

"If you love me more than Herbert," I said, "then you will wait until I return from the Army. I will ask you then to be my wife."

"No," she replied, "I am marrying Herbert." When we reached her home, she did not say good night, but good-bye. I went home very hurt and very confused. I reasoned with myself that saying no to marriage maybe made sense, but not to becoming engaged. Many of my friends had become engaged, and some had married just before going into the armed services.

I left Cincinnati very early the next morning. Much to my surprise, I was met at the Peoria bus station in the early evening by Janus Gates, a platonic friend and a young Caucasian woman whom I worked with in CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. Only three African Americans in all of Peoria seriously worked in CORE. They were C. T. Vivian, a man named Jim, and myself. It was very dangerous for us to do so, and we were hated in the city by many whites and too many blacks. C.T. and Jim were beaten occasionally. For reasons unknown, I never was physically abused, even though I picketed right alongside them and when the occasion arose, as they did, drank out of fountains labeled "Whites only." I also was generally the first to go into the "Whites only" restaurants or cafeterias with the white members of CORE or from the West Bluff Christian Church. These white people, like Janus Gates, Dick Trotter, Dorothy Deale, Ruth and Tom Nelson, and the Rev. Barton Hunter, just to name a few, were dedicated to equal rights for all people.

I lived at that time with the Macklin family, whose home was about an eight-minute walk from the bus station. I loved to walk, as did most people who lived in Peoria, plus I did not own an automobile, which was a real luxury then. Janus and I dropped off my luggage at the Macklin's home,

and I went to walk her home. As we started to cross Main Street, several white men in a car saw us and made vile and vulgar remarks. I told Janus to ignore them and to cross the street in haste. When we reached the middle of Main Street, the driver attempted to strike us with his vehicle. Fortunately, we anticipated such an action and rushed across to the other side. After missing us, the driver kept on going.

Neither Janus nor I were shocked by what happened. We were well-aware that those who worked in CORE were marked and despised persons. I recall Janus saying, "Things will be different on your return from the Army." When we reached her home, she did not invite me in because her parents did not want a colored man in their house. She was an only child, and they wanted her to resign her membership in CORE.

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We left New York City for Peoria, and it was obvious after one week that Mary did not like living there. It was a very small town with little to offer from a cultural standpoint. Peoria was well known for its open gambling, a red-light district, its churches, Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, Hiram Walker Whiskey, and Caterpillar tractors; it was lesser known for its university and the Northern Regional Research Laboratory.

I loved Peoria, because unlike a big city, there was little to do on weekends except go to church, play handball, golf and chess, and visit with friends. Gossip was the fad for the women in Peoria, and Mary greatly disliked this. It was a very racially segregated city, and of its eighty thousand citizens, four thousand of whom were people of color, there were less than seven minority women who had earned a college degree. The figure for men of color was approximately nine.

Mary spent little time with Peoria's minority women, except with the wives of chemists who worked at the laboratory, Justine Hodge, Betty Bell, Helen Burton; Sinah Kelly who was single and a fellow chemist; and Marie Givens who rented the first floor of the house we lived in. Most everyone went to church on Sunday and since being chemists made us VIP's, each large minority church in Peoria (Baptists and Methodists) openly invited us to join them. Bill Givens, who lived downstairs, asked us to join his Baptist church, and we worshiped there on several

occasions. We also visited his wife, Marie's, church, as well as other minority ones.

Mary had belonged to the Christian Church in Cincinnati, but Peoria had no such place for people of color. She wanted to join the very affluent and beautiful Peoria West Bluff Christian Church, but I was opposed for two reasons: One, Peoria's African Americans would be really upset, as would the whites who attended the West Bluff Church and who lived in the nearby community. And two, Peoria was riddled with racial hatred and discrimination at the time. I could not change Mary's mind, and we agreed to attend the church and ascertain people's reactions. I knew, as well as Mary, that our attendance would be the talk of the town, and were I not a chemist at the laboratory, we would be ostracized by both the whites and the blacks.

We went to the church and caught everyone by surprise. The ushers at the door did not know what to do. In the confusion, I walked right past them, but Mary was hesitant and stopped. I quickly went back for her, and we walked to the front pew and sat down. My thinking was it would be easy to refuse us entrance at the front door, but to ask us to leave once we sat down would be difficult.

The pastor was Barton Hunter, and he conducted the service as though it was a usual Sunday. Just before it ended, he asked us our names and welcomed us to the church. He also invited us to the coffee hour that was held after services. When we walked in, many church members left, but many more remained, including the Leggs, the Nelsons, and Janus Gates. The Rev. Hunter was most gracious, and he invited us back for next Sunday's service, knowing that some of the members were very unhappy he did so.

Our going made the next day's newspapers. The church leaders called a meeting to reconsider the pastor's

invitation to us to return the next Sunday. The black community called us "Hanky Heads" (people who want to be white), and "Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima." I even was called into the office of the laboratory's assistant director and asked, "Are you going to return to a church that does not want you?"

"The pastor wants us," I replied.

We returned the next Sunday, and all went well. To our great surprise, the church had an afternoon dinner lecture to which we were invited. For the first time, many white Peorians sat down for a meal with blacks. We sat at the pastor's table, and the race issue came up. Someone asked me, "Why do you want to attend a white church when there are so many colored ones?"

Mary responded for me by saying, "There is no colored Disciples of Christ Church in Peoria."

"You do not plan to join our church, do you?" somebody else asked.

"Yes," Mary said.

"I am pleased," Pastor Hunter said. "We can discuss your joining immediately."

The following Sundays, we participated in all aspects of the church's activities. The white members came to like us very much, but the black community shunned us more and more. After several months, Mary joined the West Bluff Christian Church, but to the surprise of Pastor Hunter and most of the congregation, I did not join with her. I was a Methodist and joined a black Methodist church.

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As busy as I was during this period of time, I succumbed to the strong encouragement of Mary's pastor, the Rev. Barton Hunter, to take a real active part in the Civil Rights Movement in early 1949. I had been somewhat active in 1947 and 1948. I was a leader, along with C. T. Vivian, who integrated the restaurants, hotels, and other facilities in Peoria, Illinois. The whites who worked with us were Janus Gates, the Rev. and Mrs. Barton Hunter, the Rev. and Mrs. Donald Legg, Ruth and Tom Nelson, Dorothy Deale, Mr. and Mrs. Dick Trotter, and Shirley Kajakawa. All, except me, were members of the West Bluff Christian Church.

Mary and I now were having serious marital problems, for my weekends were not only spent at the laboratory where she could go along, but also at Bishop's Cafeteria and the Jefferson Hotel where she had no interest in participating. Bishop's Cafeteria on Main Street was the key eating establishment to be integrated because it was in the heart of downtown Peoria. Once it was integrated, the other restaurants and cafeterias would fall into line. Our first plan of action was to go to the cafeteria's manager and ask if blacks could be served. (The only public eating places open to blacks at that time were the bus station and Thompson's Restaurant.) On our initial try, he would not see us. We then decided to stand in front of the cafeteria on Saturdays and Sundays. Usually, two blacks, C. T. Vivian and myself, and approximately fifteen whites passed out literature on Bishop's discriminatory practice. This went

on for about a month, and the manager of the restaurant still did not yield, even on the issue of meeting with the Rev. Hunter and several of the group.

It was agreed that the next Sunday our group would walk in the serving line. The manager called the police to have us arrested for trespassing. (While single, I had stayed at the home of Mr. Nolan Macklin, the highest ranking of three black officers on Peoria's Police force. Mr. Macklin did not agree with what I was doing, but I was never arrested.) The police came and asked us to leave the line, but we refused. They then told us that we could stay in line but that the other customers could not be impeded, so they walked around us and were served. Realizing that we weren't going to be arrested and that our presence was disruptive, the manager agreed to meet with us. He was adamant at this meeting and made it clear that he would not serve blacks. We then went back to our tactics of standing in the serving line. Now, however, some white customers who learned that I was a research chemist and C. T. Vivian was a student at Western Illinois University began to openly say, "Serve them." Each Sunday that we returned, more and more customers said the same thing, until the manager now was concerned about losing customers.

Then, in mid-June, a white customer, whom we did not know and who had paid for his food and had his tray taken to a table by a waitress, picked up his tray and gave it to me. He led me back to the table to sit with his family when one of the waitresses rushed up and spit on the food. The customer took the tray to the manager and insisted that the food be replaced. The uproar in the cafeteria was such that the manager not only replaced the food on the tray but publicly chastised the waitress. The new tray of food was given to me, and I went to the table and ate. All of the others

in our group also were served on this day. The manager came over to me and apologized, and from that day on blacks could eat at Bishop's Cafeteria. For the first two months, only a few white customers minded that blacks ate there, and to the best of my knowledge Bishop's did not lose any white customers. (Thirty-six years later, in 1985, I was in Peoria to attend a Bradley University Trustee meeting and ate at Bishop's, which had moved from Main Street near the Pere Marquette Hotel to a place near Main Street and the Illinois River. I noted that five of the waitresses and more than forty percent of the working people were minorities. The food also was just as excellent as it had been when I first ate there.)

Other restaurants and cafeterias in Peoria also began to serve minorities. Our next plan was to integrate the hotels, and this took a different strategy from the one used with the cafeteria. We thought that the Pere Marquette Hotel, which was considered the best hotel in town, would have the money needed to fight us all the way to the high court. But we wanted to work on a good hotel and one that was as close as possible to the Pere Marquette to keep them aware of our movement. The Jefferson Hotel was chosen, and on this occasion two people were assigned to integrate it: Dick Trotter, who was white, and myself. We also felt that its eating facilities would be easier to integrate than its sleeping facilities. Our thinking was once blacks could eat at the Jefferson, they would be allowed to check in and stay at the hotel.

It was now summer and very hot in Peoria. The Jefferson Hotel served a Sunday brunch from 1 P.M. to 4 P.M. for its guests and Peoria's upper-income class. Dick Trotter and I went to the dining room and sat at a table from 1 P.M. to 4 P.M. We were completely ignored by the management and by the waiters who were all black. The head waiter was

a very close friend of Mr. Nolan Macklin, and he did everything possible to get Mr. Macklin to ask me to cease attempting to integrate the Jefferson Hotel. Mr. Macklin never tried to stop me from integrating any facilities in Peoria, although he told me on many occasions that what I was doing could bring me harm.

The second Sunday came, and Dick and I were at the hotel at 1 P.M. We sat at the same table, which was located as near as possible to the center of the restaurant. This time the head waiter came to me and said, "The manager has threatened to fire all the black help and hire whites if you don't leave now and cease trying to eat here." I told him not to worry about losing their jobs because whites would not work for the low pay that they were getting.

The next Sunday we were totally ignored again. The same happened the following Sunday, which by now it was August and very hot. As we were leaving, the manager said, "I know why you sit here each Sunday. It is because it is cool in our air-conditioned facility. Next Sunday, if you come again, we will turn it off on you."

Our strategy was not to arrive at the hotel at 1 P.M., because if the air conditioners were cut off then, only a few people would be affected. So we came at 2:30 P.M. The place was nearly full, and our center table was taken. We sat near a window, and the manager came over to us. He asked us to leave, or he would carry out his promise. We told him that we only wanted to eat and would not leave. He left us and turned off the air conditioners. In about a half hour the place began to warm up, and near closing time with all of the windows closed the place was hot and intolerable. Most people had gone by now, but those remaining began to ask if there was something wrong with the air conditioners. I told the persons at the tables surrounding us that the manager had turned them off in hopes that I would

leave and not attempt to buy a meal. Word spread quickly, and a person who appeared to be very important went to see the manager. We do not know what was said, but when he returned, the air conditioners were turned on and he invited Dick and me to be guests at his table. Food was brought to us, and we ate. Our host never identified himself, but we kindly thanked the gentleman. We wondered, though, what would happen when we returned the next Sunday. We came at 1 P.M., and were greeted in a very friendly manner. We ate a hearty meal and knew that the hotel, like Bishop Cafeteria, now would serve anyone. With Bishop's and the Jefferson serving minorities, the rest of the facilities similar to them soon did likewise. The only places still segregated were the country clubs, but we saw no need to try to change them because even if we did, none of us could afford to be members.