very respectful. They were supposed to call everyone "Mr." or "Mrs." They were supposed to step off the sidewalk to let a white person pass by. They were never supposed to touch a white person. But Grandfather looked like a white man. So when he was in a place where people did not know him, he would break all the rules. He would walk down the sidewalk with whites. He would call white men by their first names and shake hands with them. Then he would laugh

behind their backs, knowing how angry they would be if they knew he was black.

Like her husband, Grandmother Rose was half white. Her mother had been a slave, and her father had been a white servant on the same plantation. As a young woman, Grandmother Rose took care of the white plantation owners' baby.

Unlike black slaves, white servants were paid for their work. So, when Grandmother's father had saved enough money, he bought 12 acres of the plantation. Later, the white child that Grandmother had helped raise gave her six more acres as a gift. Those 18 acres made up the little farm that Rosa lived on with her grandparents. Grandmother knew that the way black people were treated in the South was not fair or right. But her experiences with white people had not all been bad. She was not bitter and angry towards all

whites in the way her husband was.

Little Rosa loved her grandparents. She listened to both of them. She understood her grandfather's anger. She admired his outspoken ways. At the same time, she respected the way her grandmother was open-minded about people. As Rosa grew up, it was clear she had learned both her grandparents' lessons well.