

The Long Walk Home

The movie begins with a voice-over narration from Mary Katherine, the daughter of Miriam and Norman Thomson. She is an adult now, looking back on the events of her life in 1955.

We see housekeepers getting on the bus to go to work. Odessa works for the Thomson's. Miriam is very busy this morning because she has a party to prepare for. She drops Odessa, Mary Katherine, and her friends, off at the park. While Odessa is unpacking their lunch, a policeman sees her. He approaches her, insults her, and demands to know what she is doing in a whites only park. Odessa hurriedly gathers the children together and leaves.

Miriam is very annoyed when she hears what happened, and refers to it as "nonsense." She makes a phone call to the police commissioner to complain. Later the policeman comes by to apologize. Miriam is very cordial, and feels that the problem has been solved.

That evening at the party, Mary Katherine is wandering around. Norman's brother, Tucker, is making racist jokes. Miriam is embarrassed by her brother-in-law's remarks. She is uncomfortable that the bartender can hear what Tucker is saying. She tells Tucker what happened in the park. Tucker thinks it was a big mistake to have the policeman apologize. She insists that she knows what's right and she knows what's wrong. She adds that it was not like Odessa was in the park with her own children.

Mary Katherine's voice tells us that a war of wills was beginning, and that the civil rights movement began that December day.

At Odessa's home, her two sons bring home the news that Rosa Parks has been arrested. Odessa's husband works at a factory, and flyers announcing a bus boycott, in response to Rosa Park's arrest, are being distributed. Odessa's daughter doesn't want to honor the boycott because it will inconvenience her. The father says a prayer before dinner.

The buses roll out the next morning mostly empty. Odessa calls Miriam and says she will be late. Miriam asks her if this has to do with the boycott, and Odessa says yes. Miriam offers to go and pick her up.

All the black people are walking to work. Miriam announces that she can't drive Odessa home, so she has to walk. Odessa's shoes are not good for walking. By the time she gets home, her family is done eating. There is a church meeting that night. Odessa's feet are swollen and bloody.

The church is packed. Martin Luther King jr. is speaking about the weapon of protest. He says, "We are not wrong." The crowd is very energized by his speech.

The next day the buses are empty again. Odessa and her friend are making beds and discussing the boycott. Odessa falls asleep briefly while she is doing the dishes. She has to get up very early to make it to work on time.

Back at the church, the congregation is singing.

At home, Odessa tells her husband that she'll ask Mrs. Thomson for some time off. Odessa thinks Mrs. Thomson is better than most employers. Her husband is skeptical. He tells her that Mrs. Thomson doesn't know them and doesn't want to know them. He says that the policeman apologized to her, not to Odessa. Odessa regrets that she comes home too late to cook and clean for her own family.

Back at work, Odessa is moving rather slowly. She is polishing the silver. Miriam notices this and doesn't want Odessa to be so tired at work, so she says she will pick her up two days a week. She is concerned that it is right before Christmas, a very busy time, and she needs Odessa's help for many things. Miriam tells Mary Katherine not to tell her father that she is picking Odessa up sometimes.

Sara, the older Thomson daughter, comes home from school for the holidays. Norman promises to take everyone out to dinner, even though Miriam has been cooking dinner all day. Norman takes the family to a new subdivision. He has named the streets after his wife and daughters.

Sara asks Mary Katherine if she still believes in Santa Claus. Mary Katherine is crushed. She DID believe, but she is too embarrassed to admit it so she just shakes her head. That night as her parents place many gifts around the living room, Mary Katherine lies awake in bed and cries a little.

At Odessa's house, the preparations for Christmas are a lot simpler. Everyone has a stocking and there is a little tree.

In the morning at the Thomson house, Norman takes home movies. Odessa is working Christmas day. Miriam gives her a list of instructions, and then remembers to say "Merry Christmas." Odessa has a small present for Mary Katherine, but she puts the gift back in her pocket when Mary Katherine comes running in to show her all her big, expensive presents.

Odessa and the Thomson's other housekeeper are serving the Christmas dinner while the dinner guests talk about the boycott. Tucker feels this is just a test, the beginning of the end of the way of life that he enjoys. Norman thinks it's best to just ignore the whole thing. His brother and mother disagree. His mother says, "Norman, you don't understand. If they get by with this bus thing now, why, in a few years you won't even be able to have this Christmas dinner cause you'll have to have the maid sitting right beside you. It's just communism. That's what it is, a bunch of communism." She feels that black people want too much and they are not willing to work for it. Meanwhile Odessa is standing right behind her, listening to her insults and her tirade.

Later Norman goes into the kitchen to give the two housekeepers their Christmas bonus. He asks Odessa how she gets to work. Miriam is in the doorway looking anxious. Odessa doesn't lie, but she doesn't mention that his wife sometimes gives her a ride. She says she walks or she finds a ride wherever she can. He asks her if it were safe to ride the bus, would she still prefer to walk rather than sit in the back. She admits that she would. He says, "That's a long walk." She answers, "Yes sir, mighty long."

Norman goes back to the table and admits to Tucker that he sees his point. Tucker starts ranting about black people wanting more and doing less. He recommends firing Odessa. Miriam protests that Odessa has been with them for nine years. Tucker yells at her, "If you give in, whaddya think is

gonna happen to this city? Whaddya think is gonna happen to your family? You gotta hold the line."

Odessa and the other housekeeper are walking home discussing the dinner. Odessa admits that Norman's mother almost got a plate of food upside her head. Her friend says she would have quit right then. Odessa says she let herself be insulted, and she would walk till she didn't have any legs left if she thought it would give her children a better shot in the world.

When Odessa gets home, her family gives her two gifts: a new dress and a new pair of shoes, suitable for walking. They all go to church.

Meanwhile, back at the Thomson's, Miriam finds the unopened gift from Odessa to Mary Katherine.

The next day Odessa's daughter, Selma, is on the phone making plans to meet her friend. She is planning to take a bus. Theodore comes in and realizes she is gone. He also realizes that his little brother, Franklin, is clutching a quarter that Selma gave him to keep quiet about her plan. Theodore runs after Selma and sees her getting on a bus. The driver is reluctant to let her on. He says he doesn't want any trouble. She pays in the front, then gets off and on again in the back. Theodore runs home and breaks open his bank. He grabs some change and runs out again.

Only a few people are on the bus. Then a group of punks get on. They are going to cause trouble. They surround Selma and harass and insult her. The driver tells them to stop, but they continue. The driver stops the bus. Selma is scared so she jumps off the bus. However, the driver is very angry at these boys so he kicks them off the bus. They go after Selma. She has stopped for a drink. They surround her at the fountain, and force her face into the water. They push her and taunt her. One guy knocks her down. Just then Theodore comes running up. He has taken a taxi. He tries to help her, but he is outnumbered, and the white thugs are bigger than he is. Each time they hit him he makes a fist, then relaxes his hand. They knock him down and are beating him up. The taxi driver comes running up with a tire iron in his hand. The punks are scared and they run away. The driver tells Selma and Theodore to get in the car before he gets lynched. Theodore says he didn't want to fall. The driver tells him he stood long enough.

At home Selma is tending to her brother's injuries. Odessa comes home and asks what happened. Selma admits it was her fault because she tried to ride the bus. Odessa is furious.

At church, the preacher is organizing car pools and taxi services. He asks those who have cars to support the boycott by giving rides to other people. Odessa's husband sits next to his son, with his arm around him.

The next day, Miriam picks up Odessa. As they drive through downtown, a policeman starts following them. Miriam is anxious and confused. Odessa explains that these are intimidation tactics, designed to break the boycott. She says the police will try and find an excuse to give drivers a ticket. They pass a carpool car. Miriam is surprised to see a white woman driving a carpool car.

Later, Miriam is playing cards with her friends. She tells them that she saw a white woman participating in the carpool. They dismiss it as Yankee behavior. Someone asks Miriam if she is driving her maid to work. Miriam denies it. She explains that two days a week she goes to a market that is close to Odessa's house, so she picks her up. She thinks this is different. She says she doesn't care about the boycott, but she does care about having a maid, and if that means driving her sometime, she will.

It is day 49 of the strike. The Thomson's are watching TV and eating dinner when Tucker comes over. He and Norman are going to a meeting. Miriam asks to speak to Norman alone. She is upset that he is going to a White Citizens' Council meeting. He says everyone has joined, even the mayor, and it is either this group or the Klan. Miriam accuses him of letting his brother lead him around by the nose. This angers him, and he tells her he will do what he wants.

At the meeting, a lot of white men mingle and exchange business cards. One man gives Norman his card and says to call him if he ever has any zoning problems. About half the small business owners in town are members of this group.

Meanwhile at the black church, the preacher is trying to inspire the congregation. News comes that Martin Luther King Jr.'s house has been bombed. The preacher leads everyone in prayer.

The next day when Odessa is working, Miriam silently watches her. Then Miriam drives by the bombed house. Later that night, Miriam looks through a photo album. She sees pictures of herself as a little girl, and the black maid that is holding her hand. That night she pretends to be asleep when Norman returns.

The next morning Norman is sick so he stays in bed. Norman wonders why Odessa is not there. He figures out that Miriam is driving her to work twice a week. He is furious. He tells Miriam that if Odessa can walk three days a week, she can walk five. He insists that Miriam call her and tell her she won't be picking her up. Odessa agrees to come to work, but says she will be late. It is raining hard but she starts walking. Miriam is in the bathroom blotting her eyes. Norman apologizes for getting so upset. He tells her he knows she is ignorant about the implications of her actions. He says that Odessa has been a good maid but they can never really know her-like a dog knowing a cat. It's a different species. He says that when Miriam drives Odessa to work it is like telling her that she is just like them, but she isn't and can never be. He says it wouldn't be safe if the wrong people saw Miriam driving. He says that he knows what is best, and he tells her not to make any decisions on her own.

Odessa arrives late. She asks Miriam why she called that morning. Miriam is embarrassed, but she says that her husband feels that if Odessa won't ride the bus, Miriam shouldn't help her. Miriam apologizes to Odessa. She gets some tea for her. She asks Odessa what she is going to do, and wonders why Odessa can't walk until the "mess" is over. Odessa says that Miriam is a good woman, but that she needs to quit and find a job closer to home so she has time to take care of her own children. Miriam says she understands. She tries to apologize for Norman. She says he's always been where things are segregated and that's how he thinks. She tells a story of when she was in high school. Her girl's club took a bus trip across the country. It was summertime, and very hot. The bus driver found a public pool for them to use in Oregon. While they were swimming, two black boys got in. All the girls from her club scrambled out quickly. But Miriam watched some other

kids who just kept swimming and they didn't seem to suffer any ill effects. It was her first inkling that prejudice was rooted in attitude and habits. She tells Odessa how easy it is not to question something if everyone around you believes in it. She says that she is committed to living with Norman, and living the way he lives. She believes he is a decent man and a good provider, and that he is good with the children. Odessa points out that he can't mother his children, only Miriam can do that. Miriam says that Odessa does the mothering of Mary Katherine. She recalls how Odessa held Mary Katherine when she had the chicken pox. Odessa says that anyone would have done that. Miriam is ashamed to wonder if she would have done that for Odessa's daughter. Odessa says, "I don't want your children to grow up scared of mine." Miriam says, "A lot of whites are scared. I'm a little scared." Odessa replies, "We're all scared. What's scaring you, who you are, or who Mr. Thomson wants you to be?"

Later, Norman comes home from work. Miriam takes his coat and hands him a drink. Miriam has made a decision. She thinks running the house is her job and Norman shouldn't interfere. She threatens to go to work with him and tell him how to do his job, or maybe get her own job. He can't believe what he is hearing. He packs his clothes and moves into the guest room. She calls after him, "I'm doing what I think is right!"

That day she picks up Odessa and tells her to sit in the front. She asks about the carpool. At first Odessa gives her a vague answer, but Miriam is very serious so Odessa explains how it works. Miriam wants to participate. Odessa cautions her that, "Once you step over there I don't know if you can ever step back." Miriam is nervous, but she wants to help. She doesn't want to just write a check, because that is Norman's money. She wants to do something herself. She thinks the boycott is just about riding the bus. Odessa explains that it is more than that. She says that it is about the end of segregation in parks, restaurants, schools, and the voting booths. She assures Miriam that if they just go home, no one will think any less of her.

That night at dinner, while her family is praying, Odessa asks for a special blessing for Miriam. Her family looks at her quizzically. She tells them she has her reasons.

The next day Miriam drives up to three woman walking and offers them a lift. She has joined the carpool.

We hear the voice-over narration of Mary Katherine. She explains that her mother started driving for the carpool five or six days a week. Her father knew she was driving Odessa, but he didn't know she was driving for the carpool.

Norman leaves for work one morning and announces he will be late that night. He and Tucker talk. Tucker wants to show him something. Tucker takes him to the carpool rendezvous point and they see Miriam there. The White Citizens' Council has been taking down license plate numbers. They were surprised to discover Miriam. Tucker warns Norman not to make a scene in front of Mary Katherine. Norman is determined to exert his authority. The Council has a plan to close down the carpool that night, with violence if necessary. Now that Miriam and Mary Katherine are in the parking lot, Norman is in a quandary.

More men from the council arrive. The police have left the scene, giving their tacit support to the plan.

Miriam is talking to one of the carpool organizers, getting instructions. Tucker calls her name. He tells her she shouldn't be there with her daughter. Miriam says it's none of his business. The men now start harassing the car-poolers. Tucker hisses to Miriam that 150 men are arriving to shut the place down. Miriam tries to leave with Mary Katherine and Odessa but some men stop her. One man smashes the windows of her car. Tucker tells her she has lost this one. She tells him to go to hell. He hits her. Norman, who has been watching all this, then gets enraged and he hits his brother. Mary Katherine runs to her mother. The white men are all screaming "Walk nigger walk." They are very hostile and threatening. Miriam and Mary Katherine are caught in the middle. Odessa steps forward but she refuses to leave. The car-poolers start singing, "I'm going through, I'll pay the price, whatever others do, I started in Jesus and I'm going through. They join hands in a line. Someone reaches out a hand to Miriam and she takes it, and joins the line. She and Mary Katherine are both crying. She looks at Norman. He is having a hard time understanding what just happened. The men from the council aren't sure what to do. They were

planning on intimidating the car-poolers without actually attacking them. They finally disperse.

On the voice-over narration, Mary Katherine says that it was years before she understood what standing in that line meant to her mother, or to her. The movie ends with some information. On December 20th, 1956, under Supreme Court order, the Negro citizens of Montgomery, for the first time in history, rode on city buses and sat where they wanted. The boycott had been won. Within weeks four Negro churches and two homes were bombed. Four little girls were killed. But a movement had begun.