

OPENING DAY

THE STORY OF JACKIE ROBINSON'S FIRST SEASON

JONATHAN EIG

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

Praise for *Opening Day*

“In an age of steroids we wonder, what happened to the heroes? In an age of violence we wonder, what happened to the peacemakers? Jackie Robinson was a hero and a peacemaker. In this passionate and riveting book, Jonathan Eig gives us a Jackie Robinson for our time—a man of emotion and talent who needed all his skills, not just his athletic ones, to inspire a nation. *Opening Day* summons us to believe in heroes again—and boy do we need it.”

—Bruce Feiler, author of *Walking the Bible* and *Where God Was Born*

“Jonathan Eig brings us back to the grit and determination, the hot summer days, the sweat and insecurities that were part of baseball’s finest moment. Sixty years after the fact, the story is finally told right. *Opening Day* is a wonder.”

—Leigh Montville, author of *The Big Bam* and *Ted Williams*

“Masterfully researched and beautifully written, *Opening Day* is that rarest of narrative histories: a truly important story that is at once sympathetic and unflinching, heartfelt and sober. Eig’s powerful account of Jackie Robinson’s historic first season surprises, thrills, and even challenges our lifetime of presumptions. In its insight we find not just Robinson’s story but our own.”

—Robert Kurson, author of *Crashing Through* and *Shadow Diver*

“In *Opening Day*, Jonathan Eig gives us front-row seats to one of the most awe-inspiring, unsettling, and momentous seasons of baseball. This is history at its absolute finest. It is honest, intimate, and one compelling read. *Opening Day* is a celebration.”

—Alex Kotlowitz, author of *There Are No Children Here*

“Jonathan Eig has done it again. *Opening Day* is the compelling story of not only a great baseball star, but also a critical moment in our nation’s history. It is a terrific read.”

—Kevin Baker, author of *Strivers Row*

“Mind-opening . . . Eig is especially informative about the dynamics among the Dodgers.”

—George Will, *Chicago Sun-Times*

“A major-league biography of a baseball icon . . . superb.”

—Dan McGrath, *Chicago Tribune*

“As did *Luckiest Man*, *Opening Day* proves that there is so much to be learned about even our most celebrated heroes. . . . In this thorough and absorbing narrative, Eig brilliantly connects Robinson to the nascent civil rights movement and shows us how he made an impact that is felt as powerfully today as ever. *Opening Day* is both invaluable history and a compelling drama.”

—Jeremy Schaap, ESPN commentator and author of *Cinderella Man*

“A fine revisionist study by Jonathan Eig, which tells us that Robinson was not quite who

he seemed to be . . . The lesson of *Opening Day* is that a good redemptive story isn't always the same as the truth. But if Robinson was a temperamental man, he's no less hero for his self-restraint and perhaps is even more of one."

—Farrell Evans, *Sports Illustrated*

"Eig investigates and sometimes debunks the iconic incidents of this nation-changing season, separating myth from fact, and showing again the sort of courage and determination Robinson displayed on the field and off it."

—Katherine A. Powers, *The Boston Globe*

"Jonathan Eig hits it out of the park with *Opening Day* as an intimate baseball reminiscence. He homers again as the book evolves into a sociological examination of an era, a historical drama, and a biography of a cultural phenom."

—Lois Reed, *The Dallas Morning News*

"Jonathan Eig separates fact from fiction and presents a fresh, clear view of Robinson's first season in his latest book. . . . [W]ith his crisp writing style and sharp reporting, Eig accurately describes a turbulent season that changed the landscape of the game—and reveals Robinson the man, not the myth."

—Bob D'Angelo, *The Tampa Tribune*

"*Opening Day* is a noteworthy new account of the year that started it all—when Jackie Robinson put baseball, and America, on notice."

—Austin Merrill, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"An excellent account of Robinson's first year with the Dodgers."

—Bill Reynolds, *The Providence Journal*

"Jonathan Eig does a superb job of recounting Robinson's groundbreaking efforts. . . . Eig's stylish account of that first season goes beyond the locker room and ball fields, as he delves into the racial pride and uncertainty that accompanied Robinson's ascension to the big leagues."

—Steven Goode, *Hartford Courant*

"A wonderfully thorough and thought-provoking look at Robinson's first season in the big leagues."

—Bob Hersom, *The Oklahoman*

"A splendid book and a fitting tribute to a trailbreaker of notable athletic ability and even greater inner strength."

—Bob Willis, *The Roanoke Times*

"Eig offers a fresh perspective on Robinson's rookie season with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Read this book and you'll be forced to rethink the manner in which history has treated former Dodgers Dixie Walker and Pee Wee Reese."

—Steve Buckley, *Boston Herald*

“You don’t have to be a baseball fan, a history buff, or a student of the civil rights movement to enjoy *Opening Day*, a riveting story of Jackie Robinson’s arrival with the Brooklyn Dodgers.”

—Bill Cotterell, *Tallahassee Democrat*

“Captivating . . . A superb storyteller, Eig not only reminds us of what a truly heroic figure Robinson was, but also looks beneath some of the myths surrounding that season.”

—Cary Clack, *San Antonio Express-News*

“Beautifully written . . . *Opening Day* is far, far more than another sports biography.”

—Robert Philip, *The Daily Telegraph* (London)

“A vivid, enjoyable account that sheds new light on a season that’s been written about many times before.”

—John C. Ensslin, *Rocky Mountain News*

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For my parents, Phyllis and David Eig

Be the change you want to see in the world.

—MOHANDAS GANDHI

A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives.

—JACKIE ROBINSON

PROLOGUE

April 10, 1947

The telephone rang like an alarm, waking Jackie Robinson from deep sleep. "Hello," he mumbled.

It was early morning in Manhattan. Robinson was alone in room 1169 of the McAlpin Hotel, across the street from Macy's. He had been on edge all week, his stomach in knots. As he listened to the voice on the other end of the phone, he was poised to embark on a journey—one that would test his courage, shake the game of baseball to its roots, and forever change the face of the nation. Throughout history, heroic quests have often been launched on grand orders. "The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River . . .," wrote Thomas Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis. "The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!" General Dwight David Eisenhower exhorted his troops before the D-Day invasion. But the commanding words that sent Robinson on his way this cool, gray morning were uttered by a humble secretary.

Come to Brooklyn, she said.

He showered and shaved and hurried out of the hotel. He was on his way to meet Branch Rickey, president and part owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and to learn whether Rickey was ready to end the segregation of the races in big-league baseball.

In 1947, some southern states still denied the vote to black Americans. Black children were not entitled to attend the same schools as white children. Lynch mobs executed their own bloodthirsty style of justice while local law enforcement officials looked the other way. "I'm sorry, but they done got him," one sheriff in North Carolina announced that year after a gang of white men made off with one of his prisoners. Black Americans were excluded not only from certain schools but also from parks, beaches, playgrounds, department stores, night clubs, swimming pools, roller-skating rinks, theaters, restaurants, rooms, barber shops, railroad cars, bus seats, military units, libraries, factory floors, and hospitals. In the North, WHITES ONLY signs were far less evident than in the South, but the veiled message was often the same. Black men on business in Chicago, Detroit, or Cleveland usually stayed in black-owned hotels, rode in black-owned taxis, and dined at black-owned restaurants. If a white man became acquainted with a black man, odds were good that the acquaintance stemmed from some service the black man performed for the white man—shining his shoes, for example, or mowing his lawn, or mixing his cocktails.

Segregation suffused the nation's culture, and yet profound changes were rippling across the country. Black workers moved from South to North in great waves, reshaping urban spaces and lending new muscle to organized labor. Black soldiers coming home

from the war declared they would no longer tolerate second-class citizenship. Federal judges commanded southern states to stop obstructing the black vote. President Truman signed an order to end segregation in the military. And in major-league baseball, where there were sixteen teams and every player on every one of those teams was white, a single black man was presented an opportunity to change the equation: to make it one black man and 399 white.

The test case represented by Jackie Robinson was one of towering importance to the country. Here was a chance for one person to prove the bigots and white supremacists wrong, and to say to the nation's fourteen million black Americans that the time had come for them to compete as equals. But it would happen only if a long list of "ifs" worked out just so: *if* the Brooklyn Dodgers gave Robinson the opportunity to play; *if* he played well; *if* he won the acceptance of teammates and fans; *if* no race riots erupted; *if* no one put a bullet through his head. The "ifs" alone were enough to agitate a man's stomach. Then came the matter of Robinson himself. He perceived racism in every glare, every murmur, every called third strike. He was not the most talented black ballplayer in the country. He had a weak throwing arm and a creaky ankle. He had only one year of experience in the minor leagues, and, at twenty-eight, he was a little bit old for a first-year player. But he loved a fight. His greatest assets were tenacity and a knack for getting under an opponent's skin. He would slash a line drive to left field, run pigeon-toed down the line, take a big turn at first base, slam on the brakes, and skitter back to the base. Then, as the pitcher prepared to go to work on the next batter, Robinson would take his lead from first base, bouncing on tiptoes like a dropped rubber ball, bouncing, bouncing, bouncing, taunting the pitcher, and daring everyone in the park to guess when he would take off running again. While other men made it a point to avoid danger on the base paths, Robinson put himself in harm's way every chance he got. His speed and guile broke down the game's natural order and left opponents cursing and hurling their gloves. When chaos erupted, that's when he knew he was at his best.

On that April 10 morning, as he rode the subway from Manhattan to Brooklyn, Robinson understood exactly what he was getting into. One prominent black journalist had written that the ballplayer had more power than Congress to help break the chains that bound the descendants of slavery to lives lived in inequity and despair. Before he had even swung a bat in the big leagues, Robinson was being compared to Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, and Joe Louis, with some writers concluding that this man would do more for his people than any of the others. The time had come, they said, for black Americans to stake their claim to the justice and equal rights they so richly deserved, and now a baseball player had arrived to show them the way. Robinson absorbed the newspaper articles. He felt the weight on his shoulders and decided there was nothing to do but carry it as fast and as far as he could.

A cold wind met him as he climbed out of the subway onto the busy streets of Brooklyn. He walked to 215 Montague Street. Waiting for him there was Branch Rickey, a potato-shaped man in a wrinkled suit. The office was dark and cluttered. Rickey got straight to business, offering Robinson a standard contract for five-thousand dollars, the league's minimum annual salary.

"Simple, wasn't it?" Robinson recalled later. "It could have happened to you. The telephone rings. You answer it . . . and you're in the Big Leagues. . . . Just like a fair

tale. . . . I went to bed one night wearing pajamas and woke up wearing a Brooklyn Dodgers' uniform."

He knew it was no fairy tale, of course. He knew that a happy ending was far from assured. Most big-leaguers in 1947 had never been on the same field as a black man, had never shared a locker room, a shower, a taxi, a train car, or a dining-room table with one. Big-league culture was so thoroughly dominated by white southerners that even rough Italian kids from northern cities experienced shock and isolation upon arrival. There was no telling how Robinson would be received. He was not yet a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and already half a dozen or more of his prospective teammates promised they would quit or demand a trade before they would play with him. Elsewhere, players spoke of a league-wide strike. They were willing to destroy the game they loved rather than see it stained by integration. Others said it would be simpler to take Robinson out with a well-aimed fastball to the head, or with a set of metal cleats driven through his Achilles tendon on a close play at first base—something that would look like an accident.

Rickey made only one demand of Robinson. He asked the ballplayer to promise that he would never respond to the racist attacks that would surely come his way. When Rickey quoted a passage from Giovanni Papini's *Life of Christ*—"But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also"—Robinson sought clarification. Did Rickey want a player who didn't have the guts to fight back? No, the boss answered. "I want a ballplayer with guts enough *not* to fight back."

Rickey turned and walked away while Robinson thought about it for a moment. Though the request would require Robinson to subdue his most basic instincts, and though he had no idea, honestly, whether he could compete without an outlet for his seething sense of indignation, he said he would try. With that, the season's storyline was set.

Robinson became baseball's biggest attraction in 1947. According to one survey, he was the second most famous man in America, trailing only Bing Crosby. Americans yearned for a sense of normalcy in the aftermath of the war, yet everything around them was in flux. Robinson, a human whirlwind, captured the spirit of the time better than anyone. When the Dodgers went on the road, thousands of black men and women traveled great distances to get a glimpse of him, as if to see for themselves that he was real, to share his dignity and glory, to watch this proud, defiant man, the grandson of slaves, stake a claim on their behalf to what Langston Hughes called "the dream deferred." Railroad companies scheduled special runs. Black parents named their children, boys and girls, after him. White kids from small towns in the Midwest sat surrounded by black men and women at the ballpark and wondered why their parents seemed anxious. Jewish families in Brooklyn gathered around their dining-room tables for Passover Seders and discussed what Moses had in common with a fleet-footed, right-hand-hitting infielder with the number 42 on his back. White business owners integrated their factory floors and wrote to Robinson to thank him for opening their eyes. Young ballplayers of every color imitated his style, wiping their hands on their trousers between pitches, swinging with arms outstretched, and running helter-skelter around makeshift bases.

Jackie Robinson showed that talent mattered more than skin color, supplying

blueprint for the integration of a nation. He led the Dodgers to the greatest season the team's fans had yet seen, to a World Series showdown with the New York Yankees, the outcome in doubt until the final inning of the seventh and final game.

But it was something else, something more personal, that captured the American imagination that summer.

It was the story of a man filled with fear and fury. It was Jackie Robinson, all alone taking his lead from the base, bouncing, bouncing, bouncing . . . and a nation waiting to see what he would do next.

ONE

JACK ROOSEVELT ROBINSON

His name was Jack Roosevelt Robinson, not Jackie. Mallie Robinson, his mother, chose the middle name in honor of former president Theodore Roosevelt, who had died a few weeks before her son's birth. "Speak softly and carry a big stick," Roosevelt had said. "You will go far." Mallie Robinson had no big stick. All she had was a sixth-grade education, a powerful faith in God, and a sense of determination that bordered on stubbornness. She didn't expect to go very far, but she believed strongly that her children would.

Jack, the youngest of five, was born January 31, 1919. He lived with his family in a ramshackle cottage near the town of Cairo, Georgia, not far from the Florida state line. Jack's father, Jerry, could neither read nor write. He knew how to farm, but he preferred not to. Fortunately for the Robinsons, Mallie was big-boned, strong, and not one to back down from a challenge. It was Mallie who raised the children, Mallie who worked the soil, and Mallie who negotiated with the plantation owner for a share of the crop instead of straight wages. "You're about the sassiest nigger woman ever on this place," the plantation owner once told her. She took that as a compliment.

Yet for all her sass and strength, Mallie couldn't overcome the crushing poverty that afflicted so many black families in the Deep South. Nor could she control her husband, who wouldn't work, wouldn't stay home, and wouldn't confine his loving to one woman. "I always lived so close to God [that] He would tell me things," Mallie once said. So when God told her to take the children and get away, she did just that, ignoring Jerry's attempts to convince her that it was the devil talking to her. She packed her things, herded the kids out the door, and caught a train heading west. Jack was sixteen months old.

It was an enormous gamble—truly an act of faith. She had little money and no plan. All she had, really, was a half brother in Pasadena who had bragged to her once, "If you want to get closer to heaven, visit California." Whether it was closer to heaven or not, Mallie figured it couldn't be worse than Georgia, where an impudent black woman might get strung from a tree if she wasn't careful.

She and her children arrived in Los Angeles by night, the city lights aglow, bright and more beautiful than anything she had ever seen. In almost no time she found a job working as a maid in a wealthy white man's household. When the boss sent her home at four in the afternoon, she didn't know what to do. In Georgia, plantation work had been her mornings, afternoons, and nights. To quit so early seemed unnatural. So she found other jobs cooking and cleaning in other homes to fill her hours and her cupboard. She worked

so much in those first few years that her children seldom saw her. “She was hand ~~caressing us or a voice in our sleep,~~” her youngest son recalled. It was a voice that would speak to him for years to come.

• • •

Pasadena in the 1920s was one of the richest small cities in the United States. It was a winter getaway for tourists, a place of wealth and culture and fine architecture, a booming town with little reason to fear a bust. The Robinsons arrived at an opportune moment, a time when the rich got richer and the poor got jobs. Pasadena had a few working-class neighborhoods, but nothing that qualified as a ghetto. By 1922, to the astonishment and dismay of her white neighbors, Mallie and her relatives saved enough money to buy two small houses that occupied a single plot of land at 121 Pepper Street, a predominantly white block in a working-class part of town. One exasperated Pepper Street homeowner called the police whenever the Robinson children ran or roller-skated past his house, explaining that his wife was afraid of Negroes, using the polite term of the day. Other neighbors drew up a petition to get rid of the new family. By 1930, the U.S. Census showed ten people crammed into Mallie’s little house—six children and four adults—a condition that probably didn’t help win friends among the neighbors. Not for a minute did the family feel welcome.

Mallie, a devout Methodist, fought back with kindness. She performed chores at no charge for the richest white woman on their block, hoping to gain her loyalty and affection. She never quit trying and she never made much real progress, a fact not lost on her youngest son, who had plenty of his mother’s strength but little of her patience. The same year, 1922, the city of Pasadena built the Rose Bowl. It was of no small importance that Jack lived in a town enamored of sports, where blacks and whites often competed on the same ball fields, and where the weather let children play outdoors twelve months of the year. Jack’s schools were filled mostly with white students. In Pasadena, a black person never forgot he was part of a minority group and that the group was treated far differently from the majority. Jack saw movies seated in segregated balconies, swam in city-owned pools only on Tuesdays, and gained entry to the local YMCA only one night a week. Such humiliations taught many black boys and girls to expect little from the world, but Mallie’s children were different. They grew up surrounded by wealth and privilege, and, while they were not naive enough to expect equality, they were at least encouraged to fight for whatever they could get.

• • •

As a boy, Jack was quick-witted and quick to anger. When he was eight years old, a white girl on his block taunted him one day with cries of “Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!” He responded by calling her a cracker. Soon the girl’s father stormed out of the house and started shouting. Before long, the boy and the grown man were hurling rocks at each other. Mallie Robinson never said who threw the first stone, but she did remark that her son had the better aim.

Mallie always bragged that she instilled in her young Jack a sense of racial pride. She claimed no responsibility for her boy’s rage, however. While Mallie never bowed to white

people, she seldom lost her temper. Perhaps Jack was angry because he grew up without a father in a home in which everyone tried to pretend the old man had never existed. Perhaps the rage sprouted from the rich soil of Pasadena, where he was removed from the overt racism of the South but still surrounded by razor-sharp inequities. There were no lynchings, no police roundups, no Ku Klux Klan rallies in his world. Here in Southern California, he had just enough opportunity and just enough freedom to flash his anger without fear of severe reprisal. He was smart, loquacious, and supremely confident, with a competitive streak as wide as a Pacific sunset. A white boy with such qualities might have been marked by his teachers as a future leader, but Jack's instructors in grade school did little to encourage his ambition. He didn't seem to care much about his grades, and he ran with a troublemaking group called the Pepper Street Gang. He treated school the way a cab driver treats traffic, as something to be endured, and not without seeking shortcuts. His teachers recommended a career in gardening. Years later, Mallie said she had the feeling that Jack never forgave the people of Pasadena.

Even in his youth, Robinson was smart enough to notice that the jobs available to him as a boy—shining shoes and selling newspapers, to name but a couple—were not much worse than the jobs held by many black adults. Yet when he played sports, magical things happened. White kids wanted him on their teams. Coaches gushed. Teachers paid attention.

Games provided the closest thing to equal opportunity he had found in his young life. So he played as if sports were the whole world, a world more fair and open-minded than the one in which those who lacked his grace, speed, and strength lived. "If I was good enough, I played," he once said. "If not, I had to give way to some other kid."

As if to prove his theory of the superiority of the sporting universe, he watched the career of his older brother Mack, a track and field star whose swift feet and powerful legs earned him a scholarship to the University of Oregon. In 1936, when Jack was seventeen, Mack competed in the two-hundred-meter dash at the Berlin Olympics and finished second to Jesse Owens. Black Americans became heroes back home for running over Hitler's notions of Aryan supremacy. Jack heard the cheers. He saw the silver medals his brother brought back. Yet while many of the white members of the Olympic track team went on to careers as coaches and teachers and radio broadcasters, Jesse Owens, the biggest hero of them all, found himself racing against horses at county fairs and minor-league baseball parks, one small step removed from a circus act. Mack settled for work as a street sweeper on the night shift. In what was an act of either remarkable provocation or extreme self-pity, Mack wore his Olympic jacket while he swept trash.

The lesson was as clear to little brother as the "USA" on Mack's jacket: Sports were a great equalizer, but games could only do so much. When the competition ended, the universe reverted to its original form. The only thing to do was keep playing.

• • •

He remained Jack, not Jackie, at John Muir Technical High School. "Dusky Jack Robinson," the *Los Angeles Times* called him, the adjective serving as a signal to readers who might not have been aware of his race. From Muir Tech, he went on to Pasadena Junior College, where he achieved a small measure of celebrity as an outstanding football

player, and where newspaper writers began referring to him as Jackie. At about the same time, he also came under the influence of the Reverend Karl Downs, a young and energetic pastor from Scott's Chapel Church, who persuaded Robinson to quit the Peppercorn Street Gang and start teaching Sunday school.

In 1939, Robinson stepped up to the University of California at Los Angeles. It was here, starting at halfback for one of the nation's best college football teams, that he emerged as a full-blown star. "All Jackie did at Pasadena," wrote the *Los Angeles Times* in welcoming him to UCLA, "was throw with ease and accuracy, punt efficiently and run with that ball like it was a watermelon and the guy who owned it was after him with a shotgun." All he did at UCLA from that moment on was play baseball, basketball, and football, compete in the long jump and broad jump with the track team, and dabble a bit in tennis. No matter the game, his reputation as a ferocious competitor preceded. "I was aggressive . . ." Robinson recalled years later. "Often I found myself being singled out by the other players. . . . I enjoyed having that kind of reputation."

Robinson on the run looked like a funnel cloud. If you were an infielder watching him spin your way, or a linebacker contemplating a tackle, or a basketball player trying to keep him from the hoop, you could never tell which direction he would go or when he might hit. You only knew there would be damage. He was big, just under six feet tall and a bit less than two hundred pounds, solid from head to toe, yet with the agility of a much smaller man. He ran with his toes pointed slightly inward, and with his arms lashing wildly, so that even when he was moving in a straight line he appeared to be going this way and that. But it wasn't his size, his speed, or his agility that impressed people most. It wasn't the blue-black darkness of his skin. Nor was it his high-pitched voice. The thing that struck people most strongly was something subtle, something that became obvious only after they'd come to know him. It was the fire. It seemed to burn constantly, just below the surface. It fueled his competitive spirit even as it threatened at times to undermine his accomplishments.

At UCLA, as in Pasadena, Robinson enjoyed a relatively friendly environment. Racism was unavoidable, but it was much more subtle than in the South. It was the kind of racism white people often failed to notice, which no doubt made it all the more hurtful at times to men like Robinson. The university had no black professors. Black students could not live in the village of Westwood. Nor could they work in the college bookstore. But UCLA, eager to compete athletically with powerhouse schools such as Oregon, Stanford, and USC, had nonetheless decided to bring more black students to campus. That left Robinson surrounded by a student body that was for the most part happy to have him around. On the football team, he was joined by the great halfback Kenny Washington and the gifted receiver Woody Strode, both of whom were black. The press called them "The Gold Dust Trio." Robinson became famous, not just in Southern California, but nationwide, with a reputation as one of the country's finest all-around athletes. He never acquired a nickname at UCLA. Every so often a reporter would label him "the Brown Comet," "the Black Meteor," or "the Sepia Flash," but none of the names stayed with him.

As a part of the Gold Dust Trio, his life at times did seem to be dusted in gold. He was living in Southern California, cooled by the sweet Pacific breeze. When he got into a jam with the police (not for the first time), a jam Robinson attributed (not for the first time

to the bigotry of a white police officer, there were powerful people at UCLA on hand to extricate him. Still, to his friends and teammates, he seemed easily and often perturbed. Strode recalled Robinson as a loner with “steely hard eyes that would flash angry in his heartbeat.” He was not the sort of athlete who performed with a smile on his face, whose physical ease went hand-in-hand with emotional delight at play. No one would ever compare him to Babe Ruth or Satchel Paige, or Willie Mays, or any of the other great athletes who retained their childlike joy into adulthood. If he did experience pure pleasure at play, he seemed determined to make sure no one saw it.

• • •

Late in the summer of 1940, when he met a young woman named Rachel Isum, Robinson showed signs of mellowing ever so slightly. Rachel was tall and beautiful, and looked taller and more beautiful for the way she carried herself. She was just seventeen, slender and serene, with soft brown curls stacked cloudlike atop her head. She studied nursing at UCLA and took her school work seriously. She took most things seriously. Like Jack, she neither drank nor smoked. When her father became too sick to work, her mother found a position as a caterer, and Rachel took on two jobs: assistant to the caterer and nurse to her father. She had developed excellent skills for taking care of her family but had not yet abandoned hope of becoming a doctor or a nurse. The first time she saw Jackie Robinson on campus, she was intrigued. She admired his preference for crisp white shirts, which accentuated the dark hue of his skin. She took the fashion choice as a token of his pride. He seemed confident, strong, and yet very shy, with a smile that made her melt. While the campus knew him as Jackie, she preferred to call him Jack. He called her Rae.

On their first date, Rachel and Jack went to the UCLA homecoming dance at the Biltmore, one of the ritziest hotels in Los Angeles. She wore a new black dress and a matching black hat with fox trim. He wore a blue suit, the only one he owned. The orchestra played “Stardust” and “Mood Indigo.” They danced awkwardly. At the end of the evening, he gave her a disappointing peck on the cheek and said goodnight. Both said later that they knew right away they were destined to be married. Robinson played on for two years at UCLA, using up his football eligibility. By the end of his second season he was falling behind on class work, and none too upset about it. He stuck around for one more basketball season and then dropped out.

Suddenly, the future seemed unclear. There were no black players in the National Football League, and none in the National Basketball League, either, or his path would have been more obvious. Instead, he went to work as an assistant athletic director at the National Youth Administration, a Depression-era job-training agency on the campus of the California Polytechnic Institute, making \$150 a month. He was still living with his mother and still contemplating marriage in December 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and President Roosevelt called the nation to war. His draft notice arrived a few months later.

• • •

Late one night, on July 6, 1944, Lieutenant Jack Roosevelt Robinson stepped aboard

bus at Camp Hood, the army base in Texas where he was stationed. He took a seat in the middle of the bus as it bounced toward the nearby town of Temple. He was twenty-five years old, with a bum ankle that was threatening to keep him from shipping out to Europe with the rest of his battalion.

Robinson had quickly established a reputation as a hothead at Camp Hood. As morale officer, he often heard complaints from black soldiers, and he rarely hesitated to take those complaints to his white superiors. When some of his peers complained that there were not enough seats for black soldiers in the post exchange, where they went for snacks, Robinson telephoned the provost marshal to bring the issue to his attention. The provost marshal, not alerted by the sound of Robinson's voice that he was black, asked how the lieutenant would feel if his own wife wound up "sitting next to a nigger." With that, Robinson blew. "Pure rage took over," he recalled. "I was shouting at the top of my voice. Every typewriter in headquarters stopped." The provost marshal hung up. Another time, when a captain refused to let him play on the Camp Riley baseball team, Robinson and the captain argued. The captain threatened to beat Robinson with a baseball bat. Robinson stepped in close and urged the captain to repeat his threat. "What did you say you were going to do?" he asked. Just then a colonel got between the men and forced them to separate.

But it was the incident on the bus that nearly ruined him.

The bus had gone only five or six blocks when the driver looked in the rearview mirror and spotted Robinson talking to a light-skinned black woman. The driver, mistaking the woman for white, stopped, got up, and ordered the lieutenant to take a seat in the rear. "I didn't even stop talking," Robinson recalled in *I Never Had It Made*, one of his autobiographies, "didn't even look at him. . . . I had no intention of being intimidated in moving to the back of the bus."

Robinson knew there was considerable risk in provoking a white man, even a lower ranking one. Throughout the war, black soldiers had been beaten and killed for less. In some cases, the mere sight of a black man in uniform had been enough to inspire brutal attacks. The sense among many whites, particularly in the South, was that black men serving in the military were beginning to think too much of themselves. Later, Rosa Parks would take the same stand as Robinson, refusing to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her brave decision touched off widespread protest and earned her a place in history as the so-called mother of the civil rights movement. Robinson's ride came eleven years earlier. It inspired few news stories, and no protests or marches.

The bus driver shouted at Robinson. At some point he used the word "nigger," which sent Robinson into a rage.

The driver warned that Robinson would be in trouble if he didn't shut up and obey.

Robinson said he didn't care, that he'd been in trouble his whole life.

"I walked up and put my finger right in his face," Robinson recalled. "I figured the best thing to do was not to shrink in a case like this, but get more bold, you know?" That was becoming a recurring theme in his life. "I put my finger right in his face and told him to leave me alone—that I didn't want to be bothered with him and I was sick and tired of being pestered."

The driver went for help. Soon a couple of military police officers arrived and took Robinson to meet their captain. In the meeting, Robinson not only complained about the

bus driver but went a step further, accusing his interrogator of being a racist. "Captain, tell me," Robinson said, seeking to provoke, "where are you from anyway?" Now it was the captain's turn to get angry. Robinson soon found himself under arrest.

At the military trial, he took the stand in his own defense, and while he admitted using obscenity in his argument with the driver, he justified his behavior. He told the jury about his grandmother, Edna Sims McGriff, his mother's mother, who had been born a slave in Georgia in 1858 and who had come to live with Mallie and the kids in Pasadena in the 1920s, a reminder of his family's bitter legacy right under his roof. He discussed the definition of the word nigger, and how it felt to be called by the name: "I looked it up once, but my grandmother gave me a good definition, she was a slave, and she said the definition was a low, uncouth person, and pertains to the negroid or negro. . . . I objected to being called a nigger by this private or by anybody else. . . . I told the captain, I said, ' . . . I do not consider myself a nigger at all. I am a Negro, but not a nigger.' "

Robinson's lawyers presented character witnesses, and then wrapped up their defense by arguing their client had been accused not because he'd committed any real crime but because a group of white men didn't like getting lip from an "uppity" black man. After a four-hour trial, he was found not guilty of all charges.

So it always seemed to go for Robinson, as he dashed in and out of trouble. Later in life, he would establish a reputation as the most cunning base-runner in the major leagues. For almost all other ballplayers, getting caught in a rundown on the base path was considered a grave error, and an almost certain out. For Robinson, it was often an opportunity. Sometimes after a hit, he would pretend to have taken too big a turn off first base, hoping to draw a throw. And then, when the toss came in behind him, he would bolt for second. It was remarkable how often he fooled opponents. It was as if it had never occurred to the outfielders that he might outsmart them. Like the black men and women who sang the blues, he made an art form out of hardship and trouble.

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After the army, it was time for Robinson to decide what he intended to do with his life. A job offer came from his former pastor, Karl Downs, who had moved from Pasadena to Austin, Texas, and now served as president of Samuel Huston College. Downs recruited Robinson to teach physical education and coach basketball at the all-black school. Not surprisingly, Robinson proved a tough coach, punishing players who missed practices or skipped classes. He grew frustrated at times, though, because his players were neither as determined nor as talented as he. In exhibition games, when his team fell behind, he would insert himself in the lineup, teaching his young athletes the absolute wrong lesson: that it was winning that mattered more than how you played the game. "He liked to play around the basket, rebounding and all that. He was tough around the basket," said Harold "Pea Vine" Adanandus, who was then the team's trainer. "He was just an exceptional athlete, and you could tell he still wanted to play."

Before the season's end, Robinson got a job offer from the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the top teams in baseball's Negro leagues. He considered himself a mere dabbler in baseball, and not even much of a fan. If he'd collected baseball cards as a kid, he never mentioned it. Still, he longed for real competition, and he knew he lacked the patience

for coaching. The Monarchs were one of the most successful squads on the Negro baseball circuit, and their offer of four hundred dollars a month in salary looked much better than any of his other options. Yet he soon came to despise his first foray into professional baseball. A "pretty miserable way to make a buck," he called it. For a perfectionist such as Robinson, the Negro leagues were torture. Sometimes the ballplayers were permitted only on the diamonds and not in the locker rooms, because the white men who controlled the facilities didn't want their showers used by black men. Sometimes there were no hotels willing to take them, sometimes no restaurants. The men considered themselves lucky if they were permitted to go in through the back door of a putrid roadside rest stop, pay for some hamburgers, and walk back to the bus with grease-stained brown bags in hand. Every day offered new lessons in humiliation. Most of the Monarchs were accustomed to the indignities, but Robinson would never get used to them.

"We . . . pulled up in service stations in Mississippi where drinking fountains served black and white, and a couple of times we had to leave without our change, he'd get so mad," teammate Othello Renfroe recalled of Robinson. Once, when the white owner of a gas station refused to let the men use the rest room, Robinson ordered the driver of the team bus to stop filling the bus's enormous twin tanks. They'd buy their gas elsewhere, he announced. The station's owner relented. The Monarchs had faced similar indignities in their travels, but never had one of them responded so forcefully.

Even the ballgames frustrated Robinson. The action was sloppy. Some games were never completed. If teams were in a rush to get back on the road, they might knock out after six or seven innings. The Monarchs played hard at times, but only at times. Robinson fit in like a schoolmarm in a brothel.

The Negro leagues were not exactly a business juggernaut, but they were most profitable in the years after the war, one of the few black-owned and black-operated institutions with national recognition and a widespread support. The best-known black player in the country was Leroy "Satchel" Paige, one of Robinson's teammates, and a celebrity of the brightest wattage. Paige, long-legged and long-armed, spoke as cunning as he threw. He bragged that his aim was so precise that he could "nip frosting off a cake with my fastball." But he had much more than a fastball. "I use my single windup, my double windup, my triple windup, my hesitation windup, my no windup," he once said. "I also use my step-'n-pitch-it, my submariner, my sidearmer, and my bat dodger. Man's got to do what he's got to do." Which might well have become the motto for Negro-league baseball. Paige and the slugger Josh Gibson were the two greatest black ballplayers in the country. Either one of them could have been a star in the major leagues. Paige had proved on the barnstorming circuit that his pitches worked as effectively on white hitters as they did on black, but he still doubted the major leagues would give him a chance. Even if they did, he was fond of saying, they would never pay him anywhere near what he made in the Negro baseball business.

In one interview, Paige blasted black journalists for pushing integration, warning that it would only bring trouble. "You keep on blowing off about getting us players in the league without thinking about our end of it . . .," he said, "without thinking how tough it's going to be for a colored ballplayer to come out of the clubhouse and have all the white guys calling him nigger and black so-and-so. . . . What I want to know is what the

hell's gonna happen to good will when one of those colored players, goaded out of his senses by repeated insults, takes a bat and busts fellowship in his damned head?"—

Robinson's career with the Monarchs was brief. Researchers have recovered box scores from only fourteen league-sanctioned games in which he played. He almost certainly played more than that, but there's no telling how many. In those fourteen outings, Robinson hit .434, with one home run and one stolen base, which is astounding given how little experience he had in baseball.

Traveling with the team, Robinson longed for a reunion with Rachel. He wrote to her several times a week. But he didn't know what to do next. There seemed no future in the game, and as long as he kept kicking around with the Monarchs, his future with Rachel remained on hold, too. "I never expected the walls [of segregation] to come tumbling down in my lifetime," he wrote years later. "I began to wonder why I should dedicate my life to a career where the boundaries for progress were set by racial discrimination." He was not one of those ballplayers who loved the game so deeply that he would find a way to play no matter the pay and no matter the conditions. If baseball didn't need him, then he didn't need baseball.

TWO

“SOME GOOD COLORED PLAYERS”

On August 24, 1945, the Kansas City Monarchs visited Comiskey Park to play a double-header against the Chicago American Giants. Robinson was nursing a sore shoulder. Between games, columnist Fay Young of the *Chicago Defender* cornered the young ballplayer and asked if he planned to go east to meet with Branch Rickey, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Rickey was scouting players for a new Negro league, according to news reports, and promising that his organization would be more stable and more professionally managed than the other Negro leagues.

Rickey was known throughout the land of baseball as a careful calculator, but something about his plan didn't add up, and Fay Young sensed it. Negro-league baseball was a tricky business, full of hustlers and fly-by-nighters. Like the used-car trade, it was lucrative and professionally run in some locations, and a complete mess in others. Young couldn't understand why Rickey, a man of famously high standards, would want to slosh around in such muck. The writer wondered if the Brooklyn boss had an ulterior motive, and he pressed Robinson for whatever information he had.

Was he going to Brooklyn? Was he meeting Rickey?

“Just rumors,” the ballplayer insisted.

Robinson was a newcomer to Negro-league ball, and far from the best player around. But his football heroics at UCLA had made him famous, which meant he might be a nice catch for a white businessman trying to bring attention to a new league. If Robinson planned to cut a deal with Rickey, the athlete had a duty to inform readers of the *African American Defender*, Young argued.

“Well, it's a rumor,” Robinson said, smiling. “If you don't see me here tomorrow, there's something to it.”

The next day, Robinson was gone.

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During the war years, when other teams had scaled back their scouting operations to save money, Branch Rickey, sensing opportunity, doubled the budget for Dodger scouts. He was a staunch patriot and never doubted that the United States would win the war quickly. At the same time, he addressed a secret meeting of the Dodgers' board of directors and asked their approval to pursue black ballplayers. In the meeting, which was held before the start of the 1943 season at the exclusive New York Athletic Club, the directors granted their permission, although they warned Rickey that it was one thing to seek a competitive advantage on the ball field and another thing to set out to change the

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