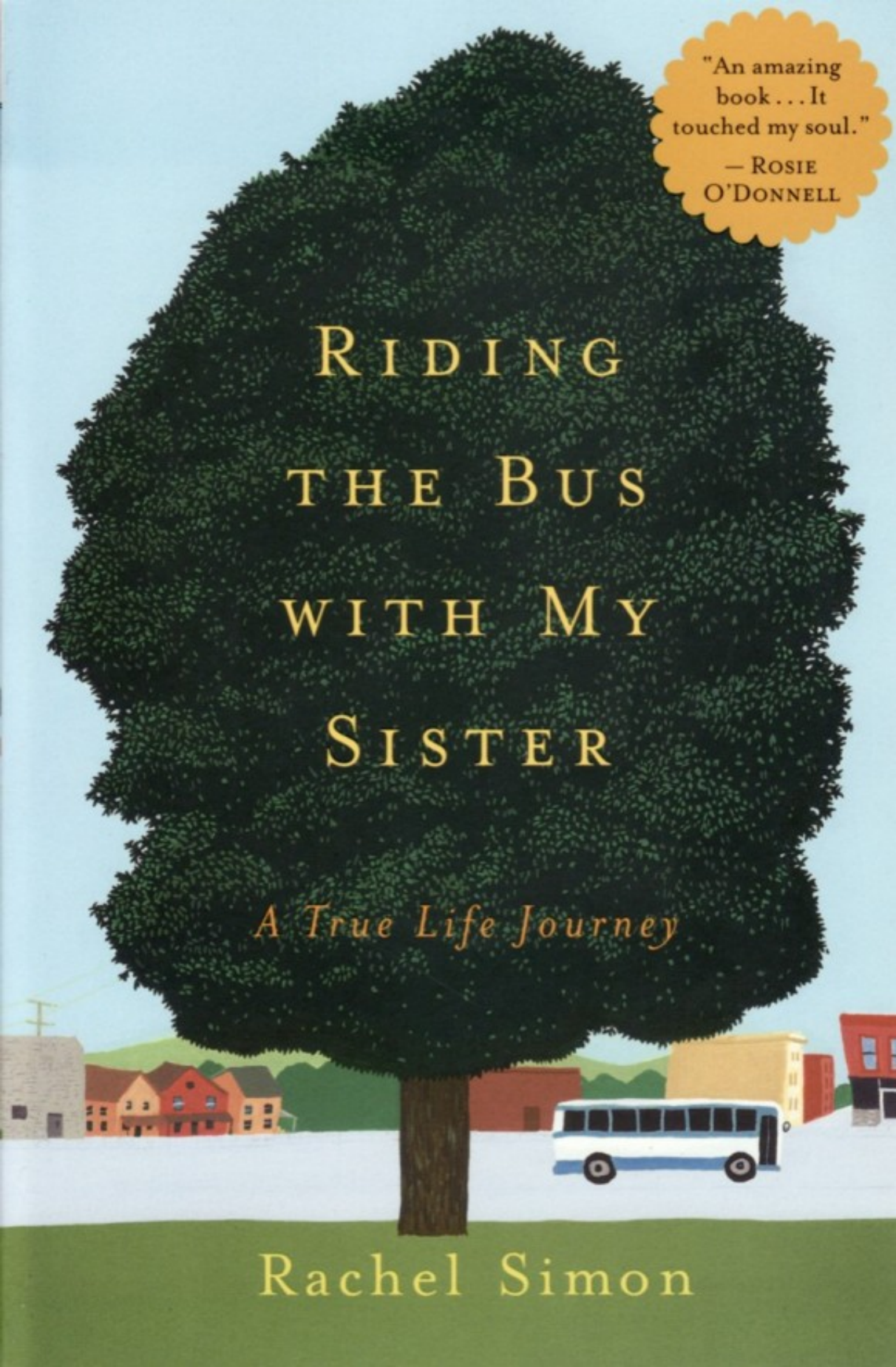


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— ROSIE
O'DONNELL



RIDING
THE BUS
WITH MY
SISTER

A True Life Journey

Rachel Simon

The Journey

“Wake up,” my sister Beth says. “We won’t make the first *bus*.”

At six A.M. on this winter morning, moonlight still bathes her apartment. She’s already dressed: grape-juice-colored T-shirt and pistachio shorts, with a purple Winnie-the-Pooh backpack slung over her shoulder. I struggle awake and into my clothes: black sweater, black leggings. Beth and I, both in our late thirties, were born eleven months apart, but we are different in more than age. She owns a wardrobe of blazingly bright colors and can leap out of bed before dawn. She is also a woman with mental retardation.

I’ve come here to give Beth her holiday present: I’ve come to ride the buses.

For six years, she has lived on her own. In her subsidized apartment, a few blocks off the main avenue of a gritty, medium-sized Pennsylvania city, each of her days could easily resemble the next — she has a lot of time, having been laid off from her job busing tables at a fast food restaurant. She has enough money to live on, as a recipient of government assistance for people with disabilities.

But Beth also has something else: ingenuity.

This trait isn’t generally ascribed to people who live on the periphery of society’s vision. Like indigent seniors, people with untreated mental illness, and the homeless, Beth is someone many people in the mainstream don’t think much about, or even see.

Six months after she moved to her fifth-floor apartment, she realized that she was lonely, and had consumed all the episodes of *The Price Is Right* and *All My Children* that she could tolerate. So one day she decided to ride the buses. Not just to ride them the way most of us do, and which her aides had trained her to do a few years before. She wasn’t interested in something as ordinary as getting from one location to another. She wanted to ride them her way.

It was, Beth recalls, October 18, 1993, when, for reasons she can-

not remember, she first picked her monthly bus pass off her coffee table. Then she pressed the first-floor button in her high-rise elevator, walked through the vestibule to the street, hailed a bus on the corner, climbed the steps toward the driver, settled into a seat, and looped through the city from dawn to dusk, trying out one run after another, bus to bus to bus. Soon she was riding a dozen a day, some for five minutes, others for hours, befriending drivers and passengers as she wound through the narrow streets of the city and its wreath of rolling hills. Within weeks she could navigate anywhere within a ten-mile radius, and, by studying the shifting constellations of characters and the schedules posted weekly in the bus terminal, she could calculate who would be at precisely which intersection at any moment of any day. She staked out friendships all over the city, weaving her own traveling community.

Beth's case manager had not suggested this, nor had Regis and Kathie Lee, nor even Beth's boyfriend. This idea was hers alone.

We hurry down Main Street, the moon setting behind the buildings. My guide, whose fuzzy brown hair is still wet from her morning bath, points out the identifying numbers on bus shelters, the scowls of grouchy drivers. She wears no watch, telling time instead by the buses.

We dart into the downtown McDonald's, already, at six-thirty A.M., filled with early risers: clusters of the elderly playing cards, solitary office workers bent over newspapers. Beth orders coffee, though she doesn't drink coffee, palming out the eighty-four cents before the server asks.

Then we bolt into the dawn, making a beeline for a bus shelter. Head craned down the street, Beth giggles as she once did when I took her to a Donny Osmond concert: thrilled, in her element. She clutches her yellow radio and a tangle of key chains — twenty-nine, by her count — Cookie Monster, smiley faces, peace signs, which hold a total of two keys. She does a drumbeat on her laminated bus pass, stickered 000001. Every month she renews it, arriving first in line at the sales window. That sticker is her private coat of arms, proof that she's queen of these routes.

Our first bus draws up to the curb. The driver, Claude, throws open his door as if welcoming us to his house. Beth clomps aboard,

arm thrust forward with the coffee. He takes the steaming plastic cup, then thumbs four quarters into her hand. "Our agreement," he explains to me.

Then she spins toward "her" seat — the premier spot on the front sideways bench, catty-corner from his, so she'll be as close to him as possible. I sit beside her; as a suburbanite who relies on my car and the occasional commuter train, it is my first time on a city transit bus in years. We pull out, past working-class row houses, a Christian lawn ornament store, a farmers' market, an abandoned candy factory, Asian grocers. Short hair, just beginning to gray, fans out from underneath Claude's driver's cap. Beth announces that he's forty-two, with a birthday coming soon. He laughs as she offers the exact date and then explains how he likes to spend his birthdays. "She remembers everything," he says.

He asks if she'll change into her flip-flops should this chilly day become as balmy as the forecast predicts. "If iz over *forty*," she replies, "you know I *will*." He tells me they "jam" with her radio when the bus is empty. "Real loud," she adds. They recall some trouble with a rider months ago. "She was mean," Beth says indignantly. Claude agrees, and recounts the altercation, in which a passenger vehemently challenged his knowledge of upcoming stops, and which culminated, after the malcontent had finally exited, in Claude's relief that Beth was sharing the ride — he had someone who could sigh along with him.

Moments later, we pass Beth's boyfriend on his bicycle. Also an adult with mental retardation, Jesse has paused at a crosswalk, his maple brown face pointing straight ahead, his blind left eye looking milky in the light, sun glinting off the helmet Beth long ago convinced him to wear. The decade they've been together is more than a fourth of their lives. Claude picks up his intercom mike and calls out, "Hello, Jesse!" Jesse looks over. We twist around in our seats, and his mustached face brightens as we wave.

All day, when we mount Jacob's bus, Estella's, Rodolpho's, one driver after another greets Beth heartily. They tell me she helps out: reminds them where to turn on runs they haven't driven for a while, teaches them the Top Ten songs on the radio, keeps them abreast of schedule and personnel changes, and visits them in the

"A HEARTWARMING, LIFE-AFFIRMING JOURNEY THROUGH
BOTH THE PRESENT AND THE PAST...READ THIS BOOK.
IT MIGHT JUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE."

—*BOSTON HERALD*

Beth is a spirited woman with mental retardation who spends nearly every day riding the buses in her Pennsylvania city. The drivers, a lively group, are her mentors; her fellow passengers are her community. Beth, who lives independently and has a boyfriend, is a joyful, endearing, and feisty individual. Her single sister, Rachel, a writer and professor, masks her emotional isolation and loneliness behind her hyperbusy schedule. When Beth asks Rachel to accompany her on the buses for one year, they take a transcendent journey that changes Rachel's life in incredible ways, leads her to accept her sister at long last—and teaches her to slow down and enjoy the ride.



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"With tenderness and fury, heartbreak and acceptance...
Simon comes to the inescapable conclusion that we are all riders
on the bus, and on the bus we are all the same."

—Jacquelyn Mitchard, author of *The Deep End of the Ocean*



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