

Dear Robert

Maybe you don't remember me, but I sat next to you in 1962, in eighth grade math class, Leestown Junior High School, Lexington, Kentucky. Vietnam was still a world away to us and the United States had resumed its nuclear testing, detonating a place called Christmas Island, but we didn't know.

I didn't know about a segregationist group in New Orleans, offering African Americans free one-way bus rides out of New Orleans, to go anywhere, to just leave. It was in response to the Freedom Riders they said. I did know about the Freedom Riders. I loved the idea in those words, the idea of getting on a bus because you could, going where you wanted to go, with people you wanted to be with, Freedom Riders. I may not have known math that year, but I knew that being black meant you sat at the back of buses. And, I saw the separate water fountains for you, the separate entrances to the movie theaters downtown. If you went to see "The Blob" with Steve McQueen with your family, like I did with mine, you didn't even stand in the same line I did to get tickets. One time when I was getting popcorn I watched the white ushers rope the black people off from where I was standing, then they motioned them up the stairs, silently, quietly, before the movie started. From where I sat on the main floor I turned and looked up behind me. I tried to see if you were there in that second balcony. I hadn't even known there was a second balcony.

That year at school, Robert, you said hello to me every day. You wore white shirts that were so crisp they looked as if they could sit in your chair without you. You walked straighter than anyone I'd ever seen. You wore dress pants and you walked so quietly that sometimes I didn't know you were there next to me until you moved the chair to sit down. No one, no one, had hands like yours - calm, clean, determined and confident. And, I watched your hands when you raised one of them to answer the teacher's math questions. You were always right. Even if I'd known the answers, which I never did, I could never have raised my hand like you did. Your voice matched your hands.

I wondered what riding on a school bus was like for you. Mine was full of spitballs, boys pushing, shoving, stepping on your feet then taking the saved seats. Those buses smelled awful, like hot rubber and sour socks, but our new

school, Leestown, smelled even worse, full of what they called plastic - chairs, tables, desks. The cafeteria smelled like petroleum; the food tasted like petroleum no matter what they served. I never did find you at lunch, but I looked for you almost every day. In October there was a school dance in that cafeteria on a Saturday night. Mom dropped me off. The music was "Big John," over and over again. I never did find you. I wanted to say could we talk, could we dance.

But in that math class, when the tests and homework papers were handed back to us, I saw the one hundreds handwritten across the tops of your papers. Sometimes you'd ask me what I got, and you'd show me your paper. I pretended I hadn't already seen your grade. You'd ask me to show you my grade. I couldn't. I would just shake my head and say I didn't pass. You'd say keep working at it. Sometimes you'd try to explain the problems to me when we were supposed to be doing the homework. I still didn't get it, but oh, how I loved your attention on me.

That May my dad quit his job at the Post Office and Mom quit her secretary job at the Kentucky Highway Department. They sold our home on Taylor Drive, down the road from Leestown Junior High and bought a motel in Florida. By July I'd learned to wash sheets, make beds, clean rooms, clean a pool, fold towels, and answer a switchboard.

That summer, when Mom went to enroll me in the school there, the principal at that junior high said my math grades were too low. He said I had to go to summer school, so I did. After that, I made As and Bs in math at school. I thought of you. I was in the National Honor Society my senior year in high school and still, I thought of you.

I knew my life was hard back then, but I always knew yours was harder. I knew it took more courage than I had to be an African American. You were the only one in that math class. I saw how none of the boys I knew, or even the girls, spoke to you. It was as though you were invisible to them. I want you to know I looked for you after school every day at Leestown. I stood in the noise and exhaust fumes from the school buses and wondered if I found you would you speak to me.

One of my friends back then took me to her uncle's house one day in our subdivision. It was a mansion in Meadowthorpe Subdivision, the family house for the farm that was there before the land was sold and subdivided. The house

had a winding drive to a huge white house with columns, like Tara in *Gone With The Wind*. We were on our bikes; mine, bright blue, with a white seat. We left our bikes in the back yard and went to the back door. An African American lady in a white starched uniform with an apron as crisp as your shirts opened the door. She recognized my friend and let us inside. She smiled and gave us glasses of cold water and we walked around the huge house, running up and down the giant steps to the second floor. I had never been in such beautiful rooms, where the wood seemed to echo and the rugs were so thick you felt as if you were walking on air. The windows and drapes went from the ceiling to the floor. I asked my friend if she ever slept in the house. She showed me her room.

Then we went back downstairs and to the kitchen. The lady who was the maid hugged her. She said to come back anytime and we left. On another day, maybe the next week, I was riding my bike and thought it would be fun to go back to the mansion. I left my bike in the back yard just as we had done before and I knocked on the same back door. The same lady answered, but this time she looked at me puzzled. I said I had come back to visit. She told me I'd need to be with my friend to come in. I said I thought she said to come back and visit anytime. She closed the door. I have not forgotten the feeling I had when she closed the door. I have not forgotten standing in those fumes looking for you.

I saw you again once, eight years later, 1969, in the courtroom of Lexington's City Hall. I was working for the City-County Planning Commission, putting my then husband through the University of Kentucky. That day in that courtroom, I was there taking minutes at the Planning Commission meeting where they approved and disapproved zone changes. I looked up and there you were, walking in through the double doors, taking a seat with an older man, your grandfather I thought. I knew it was you immediately. When your grandfather's case was announced, your grandfather stood and began walking very slowly to the front of the room before the board. You supported him as he walked. I watched your hands. They were still yours. You stood behind him while he talked to the Commission. You weren't a lawyer, few African Americans were at that time. Your shirt was wrinkled, not white. You didn't have on dress pants; you wore jeans. But you stood just as straight as I remembered you could and I knew at any moment you could

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raise your hand and say the right thing, say what needed to be said.

Your grandfather was thin, kind of bent over. He held a dusty brown hat in his hands and asked for a zone variance so that he could put a trailer on his land for you. Your grandfather's request was approved. You never looked at me.

I wanted to know if you were married, was the trailer for you and your family, were you in college, did you have a wife putting you through college, were you going to Vietnam. As you left I wanted to run after you.

I'd been married about a year. President Kennedy was dead. Martin Luther King would be as well, soon. The Freedom Riders were making news and the anti-war demonstrations were everywhere. My husband and I agreed on nothing, not even the theme of "Easy Rider" or "2001 A Space Odyssey." He wasn't going to any peace demonstrations he said. He was a Republican and I better vote the same way he did. He was going to be another Frank Lloyd Wright, and I could come if I wanted to. I wondered often why I was putting him through college instead of myself. That day in the courtroom I knew I still didn't have your courage.

In 2004 I read an article in the AARP magazine, "Freedom Ride Revisited." On page 26, the article says that in August a bus tour, sponsored by the AARP and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, moved along a route the Freedom Riders took in 1961 when they were testing the regulations barring segregation in interstate transportation. The article said that each stop on the 70-day tour featured Story Stations where passersby could share their memories. It said the tour included New Orleans, a destination the Freedom Riders didn't reach in 1961 because of the escalating racial attacks.

I got out my *Twentieth Century, An Almanac* to see what it would say about the '60s. In the year we were born, 1948, the Premier of Egypt, Nokrashy Pasha, was assassinated for failing to win the war against Israel. The World Health Organization was established and began large-scale application of DDT to control malaria. And, Robert Braidwood, an American archaeologist, was digging at Jarmo in the foothills of Iraq when he found a site crucial to understanding the Neolithic revolution. Then, there on page 302, I found something in the chapter heading, "In Search of Stability 1946-1962;" that's it, Robert, we were there, and we were searching for stability.

It's been way over forty years now since the eighth grade at Leestown Junior High. It's not Vietnam anymore, it's Iraq. People lied again and are arguing over who is right, who is wrong and what to do now. New cars smell like Leestown Junior High did in the 1960s. My former husband remarried two weeks after our divorce was final in 1994.

But, I keep thinking back to Leestown Junior High, to eighth grade math class, to the back row, to you sitting there next to me amongst all that white. And now, I like to imagine a great bus, a Freedom Riders' bus, huge, rumbling the ground. I imagine you already on the bus, your shirt bright again with hope. I'm on the bus steps getting ready to go inside. I wave goodbye to the people who are standing there, the people who are watching who is getting on this bus. It's 100 degrees here maybe, or thundering, lightening and raining, or snowing and sleeting. It doesn't matter. I climb the steps and move down the aisle. I can't find a seat. It is so full of people, all colors, all ages, all languages, talking, laughing, all wanting to be there. Some have iPhones, some those music things. I'm not sure I can find a seat. Then I see you. You are toward the back, on the right. You were one of the first ones to get on. You look just like you, only older, sixty something like me now. You are smiling again. You motion for me. You've saved me a seat. I sit down next to you and this time, Robert, when the bus doors close, the bus we are both on the inside. And, this time, this country has elected an African American president of the United States. And, this time Robert, all things seem possible.

Perhaps you don't remember me Robert, but I sat next to you in 1962 in math class. You are the bravest person I have ever known.