

The event that changed America.

I had a dream last night. My friends and I were out all day running and catching ball on the streets and Albert was not the best player that day. In fact , we decided that Robert would lead the team and take us to victory against ' Vance Primary ' – but I knew in my heart that Albert was going to come back and win it for us .

I suggested we should meet outside our candy store for the August 29 game. We would pick our team that day and keep a spot open for Albert if he wanted to come in. He had left in a huff but we knew he was a good kid and an excellent pitcher. We needed to win this year - despite our fierce competition with the Industrial School of Montgomery, we had lost the previous year. We needed Charles, Albert and Sam in our team to trounce those kids.

The year was 1955. We were happy playing ball most days but something was happening in our hometown of Montgomery, Alabama. My Momma kept saying that we would soon be going to the same school as the white kids and learn more things than our 'Jim Crow' schools. Someday, she said, I would be going to University. Her eyes misted over when she said such things.

That night my dream was violent – I was swimming in this strange world – I saw many faces – blurred and mutilated. I saw a young boy's face – only it was no longer a human face. People were chasing this boy, others running. There was blood, a lot of blood. I could not see this boy's eyes – Oh Momma! , where were his eyes? I shouted out in my sleep and my parents came over to my room to comfort me. I was drenched in sweat and my Momma cradled my head in her lap. I went to sleep with her fingers running through my hair that night.

August 28, 1955. The unthinkable happened in Mississippi – word spread like wildfire about Emmett Till who was murdered brutally for saying 'Bye baby' to a white woman as he was leaving her candy store. Everything turned upside down that day in Montgomery. My Dad's best friend, uncle Jordan, came with a few other people to our house. They talked – drank, ate and talked some more. They made some signs and big banners. They were planning to spill out into the streets and organise big marches.

The men in Montgomery were growing very restless. The Sherriff, a huge Mr Parker, drove around with a lot of policemen around our neighbourhoods but he generally did not stop us from playing ball.

Our school was cool – Mrs Roberts her usual stern self. She was a kind woman but ran a tight ship. On Thursdays, the local University students would come with banners and signs and stand in front of our school for an hour before they moved on to other schools . They shouted about 'desegregation' and 'integration'. I was only nine that year and did not understand what they meant. I just wanted my friends Rufus, Samuel and Albert to be in school with me so that we could slip out of the school during recess and catch ball.

The pictures of Emmett Till were all over. The boy's murder had been brutal, his eyes gouged out. I was having terrible nightmares – his face came back to me night after night and Momma was getting worried. She wanted to take me to the doctor but Dad said I was going to be all right. The day the two men were pronounced 'not guilty' the whole town erupted. The men marched to the Town Hall and the Sheriff's Office and the Sherriff started firing shots into the air. The women just wailed and wailed – the factories in Montgomery were closed for a month.

Dorothy was the only person I could talk to about the turmoil in my head. To me, Dot was my shining light and a font of knowledge. Dot was hoping to finish her high school that year and she dreamt of going to Alabama State University one day.

Dot told me stories of the first enslaved Africans being brought in 1619 and the history of the black people in America. I learnt the stories of the Southern states, the formation of the Confederate States and President Abraham Lincoln. I learnt about the heroism of General Ulysses Grant and his bloody battles with the Confederate Army General Lee. I began to appreciate the differences in society and the fight of so many black men and women to achieve greater rights and freedom.

I learnt President Lincoln's Gettysburg address – it always sent a shiver down my spine. I recited it, word for word, to my Momma, my chest all puffed out. The word 'Liberty' took on a whole new meaning for me, the phrase 'All men are created equal' forever etched in my mind. I didn't know about the rest of America, but in Alabama I could see that we were very different from the white people.

Dot continued to tell me stories. The stories came flowing through her mouth and transported me to a different world. She told me about Alexander Twilight – the first black man to earn a college degree, and of James McCune Smith, the first African-American man to earn a medical degree. She used to become a different person as she told me the achievements of these great heroes. However, the day she told me about Mary Jane Patterson, the first black woman to receive a bachelor's degree, I saw tears streaming down her eyes. We sat in silence for a long time and then she got up and left. The next day, she told me about Rebecca Lee, the first black woman to receive a medical degree. 'Was that even possible?'. Nearly ninety years on, it did not seem possible for anyone I knew in Alabama. However, Dot was different. Was she the one who would usher in a wave of hope, of dreams and of change?

Montgomery, Alabama, was very different from the northern states. We lived by the 'Jim Crow' rules and were not allowed to dream big. We had our own schools, our own libraries and even drank water from our own water fountains. Our schools had all black teachers and my Dad and his friends worked on the railroads, their hands calloused from the hard menial work. We went every Sunday to our own church and all the women sang beautifully. My life revolved around my family, my friends and playing catch.

The world around me was changing. People were restless and fearful. I would see more police on the streets and I was called a 'nigger' more often when I passed a group of white boys on my way to school. Should I have been more offended by that word? It started feeling so - even though I had been called that from childhood. I just wanted to reach school fast and be with my friends. My Momma had warned me not to answer back to the white kids as the police would take me away. Hell, we even had threats from our teachers that we would be taken away from our families if we got into any trouble with the white kids.

December 1st, 1955. I had my 10th birthday a couple of weeks back. I got on the municipal bus driven by James Blake, who we all feared. The bus was full and we got on at the school stop. Rufus and I were there as Albert said he would come on the next bus. We paid our fare to Mr Blake, then got down and reboarded the bus from the rear entrance. Luckily, we got seats at the back and we immediately started playing 'I spy'. The bus still had empty seats. We never even looked at the white section as that was too far for us to even look. Auntie Rosa (Parks) was seated a few rows ahead of me, she smiled and waved at me as I took my seat. I had seen her come to our house twice that year when the men were meeting in our house after Emmett Till's murder. I knew she was the secretary

of the NAACP (my Dad was also a member) and I saw that everyone respected her and listened to her when she spoke. Dot used to talk about Auntie Rosa – how, even after leaving school in the 11th grade, she managed to get a high school diploma.

The bus continued to fill up that day. I was not surprised that all the seats in our section at the back were taken but the front section also was filling up fast. There had been a fair on that day and a lot of people were returning home. There was a chill in the air and I was already thinking of the meal my Momma would have ready for me.

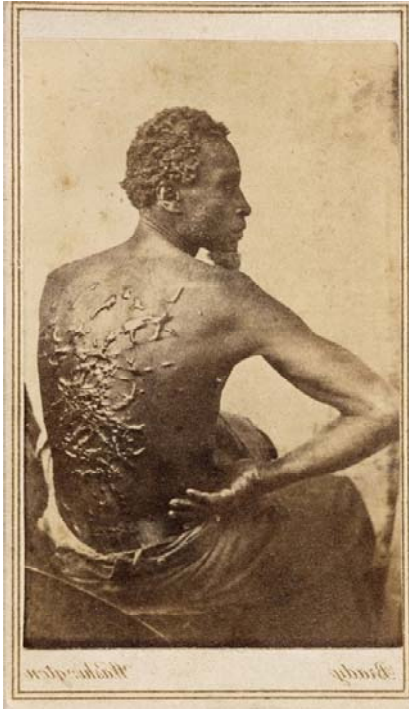
Suddenly, there was some shouting and commotion ahead of me in the bus. The bus had stopped and was very full. There was a white man standing and he did not have a seat. He was excitedly saying something to Mr Blake who had come out from his driver's seat in the front and had moved the sign separating the white and black seating sections one row back. He then asked the four people in that row of seats to stand up and leave the seat for the white man. This did not surprise either of us as both Rufus and I had both seen this happen before.

The three others dutifully obeyed Mr Blake and stood up. However, Auntie Rosa refused! She just wouldn't give in! Mr Blake boomed at her 'Why don't you stand up?', to which she replied in a calm and measured voice, 'I don't see any reason to move'.

The whole bus now erupted. The white people began shouting and we started cheering from the back. Mr Blake was notorious for his blatant racism and had slapped my friends in the past for being slow in paying the fare. Auntie Rosa had defied him and we were ecstatic. One white man got down and called the police. The police came and asked Auntie Rosa to move but she just wouldn't budge. The police then arrested her and led her out. We all got out of the bus and walked home that day.

In the days that followed, Montgomery changed forever. Auntie Rosa stood trial 4 days later and was fined. She however, set off a train of events that changed the face of the country I knew. Dr Martin Luther King, at just 26, was elected the President of the MIA and I was mesmerised by his oratory. I followed him to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 and listened to his 'Dream' as he outlined a Negro's dream about living in America and lamented that even a hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the Negro was not free. Finally, as an eighteen year old, I thought that a day will come when I will no longer be called a 'nigger'.

Subsequent events have meaningfully shaped American history. President Kennedy's Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act have given the African – American more rights and as an old man, I have seen the first black President of America. America now is different to the Montgomery of my childhood and leads the 'Free World'. I however, still remember the bus ride that started it all and the protest of one brave person that galvanised a nation. The face of Emmett Till has finally stopped haunting me in my dreams.



Medical examination photo of [Gordon](#), widely distributed by abolitionists to expose the brutality of slavery. Source: Wikipedia.

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