Chapter 1: Jim Crow and the Detested Number Ten
from *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

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I swear to the Lord
I still can't see
Why Democracy means
Everybody but me.

—Langston Hughes

CLAUDETTE COLVIN: I was about four years old the first time I ever saw what happened when you acted up to whites. I was standing in line at the general store when this little white boy cut in front of me. Then some older white kids came in through the door and started laughing. I turned around to see what they were laughing at. They were pointing at me. The little white boy said, "Let me see, let me see, too." For some reason they all wanted to see my hands. I held my hands up, palms out, and he put his hands up against my hands. Touched them. The older kids doubled up laughing. My mother saw us, and she saw that the boy's mother was watching. Then

my mom came straight across the room, raised her hand, and gave me a backhand slap across my face. I burst into tears. She said, “Don’t you know you’re not supposed to touch them?” The white boy’s mother nodded at my mom and said, “That’s right, Mary.”

That’s how I learned I should never touch another white person again.

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IF, LIKE CLAUDETTE COLVIN, you grew up black in central Alabama during the 1940s and 1950s, Jim Crow controlled your life from womb to tomb. Black and white babies were born in separate hospitals, lived their adult lives apart from one another, and were buried in separate cemeteries. The races were segregated by a dense, carefully woven web of laws, signs, partitions, arrows, ordinances, unequal opportunities, rules, insults, threats, and customs—often backed up by violence. Together, the whole system of racial segregation was known as “Jim Crow.”

Jim Crow’s job was not only to separate the races but to keep blacks poor. In 1950, nearly three in five black women in Montgomery, Alabama’s capital city, worked as maids for white families, and almost three-quarters of employed black men mowed lawns and did other kinds of unskilled labor. The average black worker made about half as much money as the average white. “The only professional jobs . . . open to blacks were . . . pastoring a black church and schoolteaching, which was open because of segregated schools,” recalled the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, the minister of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery during the 1950s.

Jim Crow kept blacks and whites from learning together, playing or eating meals together, working or riding buses or trains together, worshiping with one another, even going up and down in the same elevator or throwing a ball back and forth in the same park. Black and white citizens drank water from separate fountains and used different bathrooms. They were forbidden to play sports on the same team, marry one another, or swim together in the same pool.

WHO WAS JIM CROW?

Between the 1830s and the 1950s, minstrel shows starred white performers who smeared burnt cork on their faces and ridiculed African-American life. Thomas “Daddy” Rice is credited with popularizing minstrel shows with the song “Jump Jim Crow,” which, he said, he’d heard from a black singer. After the sheet music sold widely, Jim Crow became a standard character in minstrel shows and then evolved into a term to represent the whole system of laws and customs that segregated black and white Americans.

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Some of the segregation laws didn't matter too much in the daily lives of black citizens, but the bus was different. Riding the bus was like having a sore tooth that never quit aching. Montgomery's neighborhoods were spread out, and the maids and "yard boys"—people like Claudette Colvin's parents who scraped together a few dollars a day by attending to the needs of white families—depended on the buses to reach the homes of their white employers. Thousands of students also rode the buses to school from the time they were little, learning the transfer points and schedules by heart. They gathered in clusters at the corners, chatting and teasing and cramming for tests, until the green and gold buses chugged into view and the doors snapped open. Most blacks had to ride the bus.

But everything about riding a bus was humiliating for black passengers. All riders entered through the front door and dropped their dimes in the fare box near the driver. But, unless the entire white section was empty, blacks alone had to get back off the bus and reenter through the rear door. Sometimes the driver pulled away while black passengers were still standing outside.

In other Southern cities, like Atlanta and Nashville and Mobile, black passengers sat in the back and whites sat in the front of the bus, with the two groups coming together in the middle as the bus filled up. When all the seats were taken, riders of both races stood.

But Montgomery had its own rules and traditions. Here, each bus had thirty-six seats. The first four rows of seats, which held ten passengers, were reserved for white passengers only. Day after day weary black passengers remained standing over empty seats in front. Trying to hold on to their packages and small children, they jostled for balance even as the aisles became jammed with dozens of seatless passengers. Seating behind the first ten seats was up to the driver, who constantly glanced into the mirror above his head to keep track of who was sitting where.

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If the ten white seats in front were filled, the driver ordered black passengers to surrender their seats in the middle and rear of the bus to newly boarding white passengers. In fact, if even one white passenger wanted to sit in a row occupied by four black riders, the driver would glance up and yell, “I need those seats!” All four blacks were expected to stand up and make their way to the rear.

It didn’t matter if they were elderly, pregnant, ill, or balancing children on their laps. It also didn’t matter that the city bus law—or ordinance, as city laws are called—had said since 1900 that no rider had to give up a seat unless another was available. Drivers simply ignored the law until it became customary for blacks to move when the driver told them to. When he said to get up, he expected people to get up, and they did. If there were no seats left in the rear, black passengers were simply out of luck.

The Montgomery City Lines bus company hired tough men to command their buses. And Montgomery’s city ordinance gave them police powers. Every driver understood from the day he was hired that his main job, other than driving the bus, was to enforce the Jim Crow rules. Some drivers carried pistols.

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Having to stand up at the end of a long day within plain sight of an empty seat was both depressing and infuriating. “The ten empty seats became an obsession to weary workers,” wrote Jo Ann Robinson, an English professor at Alabama State College at the time. “The number ten became a damnable number . . . Nobody wanted that number on anything that belonged to him.” And being packed together inside a small tube magnified the rudeness of segregation. “There were no Negro drivers,” recalled Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Montgomery buses. “It was not uncommon to hear [drivers] referring to Negro passengers as . . . ‘black cows’ and ‘black apes.’ ”

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MONTGOMERY: TRANSPORTATION PIONEER

In 1886, Montgomery became the first city in the Western Hemisphere to convert a street railway system to electricity. The trolley line was proudly known as the Lightning Route. Twenty years later, on November 23, 1906, Montgomery also became the first U.S. city to totally segregate public transportation. A city ordinance passed on that day said blacks in all public accommodations had to be completely separated from whites. Despite the grumblings of the trolley company owners, who did not want to pay for new cars, totally separate trolley cars for blacks were established.

Over the years, a few black riders stood up to the drivers. In 1946 Geneva Johnson was arrested for “talking back” to a driver and not having the correct change. Charged with disorderly conduct, she paid a fine and her case was dismissed. A few years later Viola White and Katie Wingfield were arrested for sitting in seats reserved for whites. They also pleaded guilty and paid fines.

In the summer of 1949, sixteen-year-old Edwina Johnson and her brother Marshall, one year younger, had come down from New Jersey to visit relatives in Montgomery. During their stay they climbed aboard a city bus and sat down next to a white man and his son. The white boy ordered Marshall to move. Deeply offended, Marshall refused. The driver twice ordered the Johnsons to the back, but they stayed put. Why should things be different here than back home? The exasperated driver radioed police, who were waiting at the next stop to arrest them.

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When Edwina and Marshall's relatives were called, they hurried to the police station, paid the teenagers' fines, and got them out of jail. Soon the Johnsons, shaken, were on their way back to New Jersey.

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It could get rougher. A driver showered insults upon a woman named Epsie Worthy when she refused to pay an extra fare at a transfer point. Ms. Worthy got off the bus rather than pay more, only to have the driver follow her outside and begin punching her. She fought back with her fists, exchanging a flurry of blows with the driver, who spat upon her as he struck her. Police separated the two and charged Ms. Worthy with disorderly conduct.

The most shocking incident of all happened in 1952, when a man named Brooks boarded a City Lines bus, dropped a dime in the fare box, and headed down the aisle toward the back. The driver shouted at Brooks to come back, get off, and reboard through the rear door. Brooks said he'd rather walk and asked for his dime back. The driver refused, an argument heated up, and the driver called police. An officer soon boarded the bus, ordering Brooks off. Brooks wouldn't budge until he got his dime back. The policeman shot him, and Brooks later died of his wounds. The coroner ruled his death justifiable homicide, justifiable because the officer said Brooks had been resisting arrest.

The few passengers who defied the drivers usually cooled off at the police station, paid their fines, and tried to put their humiliating experiences behind them. Why fight? The white judges, the intimidating police, the insulting drivers, and the crushing weight of all the years of custom and law were simply overwhelming.

But change was in the wind. On Monday, May 17, 1954, in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation in public schools. It was a solid punch to Jim Crow, one that produced powerful shock waves throughout the South. The ruling allowed black students to anticipate a different future and emboldened a few of them to try to make it happen.

One such student was fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin, whose school had been studying black history almost nonstop for a solid month. Around 3:30 on March 2, 1955, this slim, bespectacled high school junior boarded the Highland Gardens bus with a few of her friends and slid into a window seat on the left side, behind the white section. She piled her textbooks on her lap, smoothed her blue dress, and settled back for a five-block ride that not only would change the course of her life but would spark the most important social movement in U.S. history.

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