

*Black Like Me* (Excerpt)

John Howard Griffin, 1961

When I left him I caught the bus into town, choosing a seat halfway to the rear. As we neared Canal, the car began to fill with whites. Unless they could find a place to themselves or beside another white, they stood in the aisle. *I was on the bus-*

A middle-aged woman with stringy gray hair stood near my seat. She wore a clean but faded print house dress that was hoisted to one side as she clung to an overhead pendant support. Her face looked tired and I felt uncomfortable. As she staggered with the bus's movement my lack of gallantry tormented me. I half rose from my seat to give it to her, but Negroes behind me frowned disapproval. I realized I was "going against the race" and the subtle tug-of-war became instantly clear. If the whites would not sit with us, let them stand. When they became tired enough or uncomfortable enough, they would eventually take seats beside us and soon see that it was not so poisonous after all. But to give them your seat was to let them win. I slumped back under the intensity of their stares.

*In spite of signals from others, I tried to offer a seat to a white woman.*

But my movement had attracted the white woman's attention. For an instant our eyes met. I felt sympathy for her, and thought I detected sympathy in her glance. The exchange blurred the barriers of race (so new to me) long enough for me to smile and vaguely indicate the empty seat beside me, letting her know she was welcome to accept it. *She said me-*

Her blue eyes, so pale before, sharpened and she spat out, "What're you looking at me like that for?"

*She rejected my offer with hatred (and a possible mob action)*

I felt myself flush. Other white passengers craned to look at me. The silent onrush of hostility frightened me.

"I'm sorry," I said, staring at my knees. "I'm not from here." The pattern of her skirt turned abruptly as she faced the front.

"They're getting sassier every day," she said loudly. Another woman agreed and the two fell into conversation.

My flesh prickled with shame, for I knew the Negroes rightly resented me for attracting such unfavorable attention. I sat the way I had seen them do, sphynxlike, pretending unawareness. Gradually people lost interest. Hostility drained to boredom. The woman chattered on, reluctant apparently to lose the spotlight.

*I learned shame: I learned how to conduct myself as a black person and why.*

Note: In *Black Like Me*, the white author travels through the segregated South disguised as a black man. This excerpt recounts one specific moment in this journey. The text structure accompanying this piece is a narrative, of which there are plenty of examples; this example demonstrates the power of one kind of retelling, moving the reader from a cerebral understanding to a visceral experience. Everyone knows "it's painful to experience prejudice," but until reading this author's experience, the general American understanding of racism does not include the nuances, undercurrent, and magnitude of black life in racially divided America. This excerpt demonstrates how a simple narrative can do the work of the most powerfully written informational and persuasive texts.