

GOOD TROUBLE

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When my grandmother heard about the new voter ID laws here in Texas, she was so mad she could hardly get the words out of her mouth.

"I can't believe they're doing this. After everything we've gone through, they're trying to send us back in time."

"Why are they doing this?"

"They don't want Black people to vote. They know power comes from the ballot."

My grandmother had a way of explaining things that always got right to the point.

"Did I tell you what we had to go through when I tried to vote in North Carolina?"

She had told me the story several times, but I always gave her a chance to tell it again. It made her feel good and made me feel proud. My grandmother told me the story again.

"I'll never forget the first time I tried to vote. I walked into the poll station and was challenged as soon as I walked through the door."

"I'm sorry ma'am, but you can't vote here," the attendant told me.

"The Voter Registration Coalition says I can."

"I don't care what they told you. You can't vote here," the attendant said, with a scowl on her face.

"It's my right to vote as an American citizen."

"Have you passed your Voter Test?" she asked.

'What Voter Test?'

"There's a test for reading, writing, and arithmetic. You have to pass all three of them before you can vote."

I had just graduated from Howard University and didn't think I'd have a problem with any test they could give. "If that's what I have to do, then bring me your test."

The lady brought me a book with print so small, it was impossible to read. "The print here is too small," I told the attendant.

The attendant looked up and said, "Can you read this or not? That's all I want to know."

"No, I can't read that, and I bet you can't either."

"OK. You failed the test. Now you have to take our counting test." She walked into the other room and came back with a jar of jellybeans. "Can you tell me how many jellybeans are in this jar?"

"Do you know how many are in there?" I asked her.

"I don't need to know how many are in there. You do." She told me.

"Then how do you know if the answer I give you is right?" I knew any answer I gave was going to be wrong.

"What is your answer, and if you don't give me one, you'll fail this test too."

"We both know any number I give you is going to be wrong."

"You people act too smart for your own good. I'm going to give you the writing test."

She handed me a crumpled piece of paper and a pencil that needed sharpening, and then said, "Can you write down your name, address, and the church you go to?"

I wrote down the information requested except the name of my church. They didn't need it, so I didn't provide it.

"Ma'am, you failed two of our three tests and didn't complete the other one, so now I need you to stop holding up the line and causing trouble."

"I'm not holding up the line. If Black people can wait three hundred years to vote, those folks can wait another three minutes."

"Ma'am, the police are on their way, and if you don't leave, you will be arrested."

"You want to have me arrested for trying to vote? If that's the case, I'll be proud to get locked up."

My grandmother loved telling me other stories about her involvement in the civil rights struggle. She talked about being at the March on Washington and listening to Dr. King talk about his dream. She told me about being on the Edmund Pettus Bridge and being attacked by the police for doing nothing more than marching to secure rights they should have already had. Now she felt we were being attacked again. But this time instead of using billy clubs and dogs that didn't know any better, they were using legislators who were dumber than the dogs.

My grandmother didn't look or act her age. She had a head of silver braided hair and liked wearing jeans and high-top sneakers.

"We can't let them get away with this. Too many people gave up their lives, and it's time for us to stand up and get into some good trouble."

"What do you think we should do?"

"We need to stop pussyfooting around. This is the same kind of bullshit they used to pull on us. I had to take tests administered by people who probably never finished high school."

My grandmother was the founder of a group called GAS. It stood for Grandmothers Against Suppression. Their objective was to bring attention to the new voter suppression laws. Those laws were making it harder for senior citizens, students, and people of color to vote. These were the people who had the nerve to put a Black man in the White House. The people who claimed to love liberty were denying it to their fellow American citizens.

GAS had been meeting every other week for the past six months and was planning some sort of aggressive action. I had no idea what they were planning, but my grandmother said the world would soon find out.

We were having a mayoral election, and it was going to be the first test of the new law. Anyone without one of five types of identification would not be allowed to vote. Even though they could have been voting for the past fifty years, without the new IDs, they were effectively disenfranchised.

On Election Day, my grandmother asked me to drive her and two of her friends to the polls. When we got there, we were asked to produce one of the five required pieces of identification. My grandmother showed them her voter registration card like she had done for the past fifty years.

"I'm sorry ma'am," the clerk said. "I need to see one of these IDs." She pointed to a sign with the new requirements printed in bold red letters.

"I've been voting here for over fifty years, and this has been fine," my grandmother replied. "What's the problem?"

"We're trying to prevent voter fraud," the clerk replied.

"You haven't been letting us vote long enough to commit fraud."

"We're trying to prevent it before it happens."

"Do you think somebody's gonna come in here, disguised as an eighty-three-year-old Black woman, to try to cast a vote in my name?"

"Anything's possible," the clerk replied. "The governor is very serious about this."

"This is how stupid your rules are. If I have a license to carry a gun, that's OK for voting, but if I'm a doctoral candidate in Political Science at the University of Texas, I can't vote."

"I didn't make the rules," she said. "My job is to make sure they're followed."

My grandmother and her friends pulled out their cell phones and made some calls before sitting in the middle of the floor and saying if they couldn't vote no one would. Then she looked at me and said, "Junior, go get the camera out of the car and start documenting everything."

I ran out to the car and brought in my video camera. My grandmother made a few more calls, and in less than twenty minutes, about forty more grandmothers burst into the polling place and joined their silver-haired sisters in the middle of the floor.

"You ladies are going to have to leave," one of the poll workers told the grandmothers.

"Are you going to let us vote?" My grandmother responded.

"Only if you have the right identification," he replied.

"We'll leave when you follow the Constitution," my grandmother quipped. "I never read anything in the Constitution that says I have to have one of those IDs to vote."

The poll workers again asked them to leave, but they refused. The grannies called the local news to come and cover the protest. People kept coming, and the protest got larger and larger. The polling attendants called the police, but the police had no idea how to handle the situation. With the local news there, they couldn't just beat up a bunch of old ladies. Maybe if they were all Black, they might, but there were more White grannies than Black ones, and some of the tech savvy grandmothers were streaming the incident on Facebook and asking their friends to come down and give their support. Two hours after my grandmother tried to cast her ballot, over three hundred people occupied and surrounded the polling place.

As word got out, students from the local university joined the protest, and then a counter-protest sprang up. A group of men who looked like retired Klansmen started waving confederate flags. Skinheads and a smattering of neo-Nazis, wearing Hitler mustaches and Gestapo helmets, complained that their rights were being violated. They told the police to get rid of those grandmothers or they would. Unconcealed pistols and automatic rifles were being carried in the open. The grandmothers were threatened with arrest if they weren't gone in thirty minutes.

Five more school buses of police officers pulled into the parking lot. At least forty officers, dressed in riot gear, got off the buses with the aim of stopping the demonstration. One of the officers pulled out a megaphone and said anyone who didn't clear the area was subject to arrest. No one moved and everyone joined hands, singing *We Shall Overcome*. Then the police made their move. They grabbed the Black students, threw them on the ground, and put them in handcuffs. Two skinheads infiltrated the crowd and started throwing rocks at the police,

prompting them to fire tear gas into the crowd, and in the confusion, beat anyone they could grab. Old, young, Black, White, it didn't matter. Unless you were wearing blue, you were either beaten or put on the bus to be taken to the county jail. I went back inside the crowd and tried to find my grandmother. I found her still sitting on the floor.

"Grandma," I told her. "We've got to get out of here."

"Our work isn't finished," she said.

"You won't be able to do any work if you're in jail," I told her.

"It won't be the first time I went to jail, and if things don't change, it won't be the last. So why don't you take a seat and talk to some of these ladies? They have some interesting stories to tell, and you might learn something."

I sat down and interviewed one of the women sitting with my grandmother. She talked about being locked up in the Birmingham jail with Dr. King and said it was one of the proudest days of her life.

Before I could finish, the police started arresting the women sitting on the floor and grabbed my grandmother as their ringleader.

"Ma'am," the officer said. "You're being arrested for incitement to riot, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest."

"Wait a minute," I jumped in. "How can you charge her with resisting arrest before you even tried to arrest her? She also couldn't be conducting herself in a disorderly manner if she was just sitting and talking with friends about the election."

"What are you, some kind of jailhouse lawyer?"

"No, but I have to look out for my grandmother's interests."

"Good, then you can look out for her interests behind bars." The officer confiscated my camera, put a pair of plastic handcuffs on my grandmother and me, and put us on one of the school buses headed to the police station.

As we were being driven away, we could see the news trucks from CBS, NBC, and ABC. They had all heard about the grannies and were broadcasting the story across the nation.

"Now the whole world knows about what we're trying to do. My good friend John Lewis would say we were getting ourselves into some good trouble."

I looked at my grandmother and smiled. "I never thought I'd be going to jail, but I'm honored to be sharing this ride with you." I gave her a kiss on the cheek and sat back to enjoy our ride to the local jail.