



ROUND TRIP



WHERE AND WHEN: *Indianola, Mississippi.
Late August 1962 to fall 1963. Aggie fastens a buckle
on the bib of her overalls. Chin lifted,
she is ready for a trip.*

SOMEbody MUST HAVE KNOWN AGGIE B. ONLY SITS UP front, because even though the bus to Indianola was mostly filled, the first seat was free, right near to the driver. That seat looked like the wide-open hand of the sky inviting me and Aunt 'Retta to settle on its palm for the ride. Aunt 'Retta had carefully tied the tethers of her head-scarf, the periwinkle one she only wore for special occasions. She was dressed to greet. I was the only child in our group, there to witness and help Aunt 'Retta and my Ruleville neighbors any way I could.

Soon as we got to the courthouse, I saw the sheriff. His fingers rested on his gun. Near to twenty of us had come to Indianola. We stepped up right to where the sheriff was. We told him we were there to register to vote. He would only let us enter two people at a time. The flies were out, bobbing in humid winds.

Even though I like to be the first one, and up front, the sheriff picked who could go in. He told me right off no kids were allowed, and that I could only enter with an adult.

We had to wait for hours till our turn came. Standing out there on a day as hot as Tabasco sauce, I sensed something shady. All the whole time, the sheriff had his nose crinkled

like there was a bad smell someplace. Most likely, he was catching a whiff of his own intolerance reeling back at him.

Finally, Aunt 'Retta's turn came. Inside, a sign hung above a bald man's head. The sign said who he was—REGISTRAR.

From behind the desk, the registrar brought out a book as big as a Buick. He was a beanpole of a man, skinny as a stick. Couldn't hardly hoist that book, let alone carry it to where we were standing. That's maybe why he had so many sweat stains on his shirt. The registrar was struggling to hold on to that big book. Needed both his arms underneath that thing to keep from dropping it. All the whole time, his face was flushed. Same for his neck. It was red.

Then—*brrrump!*

The skinny-stick man with the flushed face and hot neck let the book drop onto the table.

Told Aunt 'Retta if she wanted to register to vote, she had to first pass a reading test, and also tests that required written answers. He said it with a smirk, like he knew he had us over a barrel.

Aunt 'Retta, being honest and humble, said to the man, told him, "I ain't ashamed to say I don't got a whole lot of formal education. I'm smart, but rusty with hard reading. Had to leave school when I was eleven."

As much as it's good to be humble and honest, I wish my aunt had not admitted to that man so much about what she can't do when it comes to things like schooling, because he looked pleased when he heard this.

So all right, that man's attitude made me more determined to help. Even though Aunt 'Retta couldn't read good, I had been blessed with strong skills when it came to words in books.

But anyhow, I also got enough smarts to know I can't read *every* word, especially long ones.

Seeing as my aunt's humility is understanding what you can and cannot do, and seeing as how I know what I know what I know—I *know* I *can* read, and would now have to help Aunt 'Retta by reading as best I could.

Most of the others who'd come to Indianola were sharecroppers who, like Aunt 'Retta, had to quit school when they were young children. Like Aunt 'Retta, many folks in our group couldn't read, either, except for maybe a few word-snatches.

I was ready for anything the registrar man had. He opened the book at its center. Made more noise with that thing—*brrrump!* Let one heavy side fall onto his desk. Pointed at some thick pages. Said Aunt 'Retta had to read the sixteenth section of the Mississippi State Constitution regarding de facto

laws, explain to him what it all meant, and then give some written answers, too.

Told me, “These tests are supposed to be taken alone, not with no assistance. But help, girl, if you want. How much could a child like you know anyhow?”

Soon as I looked at those twisty-long words, I knew it was more than our reading that was being tested. As much as I didn’t like math tests or spelling bees at school, I was smarter than most kids my age. But *whew*, I was not even close to untangling some of what was on those pages.

I’m guessing most lawmakers, and even Jim Crow himself, couldn’t have read or understood those knitty-knotty words. How did they expect people who’d grown up as sharecroppers and hadn’t gone to school past the fifth grade to be able to make sense of those pages?

Aunt ’Retta looked at me with tired eyes. She knew I didn’t have the slightest clue about those words, and neither did she. There was no mistaking it. Our patience was being put to a test much harder than any test these people gave us. That made me want it even more.

Seeing as reading from the book was only part of the test, next came sheets of paper with questions on it, like an exam

at school. We had to answer the questions by writing on the pages. I figured this might be easier. I’m good at writing answers.

But even the instructions played tricks on my mind. And the tests were timed. We had ten minutes to answer a bunch of silly questions.

I started by reading the instructions to Aunt ’Retta. The registrar man watched the wall clock as we worked.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Do what you are told to do in each statement, nothing more, nothing less. Be careful. One wrong answer means failure of the test.

1. In the space below, write the meaning of the sixteenth section of the Mississippi State Constitution regarding de facto laws that you have just read.
2. Draw a line around the number or letter of this sentence.
3. Spell backwards forwards.
4. Print the word vote upside down, but in the correct order.
5. If the mayor of Mississippi dies, who succeeds him? And if both the governor and the person who succeeds him die, who can exercise power in the court of law?

6. In the first circle below, write the last letter of the first word beginning with “L”.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

It didn't take a genius to realize most of the test questions were gobbledygook that made no sense. Even the stupidest person knows a mayor runs a town, not a state. So there's no mayor of Mississippi.

Seeing as I had to read each question five times, we didn't get very far before the registrar told us our ten minutes were up. The pits under both my arms had gone all-wet. Same for the place on the backs of my legs where my knees bent. Sweat was having its way with me today. Even my wrists and ankles had gone damp. My scalp tingled, too. Itchy from thinking so hard.

Not a single one of anybody from Ruleville passed the reading test. The registrar was fast to tell us we had all flunked. Some of the folks who'd traveled to Indianola wanted to give up right then. Not me. Even though we failed to understand what was in that big book and on those cockamamie pages, I knew I'd passed an even bigger test—the test of outsmarting Dumb Doubt-y. I refused to let that sly hound come after me.

On the drive home to Ruleville, Aunt 'Retta snapped

open her pocketbook, unfolded a rumpled bunch of paper, smoothed the pages onto her lap, tap-tapped the top page with a firm finger.

Said, “Aggie, read!”

She had stolen a copy of the test.

Aunt 'Retta caught me blinking fast, knowing I knew what she'd done.

Said, “This is a free government paper available to all tax-paying citizens. I pays my taxes. I *am* a citizen. Stop looking at me like I'm a thief—read!”

I nodded.

Aunt 'Retta's stern smirk showed me there was no room to disagree.

Told me, said, “And besides, if something is free, you can't steal it. We gon' study these tests till we learn what it takes to pass.”

I tried to explain to Aunt 'Retta that every test had different questions. That if we went to the courthouse again, there would be a new set of pages. Tried to tell her, too, that most of the questions were made-up and, no matter what, couldn't be answered. Aunt 'Retta wasn't having it.

Said, “Well, smarty, here's some questions for you. Are you a Little?”

I nodded.

Said, "Are we people who quit when asked to walk backwards, draw a line through stupidity, or vote standing on our heads?"

I giggled. Shook *my* head. Tossed a funny question back to Aunt 'Retta.

Asked, "If Jim Crow dies, who succeeds?"

She and me answered together.

Said, "*We do.*"

Meanwhile, everybody else on the bus was cursing the registrar, and saying we all should give up now. Not me with that, neither. I was not about to let Dumb Doubt-y convince us to quit. People were all grumbling how the test wasn't fair, and that White folks didn't have to know about the sixteenth de facto of anything to register to vote, and that White people who couldn't read a lick were allowed to register.

I'm just glad a neighbor lady, Miss Fannie Lou Hamer, brought her fortitude. She was just like Aunt 'Retta and so many others on that bus. Fannie Lou was a sharecropper child, now grown and ready to make some changes in a cracked system of equality.

To lift us out from Dumb Doubt-y's clutch, Fannie Lou started up with "This Little Light of Mine," one of my favorite

songs. All the other passengers couldn't keep from singing along.

I'm glad we got to singing, because we were tested again when the police pulled us over.

Said—we were violating the law by riding in a bus that was too yellow!

Said—our rickety-ride cotton-picking bus could be mistaken for a school bus, so we were breaking the law. The policemen charged our bus driver, made him pay a fine for the color of our bus.

Ain't that the silliest bunch of hog-slop ever? It's the gospel truth, though. Really. Not even the best tall-tale tellers could make this hog-slop up!