Bedtime Biography: The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks

Introduction

Bedtime Biographies are best when listened to. Check out the audio version to get the full experience! There's a very good chance you've heard the name Rosa Parks. Around the world, this amazing woman is remembered as an integral figure in the US civil rights movement. But since the 1950s, a persistent mythology has grown around Rosa Parks and obscured her true story. Many have come to think of her as a woman with tired feet who simply refused to give up her seat on the bus. But as we'll see, long before her defiant stand against segregation, Mrs. Parks was a prominent figure in the fight for civil rights in Montgomery, Alabama; a fight that continued throughout the twentieth century. So, find a quiet spot and a comfortable chair, and join us as we delve into the story of the woman who became one of the most memorable icons in the struggle for civil rights in the United States.

Chapter 1

Rosa Parks was born Rosa Louise McCauley, on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. Her parents were Leona Edwards and James McCauley, both of whom were raised in Alabama, too. Her mother worked as a teacher and her father as a carpenter and stone-mason. While Rosa was still a toddler, James left the family, shortly after her younger brother, Sylvester, was born. And so raised by her mother, and under her tutelage, Rosa grew up believing that she was in no way inferior to anyone else. As it was for many Southern Black families, both of her grandparents were born into and experienced slavery. Her grandfather, who – as the biological son of a slave-owner – could pass as white, and so had survived a great deal of violence and trauma. The experiences had made him, as Rosa put it, "somewhat belligerent" toward white people. This sentiment, especially at a time when even looking at a white person wrong could lead to death, speaks to this attribute. He must've made a strong impression on her because, even as a child, she'd clearly inherited some of her grandfather's outspoken intolerance for injustice and racism. For the most part, Rosa was a shy and soft-spoken child who loved to read and did well in school. But, if she were picked on, no matter if the other kid was white, which meant risking certain punishment, she would push back. This is exactly what happened when she was 11-years-old, now living in Montgomery. One day, while walking home from school, a white boy shoved her off the sidewalk. So, she shoved him back. The boy's mom, who was nearby, threatened to send Rosa to jail. Though this time the matter was settled and there were no severe consequences, Rosa's family was concerned about what might happen next time.

Chapter 2

In the eleventh grade, both her mom and grandmother got sick. So to help support the family, Rosa dropped out of school and started working. Going out on her own, and working as a housekeeper in white homes, she got an even deeper understanding of the depth of segregation in the Jim Crow South. She saw how corrupting it was, and how vulnerable Black women, in particular, were. There was no mistaking the feeling of being treated as inferior – as an object to be used however white people saw fit, without any consequences whatsoever. Rosa was also starting to pay closer attention to the psychological effects segregation and rampant white supremacist thinking had on the

Black people around her. Many felt hopeless and found it hard to envision a better future for themselves and their communities. All that was possible for most to see were the deadly risks of standing up to white oppression. This, however, was not the view Raymond Parks took. Rosa met Raymond when she was eighteen years old, and it didn't take long for the two to fall madly in love. Like her, Raymond was an avid reader with a keen intellect. But more than that, Rosa describes Raymond as the first true activist she ever met. Along with being a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), his barbershop was often home to lively political debates. And, like her grandfather, Raymond didn't shrink from talking back to white people when being mistreated. Through Raymond, Rosa began to see the possibility and value of uniting people in an effort to fight for a better future. On December 18, 1932, Rosa and Raymond Parks were married. Soon after, with her husband's support, she earned her high school diploma, and experienced her first foray into community activism through his involvement in the Scottsboro Boys incident. This was a high-profile case of injustice about a brawl involving nine Black youths, sparked by a group of white youths on a moving freight train. Forced off the train and humiliated by their loss in the fight, the white youths got the local police involved. It was at this point that two white women, who were also on the train, falsely accused all nine of the Black teenagers with rape. They were formally charged, found guilty, and sentenced to death. Rosa hosted meetings and helped with the fundraising effort to try and free the Scottsboro Boys from this gross miscariage of justice. The experience not only introduced her to a new world of civil rights activists and their work, it revealed the dark side of this calling as well. Those who supported cases like the Scottsboro Boys took a big risk, because the police and the Ku Klux Klan would use this kind of activism as a reason to target people. Many of those who attended the meetings carried guns for protection, and Rosa recalled how they'd often talk around a kitchen table that was covered with pistols. She also recalls watching the cops drive by her house at night, again and again, while she waited anxiously for Raymond to get back home safely, which he did by slipping in unnoticed through the back door. Despite these risks, Rosa was soon attending NAACP meetings herself, which – as a woman from a lower-income background – brought with it its own challenges.

Chapter 3

As far as daily indignities went in Montgomery, Alabama, segregated bussing was unavoidable. The law stated that white people could sit up front, with Black people at the back. In the middle was a section where Black people could sit, as long as there were seats available at the front. So, if a white person was standing with nowhere else to sit in the front section, the bus driver would order all the Black passengers in the middle to stand up and make room. But there were other indignities as well. If the front of the bus was crowded with white people, the bus drivers, who were always armed with a handgun at the time, would make Black passengers pay their fare, step off the bus, and reenter using the back door. In these moments, it wasn't uncommon for the bus to drive off before they could reach the back door. Already, in the 1940s, Black passengers in Montgomery were refusing to put up with these rampant terrorizations. In 1944, Viola White was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. In further retaliation for her defiance, the police attacked and raped her 16-year-old daughter. In 1950, Hilliard Brooks, a WWII veteran, refused to exit the bus and reenter using the back door. For this action, Brooks was forcibly removed by a police officer who first hit him with his club, and then shot and killed him. Then, on March 2, 1955, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat. She was returning home from

school, where she'd been studying the US Constitution. She knew she was being unlawfully discriminated against and so stood her ground. The cops dragged her away in handcuffs. This time, though, there was hope for the outcome of her case. A year earlier, in May 1954, the US Supreme Court had made their landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education, declaring racial segregation in schools illegal. Surely, it was felt, this would lead to more Jim Crow laws being challenged in court. But some in the NAACP didn't believe Colvin's was the best case to back in this matter. First and foremost, this was because she was an unpredictable teenager who couldn't be trusted to follow legal advice. Colvin was offered very little support, and even less so when it later came to light that she was pregnant. But Rosa Parks opened her doors to Colvin and provided some comfort during this difficult time. More than that, Rosa encouraged Colvin to take part in Montgomery's NAACP Youth Council, a program that Rosa had spearheaded in recent years. Throughout her life, Rosa saw the importance of getting young people involved in the fight for equality. She was always looking to the future, and saw people like Colvin and programs like the Youth Council as vehicles for ensuring that the next generation would be better prepared to fight back against the violence and terror of their oppression.

Chapter 4

As the story famously goes, at around 5:30 P.M. on December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was tired with sore feet from a long day's work at the Montgomery Fair. Even President Barack Obama would later reassert the notion of her "sore" and "tired" feet being a main reason why Rosa refused to stand up when the bus driver demanded she give up her seat in the middle section to a white passenger. In reality, Rosa had bigger things on her mind that day. A few months earlier, 14-year-old Emmett Till had been brutally assaulted and lynched in Mississippi for allegedly saying something perceived to be offensive to a white woman. There was a momentary hope for justice when the men who tortured and murdered Till were put on trial. But, when the verdict came in, they were acquitted. Rosa was deeply upset. Just days before the incident on the bus, she'd been at a large gathering at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, where a new pastor, Martin Luther King Jr., introduced a meeting about seeking justice for the murder of Emmett Till. Far from tired, Rosa wanted to do something. She was fed up with the years of setbacks and the egregious injustices that continued to pile up. It was Emmett Till who was on her mind when she refused to give up her seat that day. There is another myth: that Rosa's act of defiance caused an instant sensation – that her peers in Montgomery immediately rallied around her, that the press were there to cover her arrest, and that shockwaves rippled quickly through the country. This is also false. The truth is, no one on the bus even spoke up in support of Rosa when the police came to arrest her. Instead, she went alone – peacefully, and quietly – to jail. Later that evening, the local NAACP leader E. D. Nixon, and a supportive white couple, Clifford and Virginia Durr, arrived to bail her out. One thing did become clear over the next couple of days, though. Unlike Claudette Colvin, Rosa Parks's case was more appealing to the NAACP and her fellow activists in Montgomery. Rosa immediately hired a lawyer, Fred Gray, who in turn called Jo Ann Robinson, a woman who ran the Women's Political Council in Montgomery. Robinson had also protested segregated busing by sitting in the white section, six years prior, in 1949. Robinson had tried to start a bus boycott back then, but it didn't gain any traction. In 1955, Robinson saw another chance and immediately began coordinating a boycott, creating leaflets that called for a one-day boycott for the following Monday, on all city busses. Interestingly enough, Rosa's name isn't mentioned on the leaflet. The call for action isn't about a single injustice, but rather the

culmination of years of injustice. Indeed, this time, the boycott did catch on. Thanks in part to E. D. Nixon, who tipped off the press. Quickly, alarmist reports appeared in local newspapers, radio and television. As far as Nixon was concerned, it was the panicked press that really spread the word and made the boycott a success. On the Monday when Rosa was scheduled to appear before the court, nearly every Black person in Montgomery refused to take the bus, and many showed up at the courthouse to cheer her on. It was life-changing. For years, she'd been frustrated by the lack of solidarity between the city's Black community – with middle-class folks failing to join forces with the less wealthy, and vice versa. Here the Montgomery Black community were, finally taking collective action, and making history. The boycott was such a success that it kept going, propelled by its own unstoppable energy. It also helped that the community now had such an eloquent and powerful public speaker – Martin Luther King, Jr. The 25-year-old King was the pastor of the local church and had only just moved to Montgomery the year before the boycott. Still, he quickly proved to be a central force in inspiring the community. Both the Parks and King families were forced to endure a barrage of death threats in the wake of the boycott, with King's and E.D Nixon's homes being set on fire. Meanwhile, the phone at the Park's home rang all day and night with ugly death threats. The non-stop violence took a toll on Raymond, and he soon began drinking more and slipping into depression. Rosa developed stomach ulcers and insomnia, which brought back her childhood memories of the sleepless nights her family endured when the KKK were terrorizing their neighborhood. Nevertheless, the community remained focused and continued their fight. As the boycott gained steam, the police were running out of ways to sabotage it. Handing out traffic tickets and damaging the cars used for carpooling wasn't working. So, in February, they decided to indict and arrest all of the leading figures in the boycott, including Parks, King, Nixon and Robinson. This was the arrest that was photographed by the press and helped make Parks an iconic figure. Once again, efforts to curtail the boycott backfired, and only served to help spread the word of the movement in Montgomery and make people more determined. Unfortunately, the arrest meant that both Rosa and Raymond were fired from their jobs. She was able to keep busy by accepting requests to speak about the boycott in a number of places around the country. But Raymond sank further into depression, unable to find work anywhere. Eventually, thanks to the persistent legal work done by Fred Gray, the Supreme Court decided that the segregated busing in Montgomery was illegal. And on December 21, 1956, the boycott came to a hugely successful conclusion when the buses were officially desegregated.

Chapter 5

The end of segregated bussing didn't end the troubles facing the Park family or the city of Montgomery. Bus stops were becoming targets for attacks and the King family home was once again firebombed. In the Park household, Raymond was spiraling, Rosa's mother was ill and her ulcers were growing more unbearable. But worst of all, no business in the city would hire them, and they were quickly running out of money. Ultimately, they were forced to find fresh opportunities up north, in Detroit, Michigan. In the 1950s, as a means of escaping the violence and terror of the South, and in pursuit of a better future, many Black families had migrated north. Unfortunately, they soon found that racism and inequality were everywhere. In Detroit, it was especially bad in the housing market. Through a practice known as redlining, decent houses and neighborhoods were kept off-limits to Black families. Finding jobs wasn't easy, either. Raymond learned that he needed a license and more state-approved schooling in order to be a barber in Michigan. So for years the Parks struggled to get by. Rosa, her

husband, and her mother, ended up in project housing, in a two-room apartment, unable to even afford to make payments on a new refrigerator. To make matters worse, at the end of 1959, Rosa's ulcers finally sent her to the hospital, where she was in need of an operation. The cost was $560 dollars. But, some good luck finally came their way the following year. Jet magazine, a popular Black-owned publication, tracked down Rosa and ran an article that explained her situation. An outcry followed, donations flowed, and the NAACP agreed to pay her hospital bill. Eventually, Raymond was able to get his license and resume his career as a barber, which was a profession he took great pride in. Rosa resumed her political activities, too, and joined local churches and a more radical branch of the NAACP, known as the River Rouge chapter. Following that, in 1963, she joined 200,000 other people in the Great Walk of Freedom through Detroit. That year, she was also in Washington, DC, for the landmark March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Many women felt needlessly sidelined that day, despite the fact that women had, for decades, been at the forefront of the civil rights movement. Women who were leaders in the movement, like Rosa and a long line of others such as world-renowned singer, Josephine Baker, were limited to a general introduction and a moment of applause. None were given a chance to say more than a few words amidst the procession of male speakers, which culminated in Martin Luther King Jr.'s powerful and famous, I Have a Dream speech. Rosa was almost sidelined during the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, as well. It was in many ways a homecoming for Rosa, but it'd been a long ten years since she'd left. Repeatedly, she was escorted out of the march because people did not recognize her and believed she didn't belong. She did, however, make it to the end, and this time she got a chance to address the crowd and speak to her history in Alabama. According to New Yorker magazine, when she was announced as the "first lady of the movement" she received the biggest applause of the day. Back in her new home of Detroit, Rosa found a new role for herself in the administration of John Conyers, a 35-year-old civil rights lawyer who was running for Congress when Rosa decided to support him. He won a narrow victory, and in 1965, Rosa won a position in his office dealing with community outreach. Best of all, it finally gave her a job with health insurance. The 1960s and '70s continued to be tumultuous times for Black communities throughout the US, who'd witnessed the assassinations of two of their most inspirational leaders, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. These were terrible losses, and Rosa was heartbroken. But she persevered and played her part in keeping their messages alive. In the 1970s, she continued to support the Black Power movement, as well as the Black Panthers in their efforts to help feed, protect and educate communities. And within her role in Conyers's office, she fought for prison reform, taking part in promoting the release of prisoners who'd been put behind bars in politically-prosecuted cases. As she got older, Rosa also worked on her body and mind, broadening her own horizons. She took up a regular yoga practice and started to nurture an interest in Buddhism and meditation. Ever since leading the NAACP Youth Council in Montgomery, she never stopped looking for ways to help inspire younger generations to pick up where her generation left off. And so, ten years after Raymond's death from throat cancer, in 1987, she established the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development.She also grew more concerned with human rights beyond the United States, including the fight to end apartheid in South Africa. Remarkably, in 1990, she had a chance to meet Nelson Mandela when he visited Detroit. Many politicians and influential people were waiting as he stepped off the plane, but when Mandela saw her, he had a singular focus, exclaiming, "Rosa Parks! Rosa Parks!" as he approached her. Rosa's last few years were highlighted by a number of honors awarded to her, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, presented by President Bill Clinton. After her death, on October 24, 2005, President George W. Bush called for an honorary statue to be made and placed in the Capitol. It was finally unveiled by President Barack

Obama in 2013. The statue features Rosa Parks sitting down, with her hands crossed politely on her lap. It plays into this mythological narrative of her singular achievement being the “tired bus lady.” But she was so much more than that. She never stopped fighting for progress. And the issues that she fought for, like voting rights and equality, are still in need of activists like Rosa Parks.

The End

You've reached the end of this Bedtime Biography. Thank you for listening. Why not pause listening now so you can stay in a relaxed state? And if you're off to bed now, I wish you a good night's sleep.