

# TURNING 15 ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

MY STORY OF THE 1965  
SELMA VOTING RIGHTS MARCH



BY **LYNDA BLACKMON LOWERY**

AS TOLD TO  
**ELSPETH LEACOCK AND SUSAN BUCKLEY**



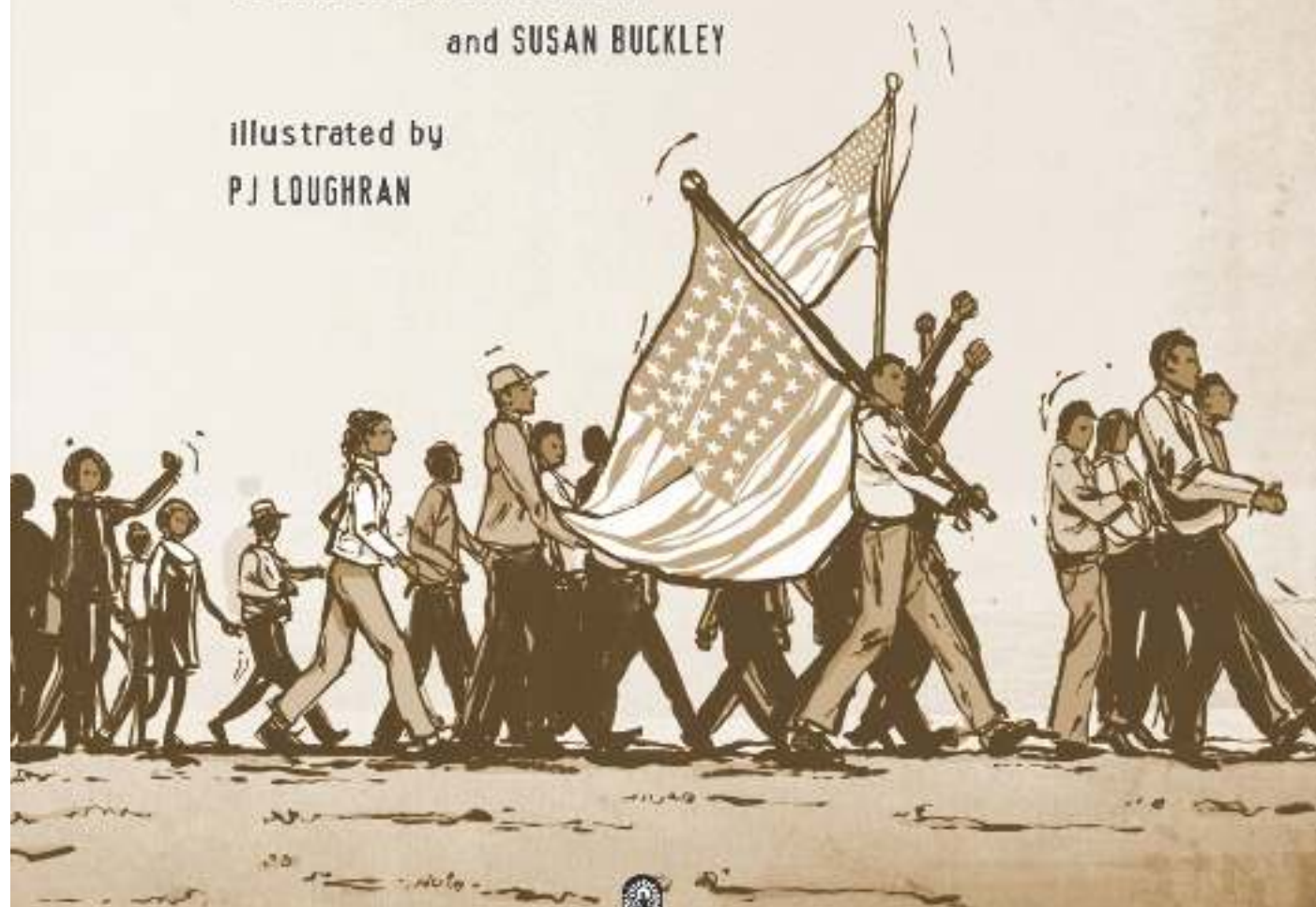
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illustrated by  
**PJ LOUGHRAN**



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*For Joanne Blackmon Bland,  
who brought us together,  
and for the children who march for  
freedom around the world*

# WOKE UP THIS MORNING

Woke up this morning with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
Woke up this morning with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
Woke up this morning with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah.

I'm walking and talking with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
I'm walking and talking with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
I'm walking and talking with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah.

Ain't nothing wrong with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
Oh, there ain't nothing wrong  
with keeping my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
There ain't nothing wrong  
with keeping your mind  
Stayed on freedom  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah.

I'm singing and praying with my mind

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Stayed on freedom

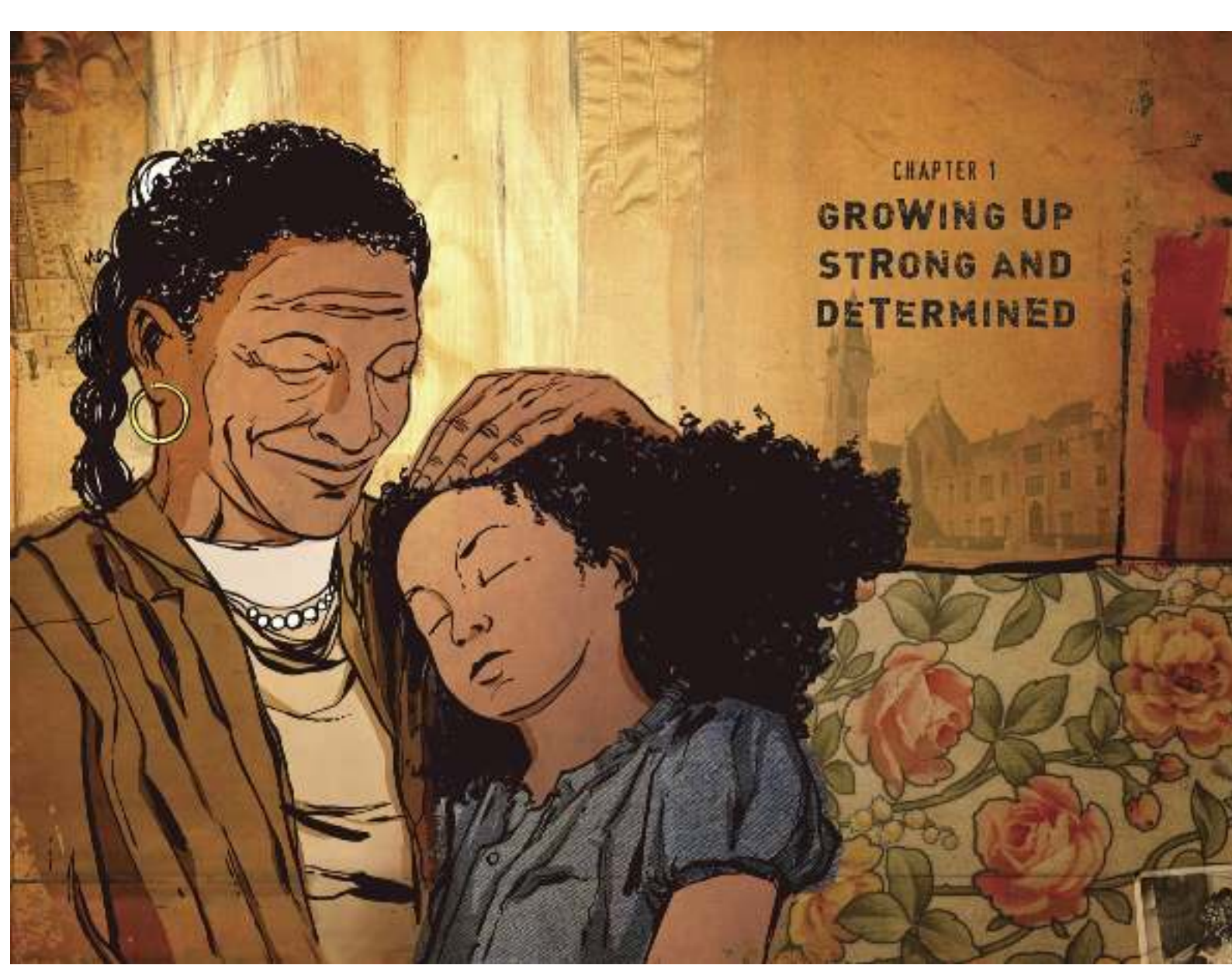
Yeah, I'm singing and praying with my mind

Stayed on freedom

Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah.



CHAPTER 1  
**GROWING UP  
STRONG AND  
DETERMINED**





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**B**y the time I was fifteen years old, I had been in jail nine times.  
I was born in Selma, Alabama, in 1950. In those days, you were born black or you were born white in Selma—and there was a big difference.

Where I lived, *everyone* was black. I lived in the George Washington Carver Homes. My buddies and I all felt safe there because everyone watched out for one another. If one family couldn't pay the rent, the others got together and had card parties and fish fries to raise the money. Nobody talked about it afterward either, because the next month it might be you who needed help.

We went to black churches and we went to black schools, where we had caring black teachers. I looked forward to going to school.

The Ku Klux Klan stayed away from us. (They were a group of crazy white folks who hated us black people and were determined to keep us out of places—to keep us segregated.)



They drove through other black neighborhoods, hiding their faces with sheets on their heads, yelling racial slurs, blowing their horns, and cursing and shooting their guns. They rode through areas where they knew they could scare people, but they would not ride through the George Washington Carver Homes.

I felt safe and secure.

...

We were poor then, but I never knew it. I can't remember a day in my life when I went hungry, even after my mother died when I was seven years old. My daddy made sure of that. I loved the ground my daddy walked on. I did. When different family members wanted to take us to live with them after Mama died, Daddy said he wasn't separating his kids. He wasn't giving us to anybody. At my mother's funeral, we heard Daddy say that we were his children and he would take care of us. I was the oldest of four. Jackie was next, then Joanne, and then baby Al.

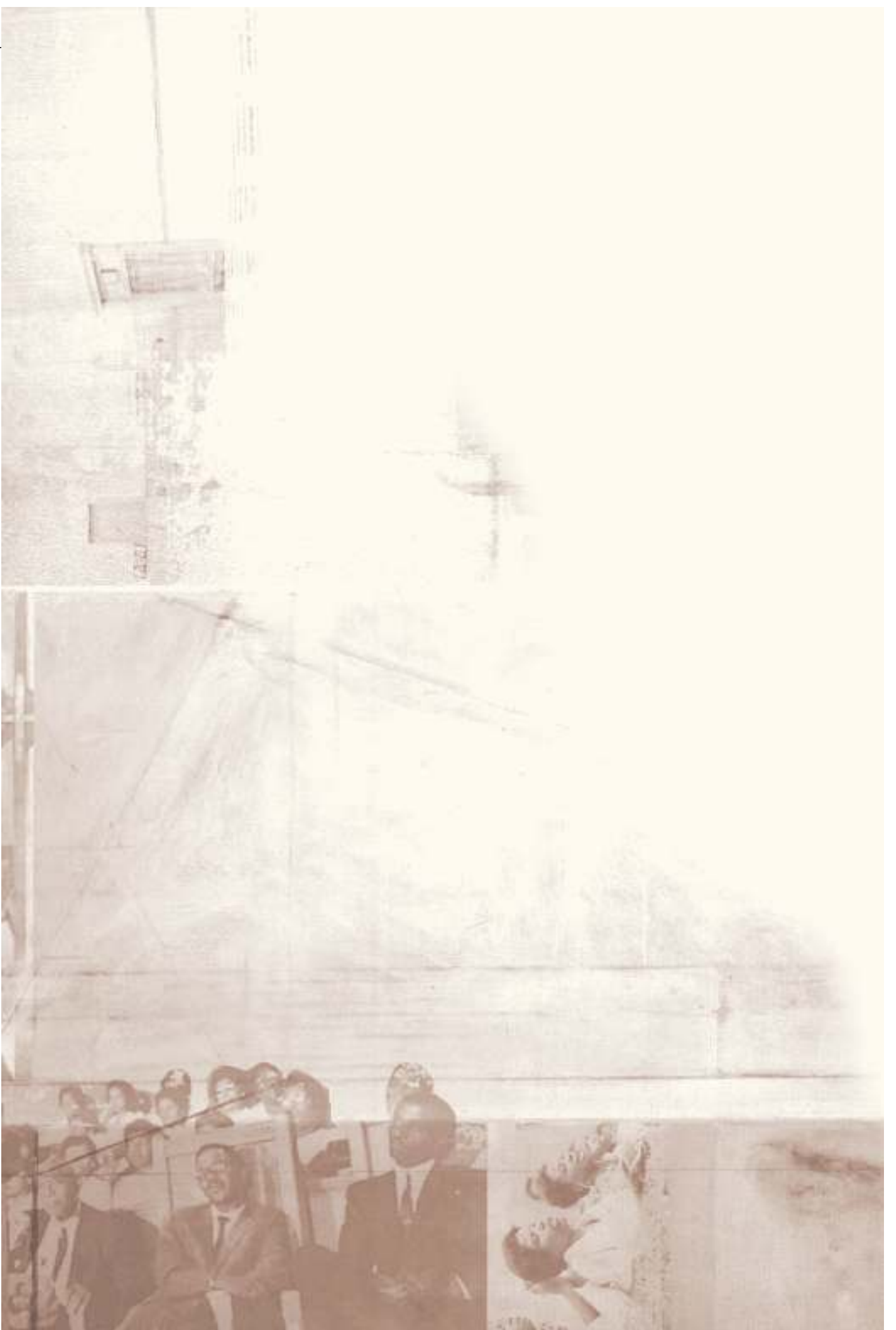
When my mother died, I heard the older people say, "If she wasn't colored, she could've been saved." But the hospital was for whites only. My mother died as a result of her skin color. I just believe that. So segregation hurt my family. It did. It hurt me.



After my mother's funeral my grandmother moved in. She was one determined woman, and she was going to raise us up to be strong and determined too. I remember her saying as she brushed my hair, "There is nothing more precious walking on this earth than you are. You are a child of God. So hold up your head and believe in yourself."

CHAPTER 2  
**IN THE  
MOVEMENT**

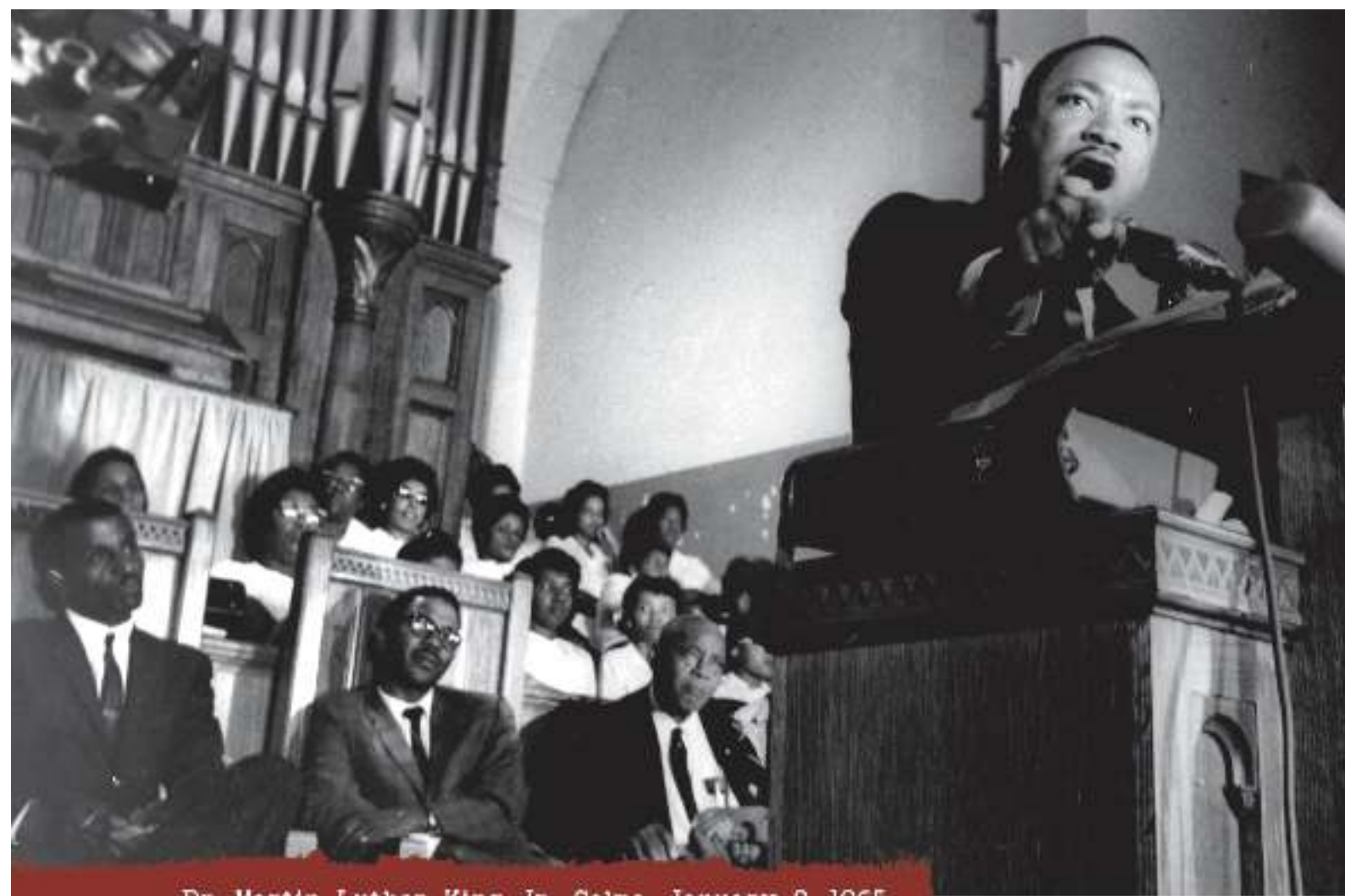




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It was my grandmother who first took me to hear Dr. King—that's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. That was back in 1963, when I was just thirteen years old. The church was packed. When Dr. King began to speak, everyone got real quiet. The way he sounded just made you want to do what he was talking about. He was talking about voting—the right to vote and what it would take for our parents to get it. He was talking about nonviolence and how you could persuade people to do things your way with steady, loving confrontation. I'll never forget those words—"steady, loving confrontation"—and the way he said them. We children didn't really understand what he was talking about, but we wanted to do what he was saying.





Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Selma, January 2, 1965

“Who is with me?” Dr. King asked, and all of us stood up, clapping. By the time we left that meeting, Dr. King had a commitment from me and everyone else in that church to do whatever it would take, nonviolently, to get the right to vote.

At that time I was already in the movement—the civil rights movement. I was mostly following the high school kids around—especially Bettie Fikes. She had this beautiful voice and I wanted to sing like her. Bettie and her friends were trying to integrate Selma by going to whites-only places. They sat at the whites-only Dairy Queen and the lunch counter at Woolworth’s department store. They tried to sit downstairs at the movie theater. (Blacks could only sit in the balcony then.)

They said I couldn’t take part in these sit-ins because I was too young, but I had a job to do. My job was to go for help. I was called the “gopher,” because I always had to “go for” someone’s mama when Bettie and her friends were put in jail.

That all changed on January 2, 1965. That’s when Dr. King came back to Selma for a big mass meeting at Brown Chapel. We called it Emancipation Day because it was all about freedom. There were about seven hundred people there, and I was one of them. It was an awesome thing, a fearsome thing to see so many people. They had come from all around. And they had to travel some dangerous roads to get to Selma—little country roads where the Ku Klux Klan was riding around.

The music was fantastic. By then we had formed a freedom choir, and I was part of it. I got to sing in the choir with Bettie Fikes, and you know how I felt about that.

When Dr. King walked in, everyone stood and cheered. He talked about the vote and how we would get it. He told us we must be ready to march. His voice grew louder as he continued. “We must be ready to go to jail by the thousands.” By the end he shouted, “Our cry . . . is a simple one. Give us

the ballot!”

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To tell you the truth, I just felt that once our parents got the right to vote, everything would be a whole lot better. There’s power in a vote. For years black people tried to register to vote, but they were mostly turned away. Just for trying to register, they could lose their jobs. You see, whenever a black person tried to register, someone would take a picture and then show it to that person’s boss. White people could fire black people whenever and however they wanted.

That’s why the civil rights leaders needed us children to march. After Dr. King’s speech, our local leaders planned two or three marches for us every day. They would say, “We’re going to march to the courthouse tomorrow. If you’re with us, come here to Brown Chapel at nine thirty.”

The very first time I heard that, I said, “I’m going to march.”

On the day of a march, you would go to school for attendance, then slip out and make it down to Brown Chapel. Our teachers were the ones who unlocked the back door and let us out of school. They supported us—they had our backs.

Our teachers were excellent, but these smart people could not vote. They couldn’t pass the voter registration test. The tests were written to keep black people from voting. (White people didn’t usually take those tests at all.) The registrars asked ridiculous questions such as, “How deep is the Alabama

River?” and “How many jelly beans are in this gallon jar?” The questions had nothing to do with voting or the Constitution or citizenship.

---

...

Two or three times a day, a group of us students would leave Brown Chapel heading downtown. I don't think we were ever fewer than about fifty kids on a march. Before we left, the adults would tell us, “You're going to go to jail. Do not fight back. You might be pushed; you might be hit. Just turn the other cheek. Do not fight back. Don't worry about it. We'll take care of you.”

Most of the time, once we got downtown the police let us march for four or five blocks. Then they would march us right onto yellow school buses. If you didn't get on the bus fast enough, the police would shock you with a cattle prod. That's a stick with an electrical charge, sort of like a Taser is now. Farmers used them to push cattle to move quicker or to get out of the way. That's what they used on us, like we were cattle.

At first they would take us to the old National Guard Armory, where we had to stand for hours all packed together, or sit on the concrete floor. But after a week or so of that, they started taking us right to jail.

CHAPTER 3  
**JAILBIRDS**



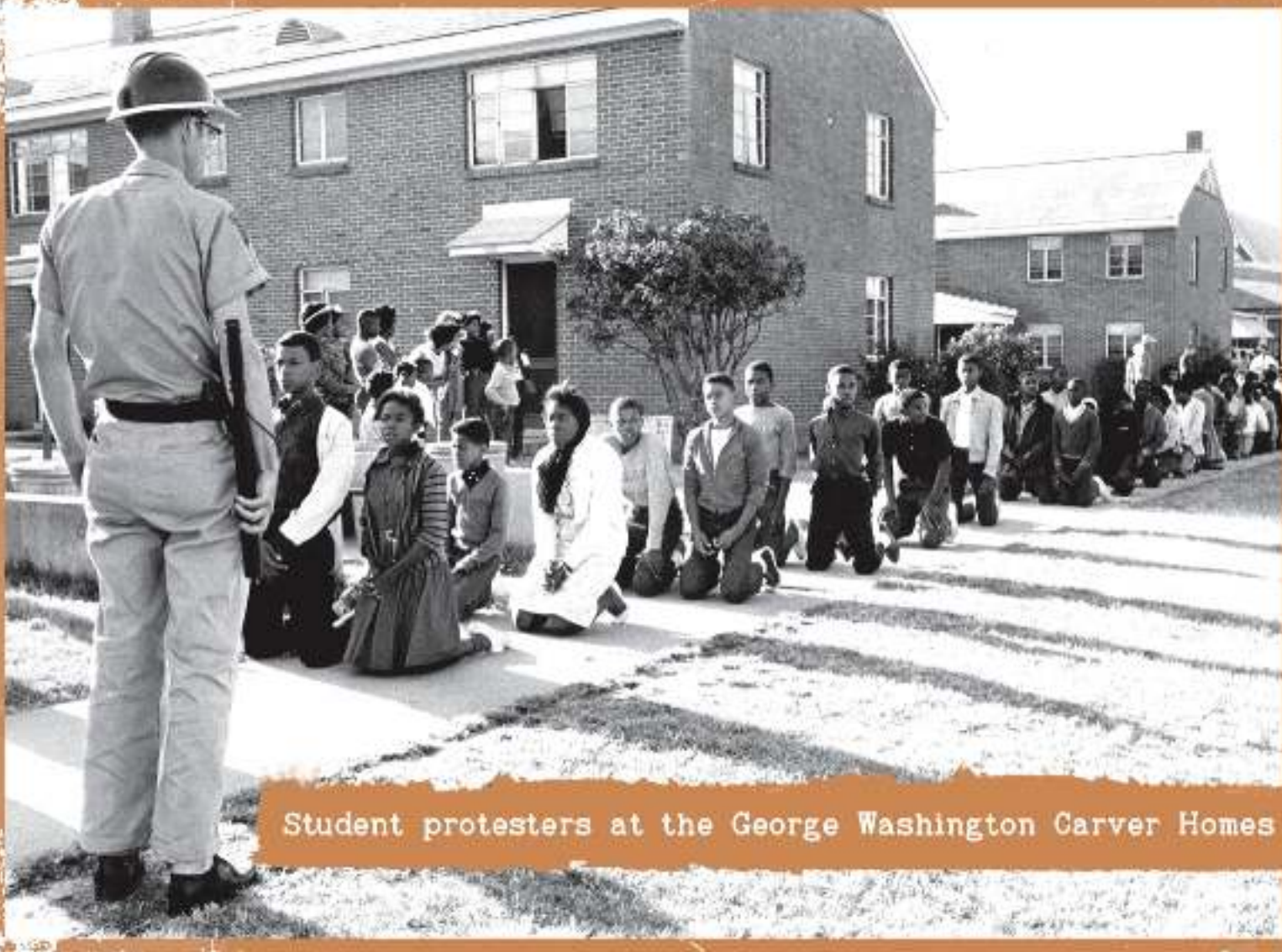


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**T**he first time I went to jail I was fourteen, and I was scared. I didn't know what they were going to do with us. There must have been about a hundred boys and girls that time. All us girls were packed into one cell meant for two people. There were two iron beds coming out from the wall. And they didn't have mattresses on them, so they'd be really uncomfortable for the prisoners. Over in one corner was a sink. And there was a toilet, just a toilet bowl. There was no way to shield yourself from whoever was walking down past the cells, so we shielded each other.

...

After that first time, I wasn't so afraid, because I was with my buddies and we knew we had each other's back. What we could *do* with each other's backs, I don't know. Those white policemen had billy clubs and guns. But we held on to each other, and we figured there was safety in numbers.



Student protesters at the George Washington Carver Homes

It helped when we sang “We Shall Overcome.” Singing those words made us believe we could do it. We could overcome the hate and racism. Every time I sang the line “We are not afraid,” I lied a little, but it was important to sing it. The people who weren’t afraid sang it the strongest and the loudest. The sound of their voices was like a warm blanket on a cold night. It made me feel a little stronger and more protected. Then I could sing a little louder too.

We sang it to let everyone know: We were on our way. We would not be ignored, and we would not be stopped.

...

Everything about the marches was well organized. The night before, the leaders would say, “We’re going to have three demonstrations tomorrow. We’ll need the first seventy-five kids here to go out by nine thirty. Second march, we’re going to send ya’ll out about twelve fifteen. Third march, ya’ll are going to leave about three o’clock.” We all knew ahead of time when there were going to be marches so we could pick the march we wanted to go on.

...

We learned the drill real quick: We went to jail, we came back out, and then we went to jail again, be it that same day or the next day. Pretty soon we knew to take our own little bologna sandwiches and

peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and cheese sandwiches and cookies and all the penny candy we could get, because jail food just wasn't good. If one of our parents or grandparents worked as someone's maid, they were bringing the white people's food home and giving it to us to take to jail with us. The white people never knew how much they had helped us.

My father didn't work in a white home. He drove his own cab. He went and bought bologna so I would have those sandwiches to take to jail too. He was there for me; he wanted me to be safe. He told me, "If you see yourself in a situation where you will get hurt, come back home." He just told me to be careful. Be real careful.

...

With all the marching and going to jail, we kids were missing a lot of school. But we planned for that too. While we were marching, some kids stayed in school. They were the ones we called "the brains." And the brains actually did homework for the rest of us. They took tests for us too. (This was their way of taking part, even if they weren't marching.) Say I left to march, but there was a math test that day. Beatrice Torrey would stay at school and take my test, her test, and somebody else's test. Then during school lunch period, Beatrice would leave for the next march. We had it all figured out—and we were very determined.

Once, when the city jail was full, the police took about three busloads of us kids to a prison camp called Camp Selma. This prison was about five miles away from town. After about three days there they took us to another prison camp even farther away. It was late at night, and you couldn't see much. So at first we thought they were taking us home, back to Selma. But pretty soon we knew we'd been riding too long to be going back home. I was scared, and I think everybody on all three buses was scared. We were sure our parents did not know where we were. They didn't know that we had been put at a state prison camp! We were gone for six long days. Finally when our leaders in Selma found out where we were, they demanded our release. The buses brought us back to Selma, and we all ran home as fast as we could. We needed baths—and something to eat besides black-eyed peas!

That was the longest time I was ever in jail.





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