

It was 1943 in Clarkesville, a tiny town in Georgia. My grandmother had begun her first year in college. The town was beginning to suffer from segregation of white and black people, and even outside of town it was beginning to show. The closest school for black children was three towns away, and many had to make the choice, walk several miles or get up before dawn to meet the bus. My grandmother, Jewel's, college was two towns away, and no bus was coming for her. She walked, rain or shine, until one day in December when all of that changed.

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Jewel squinted into the darkness ahead of her. The rain drummed on the hood of her yellow slicker and trickled down her bony shoulders, seeping through her thin cotton gloves. She shivered as she stood in the glaring porch light of the little white house, the last one for a while on US highway 23. Jewel watched the water slide slimily down her thin legs, glowing white-blue in the dim light. Much as she would have loved to turn around and high tail it back to her warm, cozy bed, Jewel was far too stubborn to be conquered by a little storm. She was clever, and even in a family full of children, usually got her way. Jewel was also eager to learn, and too ravenous for the knowledge packed into the tiny campus library to risk missing even one day of college. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out of the tiny circle of light and scuttled down the side of the wet street. Trees lined either side of the road, obscuring what little light from the moon managed to fight through the clouds. Jewel kept her head down as she made her way

down the seemingly endless black tunnel of trees, partially spooked by the rainstorm and partially annoyed. A girl shouldn't have to walk two miles in a rainstorm, especially now that she was in college! Jewel knew that even in town, many people in Clarksville didn't own cars. She also knew that she was fortunate to live nearly halfway between town and her college, out in the country, but sometimes she wished she could hitch a ride to school like her two friends who lived in town. Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stopped the mailman from passing the tiny college at the top of the hill, and Jewel's two best friends had perfect attendance.

The river just down the hill from Jewel's school had swallowed its banks in an effort to drink in as much of the pelting rain as possible, and Jewel, lost in thought, didn't notice until she was ankle deep in icy water. Her startled squeal turned to a groan as she backed out of the water and slugged across the soggy wooden bridge. Almost there, she realized, as she spotted the campus lights up the hill. Her sopping dress clung to her legs and her feet squished in her shoes. With each step up the hill, her rain-laden slicker became heavier and heavier until she was sure the weight would crush her thin frame. Suddenly, the frigid wind whipped her hood from her head and sent her long brown hair tumbling every which way. Swatting the frazzled strands from her flushed face and spitting out the ones she had inhaled, Jewel stomped her foot in frustration. Suddenly, Jewel's misery was interrupted by a rusty old bus squealing to a halt in front of her. Jewel leaped aside to avoid the cascade of water the spinning tires sent in her direction. She

glared at the bus, too angry to be afraid, as the metal doors opened with a foreboding "whoosh".

Jewel tipped her head to the side as the doors creaked to a stop. She couldn't quite hear over the pounding rain, but it sounded like the bus driver speaking...maybe telling her she looked like a drownin' rat, maybe asking if she wanted a ride. There was something familiar about the voice, a twangy accent that kept her caution at bay. She started up the steps without a second thought. As she reached the top, she cried out in recognition. The bus driver was an old acquaintance, a man who had sometimes stopped by to do some work on Jewel's property. She remembered the long summer days when she had scurried out the back door to serve him and his friends dinner while they sat on the back porch and laughed, pulling her hair and calling her names. That had been years ago, and Jewel was surprised to see him. He smiled at her and instructed her to find herself a seat. It was only then, when she turned to survey the bus, that Jewel realized that it was full of colored children. She was startled. She scanned the sea of dark faces, searching for one she knew, or at least a glimpse of friendship. She recognized some older boys that had taken the old bus driver's place working on her farm, but when she had started college, she had stopped serving supper to them, and she doubted they knew her. Most of the faces looked confused, some bored. A few were hard and cold, reminding Jewel that segregation had already begun in Clarksville. A sopping wet white girl was probably not what these children wanted to see on their bus. Intimidated, she backed toward the steps, but a little girl pulled on her sleeve. She was small, huddled in the third row seat with her ragged dress pulled over her knees and a heavy textbook in her

lap. She offered Jewel a seat and a smile when Jewel accepted. They made small talk as the bus rumbled along the old road and the rain pattered cozily on the windows. The girl showed Jewel her book, and Jewel helped her study the French words inside, the two laughing as she stumbled over the pronunciations. Repeating the words, Jewel was amazed at the girl's intelligence and the way her Georgia accent disappeared when she spoke the exercises in the textbook. And when she listened closely, Jewel found that the loud squabble of voices on the bus was not just children gossiping. She picked out words in French, Spanish, some math equations, even history facts. Knowledge was flying back and forth across the damp aisle while the children studied. Jewel listened intently, and all too soon, she spotted the familiar white church perched on the muddy hill. She smiled, as she always did when she saw the church, remembering her grandfather's funeral when so many people had crowded inside that the floor broke through. She had been young, and couldn't help but laugh, even on that somber day. She started to tell the girl the story, but her words screeched to a halt along with the bus, and Jewel realized that they were in front of the college library. Disappointed, she rose, gathered her books, and called out her thanks to the bus driver. As she started down the bus steps, the girl called after her, begging Jewel to tell her the funny story tomorrow. Jewel turned to the driver, who gave a slight smile and a wink. Then she waved and said to the girl,

"Tomorrow. I promise."

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My grandma never walked to college again. When she told her friends of her adventure, they scoffed at her for riding with colored people, but by the first snowstorm of that winter, they were riding the bus, too. In the spring, my grandmother left college, and before she could return, World War II had begun. She left Clarksville and went to nursing school, losing contact with many of the friends she had made on the bus, but not with the memories of the kindness and intelligence of the old bus driver and the little girl.