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JUDGE ORDERS INTEGRATION
—Arkansas Gazette, Tuesday, September 3, 1957

Dear Diary,
It's happening today. What I'm afraid of most is that they won't like me and integration won't work and Little Rock won't become like Cincinnati, Ohio.

As we walked down the front steps, Mother paused and turned to look back at Grandma, who was standing at the edge of the porch. In their glance I saw the fear they had never voiced in front of me. Grandma lingered for a moment and then rushed to encircle me in her arms once more. “God is always with you,” she whispered as she blinked back tears.

Trailing behind Mother, I made my way down the concrete path as she climbed into the driver's seat behind the wheel of our green Pontiac. I don't know why I veered off the sidewalk, taking the shortcut through the wet grass that would make damp stains on my saddle shoes. Perhaps I wanted some reason not to go to the integration. I knew if Grandma noticed, she would force me to go back and polish my shoes all over again. But she was so preoccupied she didn't say a word. As I climbed into the passenger's seat, I looked back to see her leaning against the porch column, her face weary, her eyes filled with tears.

Mother pressed the gas pedal, and we gained speed. I always watched closely because I wanted my license by my sixteenth birthday—only three months away. I knew the process well by now. She had guided me through practice sessions in the parking lot next to the grocery store often enough.

We moved through the streets in silence, listening to the newsman's descriptions of the crowds gathering at Central High. I noticed some of our neighbors standing on the sidewalk, many more than were usually out this time of day.

“That's strange,” Mama mumbled as she waved to people who didn't bother waving back. “No matter, maybe they didn't see me.” Our neighbors had always been so friendly, but now they peered at us without their usual smiles. Then I saw Kathy and Ronda, two of my school friends, standing with their mothers. Anxious to catch their attention, I waved out the window with a loud “Hi.” Their disapproving glances matched those of the adults.

“I didn't do anything to them,” I said, not understanding their reason.

“Then you don't have anything to be concerned about.” Mother Lois maneuvered through the unusually heavy traffic. “I don't know where all the cars could have come from,” she said. We both craned our necks, curious about all the unfamiliar cars and people. Certainly there had never before been so many white people driving down the streets of our quiet, tree-lined neighborhood.

The voice on the radio grew more urgent as the announcer described the ranks of Arkansas National Guardsmen who ringed Central High School. Hearing the news as we drew near our destination, Mother said, “I think I'll park here. The meeting place is quite a ways away, but from the looks of things we won't get any closer.”

The announcer said it was 7:55 as Mama squeezed into a parking space, and we settled ourselves quietly for a moment, trying
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to identify the buzzing noise that seemed as if it were all around us. It resembled the sound of crowds at my high school football games. But how could that be? The announcer said there was a crowd, but surely it couldn’t be that big.

“Well, I guess we’d better get going.” Mother was squinting, cupping her hands over her eyes to protect them against the glare of sunlight. A stream of white people were hurrying past us in the direction of Central High, so many that some had to walk on the grass and in the street. We stepped out of the car and into their strange parade, walking in silence in the midst of their whispers and glares.

Anxious to see the familiar faces of our friends or some of our own people, we hurried up the block lined with wood-frame houses and screened-in porches. I strained to see what lay ahead of us. In the distance, large crowds of white people were lining the curb directly across from the front of Central High. As we approached behind them, we could see only the clusters of white people that stretched for a distance of two blocks along the entire span of the school building. My mind could take in the sights and sounds only one by one: flashing cameras, voices shouting in my ears, men and women jostling each other, old people, young people, people running, uniformed police officers walking, men standing still, men and women waving their fists, and then the long line of uniformed soldiers carrying weapons just like in the war movies I had seen.

Everyone’s attention seemed riveted on the center of the line of soldiers where a big commotion was taking place. At first we couldn’t see what they were looking at. People were shouting and pointing, and the noise hurt my ears and muffled the words. We couldn’t understand what they were saying. As we drew near, the angry outbursts became even more intense, and we began to hear their words more clearly. “Niggers, go home! Niggers, go back where you belong!”

I stood motionless, stunned by the hurtful words. I searched for something to hang on to, something familiar that would comfort me or make sense, but there was nothing.

“Two, four, six, eight, we ain’t gonna integrate!” Over and over, the words rang out. The terrifying frenzy of the crowd was building like steam in an erupting volcano.

“We have to find the others,” Mama yelled in my ear. “We’ll be safer with the group.” She grabbed my arm to pull me forward, out of my trance. The look on her face mirrored the terror I felt. Some of the white men and women standing around us seemed to be observing anxiously. Others with angry faces and wide-open mouths were screaming their rage. Their words were becoming increasingly vile, fueled by whatever was happening directly in front of the school.

The sun beat down on our heads as we made our way through the crowd searching for our friends. Most people ignored us, jostling each other and craning their necks to see whatever was at the center of the furor. Finally, we got closer to the hub of activity. Standing on our toes, we stretched as tall as we could to see what everyone was watching.

“Oh, my Lord,” Mother said.

It was my friend Elizabeth they were watching. The anger of that huge crowd was directed toward Elizabeth Eckford as she stood alone, in front of Central High, facing the long line of soldiers, with a huge crowd of white people screeching at her back. Barely five feet tall, Elizabeth cradled her books in her arms as she desperately searched for the right place to enter. Soldiers in uniforms and helmets, cradling their rifles, towered over her. Slowly, she walked first to one and then another opening in their line. Each time she approached, the soldiers closed ranks, shutting her out. As she turned toward us, her eyes hidden by dark glasses, we could see how erect and proud she stood despite the fear she must have been feeling.

As Elizabeth walked along the line of guardsmen, they did nothing to protect her from her stalkers. When a crowd of fifty or more closed in like diving vultures, the soldiers stared straight ahead, as if posing for a photograph. Once more, Elizabeth stood still, stunned, not knowing what to do. The people surrounding us shouted, stomped, and whistled as though her awful predicament were a triumph for them.

I wanted to help her, but the human wall in front of us would
not be moved. We could only wedge through partway. Finally, we realized our efforts were futile; we could only pray as we watched her struggle to survive. People began to applaud and shout, “Get her, get the nigger out of there. Hang her black ass!” Not one of those white adults attempted to rescue Elizabeth. The hulking soldiers continued to observe her peril like spectators enjoying a sport.

Under siege, Elizabeth slowly made her way toward the bench at the bus stop. Looking straight ahead as she walked, she did not acknowledge the people yelping at her heels, like mad dogs. Mother and I looked at one another, suddenly conscious that we, too, were trapped by a violent mob.

Ever so slowly, we eased our way backward through the crowd, being careful not to attract attention. But a white man clawed at me, grabbing my sleeve and yelling, “We got us a nigger right here!” Just then another man tugged at his arm distracting him. Somehow I managed to scramble away. As a commotion began building around us, Mother took my arm, and we moved fast, sometimes crouching to avoid attracting more attention.

We gained some distance from the center of the crowd and made our way down the block. But when I looked back, I saw a man following us, yelling, “They’re getting away! Those niggers are getting away!” Pointing to us, he enlisted others to join him. Now we were being chased by four men, and their number was growing.

We scurried down the sidewalk, bumping into people. Most of the crowd was still preoccupied watching Elizabeth. Panic-stricken, I wanted to shout for help. But I knew it would do no good. Policemen stood by watching Elizabeth being accosted. Why would they help us?

“Melba, ... take these keys,” Mother commanded as she tossed them to me. “Get to the car. Leave without me if you have to.”

I plucked the car keys from the air. “No, Mama, I won’t go without you.” Suddenly I felt the sting of her hand as it struck the side of my face. She had never slapped me before. “Do what I say!” she shouted. Still, I knew I couldn’t leave her there. I reached back to take her arm. Her pace was slowing, and I tried to pull her forward. The men were gaining on us. If we yelled for help or made any fuss, others might join our attackers. Running faster, I felt myself begin to wear out. I didn’t have enough breath to keep moving so fast. My knees hurt, my calves were aching, but the car was just around the next corner.

The men chasing us were joined by another carrying a rope. At times, our pursuers were so close I could look back and see the anger in their eyes. Mama’s pace slowed, and one man came close enough to touch her. He grabbed for her arm but instead tugged at her blouse. The fabric ripped, and he fell backward. Mama stepped out of her high-heeled shoes, leaving them behind, her pace quickening in stocking feet.

One of the men closest to me swung at me with a large tree branch but missed. I felt even more panic rise up in my throat. If he hit me hard enough to knock me over, I would be at his mercy. I could hear Grandma India’s voice saying, God is always with you, even when things seem awful. I felt a surge of strength and a new wind. As I turned the corner, our car came into sight. I ran hard—faster than ever before—unlocked the door, and jumped in.

Mother was struggling, barely able to keep ahead of her attackers. I could see them turning the corner close on her heels, moving fast toward us. I swung open the passenger door for Mother and revved the engine. Barely waiting for her to shut the door, I shoved the gearshift into reverse and backed down the street with more speed than I’d ever driven forward. I slowed to back around the corner. One of the men caught up and pounded his fists on the hood of our car, while another threw a brick at the windshield.

Turning left, we gained speed as we drove through a hall of shouts and stones and glaring faces. But I knew I would make it because the car was moving fast and Mama was with me.
We sped away from Central High School's neighborhood and into more familiar streets where we should have felt safe. Mother directed me not to drive straight home but to circle around until we knew for certain that the men from the mob weren't chasing us. Even though I didn't have a license and had only practiced driving in the parking lot, she wouldn't allow me to stop so we could switch places. Her face was drained and her eyes haunted by a kind of fear I had not seen in her before.

Again and again, she urged me to keep moving while she frantically searched the radio dial for word of Elizabeth. We tried desperately to think of whom we could call to rescue her. We couldn't call the police. We couldn't call her parents; they didn't have a telephone. And Mrs. Bates and the NAACP folks were at Central High waiting with my friends.

As I drove, I couldn't help noticing that the streets were clogged with cars and people that did not belong in our neighborhood. There were dust-covered trucks full of tobacco-chewing white men, their naked arms and shoulders sporting tattoos. When we pulled into our backyard, Grandmother India was waiting for us with an anxious expression. "Thank God, you made it home," she gasped.

"Warriors Don't Cry"

"What about Elizabeth and the others? Have you heard anything?"

"Yes, yes, but let's get inside."

"We've got to call the ministers at the church," Mother said, scrambling up the back stairs.

"Morning," hollered our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Conovers, over the backyard fence. "Morning, child. I heard about you on the radio. I think you'll better back off them white people and stay home before we all get hurt."

"Hurry, child. Hurry." Grandma India ushered us through the back door. In her face I saw reason to be even more frightened. There were no smiles, only a furrowed brow and terrified eyes. As we entered the house, I saw that she had locked all the doors and windows and pulled all of the shades. As soon as we were safely inside, she piled chairs against the locked back door.

"So what about Elizabeth?" I said.

"I think she's safe. A white woman and man sat with her on the bus bench, protecting her from those awful people clawing at her. Then they got on the bus with her and rode away, so she's okay."

"That's a real miracle," Mother said.

"And the others—Terry and Ernie and those guys?"

"The soldiers turned them away from that school just like they did Elizabeth. They're safe. They didn't catch as much trouble, because they were in a large group with Mrs. Bates and some of those ministers. But still they didn't have no Sunday picnic; they had to get out of there real fast."

Even though Mother looked exhausted, nothing would do for her but to get dressed and go to work. "We've got to lead as normal a life as possible," she argued as we described to Grandma what had happened to us.

"One report said those troops were armed with rifles, nightsticks, and bayonets. Did you see any of that, Melba?"

"Uh, yes, ma'am. I think I saw guns."

"Maybe things got mixed up. Perhaps the governor had them"
there to keep peace, and they mixed up their orders," Grandma mused.

"Seems to me they had ample opportunity to keep peace by protecting Elizabeth," Mother Lois sounded very angry. "I think this situation is different than what we bargained for. We'd better let things cool off a bit. You can go back to Horace Mann for now."

Grandma squared her shoulders and said, "I don't see how that will solve anything. Pretty soon, white folks will think it's as okay to enslave us as it is to use soldiers to keep our kids out of school."

Mother stood in silence, pondering Grandma's words for a long moment. Her expression reflected the painful realization that maybe what Grandma said was true. And then suddenly she said, "I had almost forgotten; I have to speak to you, Melba, and I want you to listen closely to every word and obey. Under no circumstances must you ever mention to anyone what happened to us this morning. Even if you have to tell a white lie and say we didn't go to Central, we have to keep this our secret."

Telling a white lie was something she'd never before given me permission to do. She swore me to absolute silence, saying above all else those men must not connect us with their ugly deed. If we told the story and they found out who they were chasing, they might come after us to finish the job. As she spoke, her voice quivered and her hands shook. I had never seen her so uncontrolled. She looked the way I felt, battered and weary. Finally, she instructed, "Melba, don't you dare go outside, girl. I want to know where you are every moment." She pulled on her jacket, peeked through the glass in the front door, then hurried out onto the porch, almost running around the house to the car.

I resigned myself to the fact that Grandma wouldn't allow me to visit Thelma or Minnie Jean or any other friends who lived nearby. I wanted to call them for more news of what happened to them, but before I could pick up the receiver, the phone began to ring off the hook.

"Don't you dare answer," Grandma shouted to me from the kitchen.

I plopped down at the dining room table and watched her hop up and down for what seemed like a thousand times to answer the phone. It didn't stop all morning. First, it was the call from the NAACP, then the ministers. There were our frightened neighbors and friends who said they really cared about me but insisted they have answers to a string of their nosy questions. And then there were more hecklers threatening death. Our family minister called and promised to send menfolk to protect us. Grandma said one of the would-be protectors had already phoned saying he wasn't certain whether he wanted to be seen at our house at the cost of endangering his own family and job.

By noon, I was saturated with all the news reports and anxious to have some word from the others. I felt restless, trapped. I had helped Grandma with all the chores she'd allow, and I offered to help her with those she insisted she'd do alone. I had played all my Nat King Cole and Johnny Mathis records for romantic daydreaming. I had read through the latest issue of Seventeen magazine and sneaked through the pages of my secret copy of True Romance; I was so bored I thought I'd keel over.

"I think I want to go back to Horace Mann," I told my grandmother. "At least I'll have assignments and friends and all sorts of wonderful first school day things to do."

"One little setback—and you want out," she said. "Naw, you're not a quitter."

In my diary I wrote:

I was disappointed not to see what is inside Central High School.

I don't understand why the governor sent grown-up soldiers to keep us out.

I don't know if I should go back.

But Grandma is right, if I don't go back, they will think they have won. They will think they can use soldiers to frighten us, and
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"We'll always have to obey them. They'll always be in charge if I don't go back to Central and make the integration happen."

By late afternoon the ringing phone, the hot weather, and my confinement were driving me nuts, so when the phone rang, I grabbed for it.

"Where were you?" I could hear annoyance in Minnie Jean's voice.

"I was there," I said. "Across the street. I saw Elizabeth being chased by those ugly people. Why was she alone?"

"Remember, she doesn't have a phone, so she didn't get that midnight call. She didn't know where or when to meet us."

"Mama and I barely made it out of there!" I said, being cautious not to tell all.

"We got outta there as fast as we could. First we went to the superintendent's office. We waited there for an hour, sitting on those hard benches. Then Mrs. Bates dragged us on to the United States Attorney's office, to see a Mr. Cobb."

"Why?"

"She said since Judge Davies made a federal order, we should go there, but Cobb sent us on to the FBI office. That was kind of secret and fun. Those guys look just the way they do on television, like they know something but they won't tell."

"Yeah, but what did they do?"

"Asked a lot of questions and wrote the answers down."

"Questions?"

"Yeah, all about where we stood and who did what to us. Took hours and I was sweating so bad I thought I would die."

"Well, are they gonna do anything?"

"Investigate, they said they'd investigate."

"Sure, by that time we could be dead."

"You ain't kidding. That mob was outright nasty. I gotta go now, but can you meet me in fifteen minutes and we'll go to the Community Center?"

"The Community Center," I whispered. It seemed like forever since I'd had an ordinary afternoon there listening to records and talking to friends who didn't use the word "integration." I thought about the wonderful times Minnie Jean and I had shared—times when our greatest concern was saving enough allowance to buy a new record or praying to be asked to walk to the cafeteria with the right boy. Maybe our lives could be that way again. I tiptoed past Grandma, peacefully snoozing in her rocking chair. Suddenly she was awake. "Just where do you think you're going, Missy?"

"Uh, to the Community Center. I didn't want to disturb you. I thought you were sleeping."

"Uh, huh. Have a seat. The best you can do is let up a window. But you ain't going to no Community Center."

I couldn't stop the rush of tears. I ran to my room and fell onto the bed, burying my face in the pillow to hide the sobs that wrenched my insides. All my disappointment over not getting into Central High and the mob chase as well as the big sudden changes in my life over the past few weeks came crashing in on me.

Then I heard Grandma Inda padding across the room and felt the weight of her body shift the plane of the mattress as she sat down.

"You had a good cry, girl?" Her voice was sympathetic but also one sliver away from being angry.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You'll make this your last cry. You're a warrior on the battlefield for your Lord. God's warriors don't cry, 'cause they trust that he's always by their side. The women of this family don't break down in the face of trouble. We act with courage, and with God's help, we ship trouble right on out."

"But I..." I tried to explain.

"But nothing. Now, you get yourself together, read the Twenty-Third Psalm, and don't ever let me see you behave this way again."

"Yes, ma'am." The anger in her voice hurt my feelings, but her warm hand patted my arm to reassure me of her love. From then on, I knew I could only cry when no one would hear me.

I became very anxious as I watched the curtain of dusk shadow the sun. Although I relished the protective veil of night,
I feared the men who had chased us earlier might use the cover of darkness to hurt us. For much of the early evening, my family hovered in the living room reading newspapers, listening to the radio, and watching the news. There were the ever-present phone calls to frighten us. Sometimes they even entertained us, as when we heard Grandma give them her call-to-worship, reading Bible verses and asking them if they had found the Lord.

"Whew, that was quite a workout," she said, fanning herself with a folded newspaper and settling down into her favorite chair. "White ministers have their work cut out for them."

Turning away from the television, Mother said, "Yeah, but I'm not certain those ministers will get their work done before we're driven out of our minds by the phone calls. I think we'll have to get another telephone number. We can't go on this way."

"Give it a few more days," Grandma said. "Surely . . . surely they'll get tired and go away."

("You know the effort they made to integrate over in North Little Rock failed dismally," Mother Lois said. She went on to explain to us how the attempt to integrate North Little Rock's white high school had also been met with a violent and angry crowd.

And then she told us of a frightening talk she had had with one of the administrators at the school where she taught seventh-grade English.

"He started the conversation innocently enough, but then he asked me why I would subject my daughter to being the first to integrate. I told him if nobody takes responsibility for being the first, it will never get done. On and on he went, asking questions and describing the worst possible outcomes. Then he warned that some North Little Rock white school officials might take it personally that I allowed Melba to go to Central."

"I think this might be a time when we have to keep our business close to our chests," Mother cautioned. "I didn't give him any details of our encounter this morning. He asked me point-blank if I would take you out of school, and I said we'd have to see how things worked out."
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Gangs of gun-toting renegades are reportedly arriving from surrounding states to join segregationists’ fight to halt integration.

Meanwhile, Governor Faubus continues to predict blood will run in the streets if the federal order to integrate schools is enforced.

“I don’t see why we should allow these silly white people to frighten us into giving up our lives. I’ll start dinner, and I expect you all to help.” Grandma gathered up the paper and headed for the kitchen.

The shrill ring of the telephone upset me even more now that I had seen my enemies. I imagined the callers to resemble those men who had chased me. It felt as though they were entering my home each time they called. I could tell Mother felt the same way. With each ring, her expression turned grimmer.

“I’ll get it.” Conrad’s voice was less enthusiastic than usual, but still he made his chase for the phone until he was ordered to halt. Grandma had interrupted her cooking to hurry to the phone.

She called me from the hallway. “Sounds like maybe that boy Vince. You know, the polite one from church that we usually see at the wrestling matches.” Grandma beckoned me to take the receiver.

Vince, I thought to myself as my heart leaped with joy. Sure, I knew very well who Vince was. He attended high school in a neighboring town, but he was in my Sunday School class. It was Grandma who didn’t really know that Vince was my secret, pretend dreamboat boyfriend. I wasn’t at all certain he knew it. He was at least two years older than me and drove a new Chevy and looked sort of like a caramel-colored James Darren.

“Make this conversation brief, honey,” Grandma said as she handed me the phone.

“Hello . . .” I said, using the sexy whisper dictated by romance magazines.

“Melba?” It wasn’t Vince’s voice saying my name.

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“Yes,” I answered in a polite tone, dropping my pretense. The voice wasn’t at all familiar to me.

“Melba, nigger, I know where you live … Twelfth and Cross. We gonna get you tonight … ‘long about midnight.” I heard the receiver click, and he was gone. Did he know where my bedroom was? Would he come over now? Did he have a bomb? I couldn’t tell Mama and the others that he knew so much about us, so I choked back my tears.

As I entered the living room, faces turned my way in anticipation. I pretended a smile and said it was somebody else, another friend, not Vince.

I thought it was a sign that we were feeling more confident when we turned the television set off right in the middle of all the uproar about Central and took our places at the dinner table. After the blessing, the topic turned to what was really on our minds.

“I’ll keep watch again tonight. If I need you, I’ll call you,” Grandma said.

I could tell Mother was deep in thought; she studied her plate for a long moment before she looked up at Grandma and said, “Maybe you could get some sleep tonight, and I could stand guard?”

“That would be a real good idea except you don’t know how to shoot a gun. This is no time for on-the-job training,” Grandma was an expert marksman. As a railroad man, Grandpa had spent lots of time away from home. He had insisted Grandma learn to use a gun to protect herself because they had lived in an isolated area in the early years of their marriage.

“May I have on-the-job training?” Conrad asked.

“Not with this job, you can’t. God does not forgive those who kill others,” Grandma said. “Expert marksmanship is a must because you always got to aim for fingers or toes, and them’s small targets.”

When the call came from the NAACP saying perhaps we wouldn’t be going to school for several days because we’d be in court, we all seemed to relax. But our peace was only for a moment. Later that evening, phone callers told us that the
houses of several of our people connected with integration had been attacked. The news reports were revealing our names and addresses. Mother Lois said Conrad couldn’t play outside, and she demanded that from now on he walk to school in the company of several other children.

As I stood over the kitchen sink getting ready to wash the dishes, Grandma went about what for the past few nights she had been calling her security walk. She placed a flashlight by the back door near the stack of chairs that blocked it. Then she took Conrad with her as she double-checked the lock on every door and window in the house.

Peering out the window over the sink, I was astonished to see the neighborhood silent, empty, and eerie. Usually, this time of the year, all our windows and doors would stand open, like those of our neighbors. We would go back and forth bearing lemonade, engaged in happy chatter. I could always hear laughter as people gathered on their porches. Sometimes a gospel group or a blues singer practiced songs for everyone to enjoy. But tonight it was dead silent; it appeared everyone had locked their windows and doors.

"Melba." Mother Lois walked up behind me, interrupting my thoughts.

"Yes, ma’am."

"I guess I’d better say this while we’re alone and I’m thinking about it. I’m gonna leave a change of clothing hanging outside your bedroom closet door. If somebody ever gets into our house late at night, you grab those clothes, go out the back door, and run as fast as you can down to Ninth Street."

"But, Mama, why Ninth Street? You told me never to go to Ninth Street." It was the roughest area of Little Rock, where all the honky-tongs and sinful people gathered.

"No, but no white person would know you there. Those places stay open late at night and are filled with our people. They’ll protect you."

"But what about you and Grandma and Conrad? I wouldn’t wanna leave you."
"Nothing you can do, Mama’s church is having a secret meeting to kind of lift folks’ spirits and give a little help to those that really need it."

"We’re not out to hurt anybody, you know that."

"Just ignore our people who bad-mouth you. They got no thoughts about the future. They’re waiting for white folks to fix things for them."

"I’ve got to go."

"I understand—Miss India’s right there next to you, isn’t she? See you at the wrestling matches."

I ignored Grandma India’s questioning eyes as we headed for the living room to join Mama and Conrad, who were watching TV. I pretended I wasn’t absolutely overjoyed that Vince cared whether I would be going to the matches with Grandma on Saturday night. It was the one thing in my life that made me feel normal and happy, the way I did before integration took me over.

I settled down into my chair and buried my face in a magazine, refusing to give myself over to television. I wanted to save all of my mind for daydreaming about Vince and me, and how we might actually become real girlfriend and boyfriend. I wanted everybody to know I had a fellow of my own. Suddenly I heard a loud popping sound, like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. Then glass was breaking.

"Get down, now!" Grandma yelled.

I fell forward on my knees, looking at the broken glass. The green vase on top of the television set had shattered into a thousand pieces, spraying slivers all over the walls, the floor, and us. For an instant we were paralyzed, motionless, like people in a snapshot. Everything after that moment seemed to be happening in slow motion, frame by frame. Before we could move, there was another firecracker noise, and more glass fell to the floor.

"We gotta get the lights out,“ Mama ordered. Each of us moved to shut off the lights nearest us. My hands were shaking as I crawled over to turn off the television. I heard rustling sounds like somebody moving through the bushes just outside the window. Oh, God, I thought, they’re gonna come in and shoot all of us, Grandma and Mama and Conrad and me. What if it’s those men who chased us this morning. I couldn’t help myself; I was so frightened I wet my pants.

Grandma made her way through the broken glass to peek out the window, then looked back and signaled us to lie flat. Without making a sound, she took the rifle, opened the window, and rested the gun barrel on the sill. Slowly she squeezed off a shot. The noise it made was like a big explosion.

"Bingo! I hit it!"

"Hit what?“ I whispered.

"The old metal oil can—you know, the trash burner,“ Grandma said happily. "That might give them something to think about."

As she fired again, we heard people whispering and running along the side of our house, and finally the slamming of car doors.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Conners, our next-door neighbor, called. “You all got a problem in your backyard,” she told us. "After all that noise you all made over there, three white men scooted out of your yard as fast as flying bullets. Mr. Conners says they were all he could see, but just the same he’s got his double-barreled business partner loaded and he’s a-fixing to give you all some backup. A couple of the other neighbors are gonna prowl around to see what they can find.”

But, she added, her husband advised us not to call the police. "White cops ain’t no help in these kinds situations. Besides, then they’ll know exactly where you live and hang your butts for sure."

As I lay in bed that night, I felt so frightened, I couldn’t cry. Instead I lay silent for hours listening to noises outside, wondering if the men had really gone away and when they would come back.
CITY AND STATE POLICE TO BE THERE TODAY: OFFICIALS CONFIDENT. FAUBUS SAYS HE'S HOPING FOR NO UNREST; U.S. KEEPING CLOSE EYE ON LITTLE ROCK
—Arkansas Gazette, Monday, September 23, 1957

As I read the morning newspaper that Monday, what with all the changes, I thought maybe the headline would read, INTEGRATION HALTED AGAIN. At least this time it seemed everybody was expecting us to arrive at Central High School and go inside for classes.

As I walked back to the kitchen, I decided I would begin to mark off my days at Central High on the big wall calendar that belonged to Grandma. I longed to see all the cross marks fill the days that would become weeks and then months. I glanced at the month of September and picked the spot where I would put the first cross mark, if I completed the first day. Lord, please let me be strong enough to fill in this day and all the school days that follow, I whispered.

It was not yet eight o'clock when Mama and I parked at the curb, just outside Mrs. Bates's home. I was surprised to see so many people milling about the yard. There was double the usual throng of news reporters. Everybody spoke in whispers. We greeted each other as though there were a compelling reason not to talk in ordinary tones. I was ushered through the crowd into the living room, where radio and news reports held everyone's attention.

Hundreds are gathered at Central High to await the arrival of nine Negro students who will begin the court-ordered integration. Some believe the governor should have instructed the soldiers to remain at the school to keep order. Assistant Police Chief Gene Smith and a group of officers arrived at 7 A.M. to patrol the area. Fifty state police have joined them.

We nine acknowledged each other with nervous smiles and a very few whispered words. Adults nodded to each other with the kind of glances that seemed to carry secret messages as they periodically looked at their watches. The nervousness grew worse with each passing moment. People were pacing, pretending to smile, sitting a moment, then rising to pace again. After a while, I became one of those people. We were going to be late for school, no doubt—late on the first day. What would everybody think? The phone rang. It was time to be on our way.

Mother Lois looked as though she were on the brink of tears. As we filed silently out of the house, I waved good-bye to her. I wanted to hug her, but I didn't want everyone to think I was a baby. Other parents milled about, looking as if we were being carted off to be hanged. As we started to walk to the cars, they clutched at us as though they weren't completely certain we'd be coming back.

We settled ourselves into two cars. Mrs. Bates was in the first car with four of the nine, and a man introduced as C. C. Mercer. Another NAACP official, Frank Smith, was driving the car I rode in with the remaining four students. We watched the news reporters run to their vehicles and rev their engines. The non-white reporters seemed hesitant about getting started. They hovered together. That's when I realized it must be difficult, even dangerous, for our people to cover a story like this.

We seemed at first to be driving in circles. Our driver ex-
plained that the police advised we not take the usual route because segregationists might lie in wait for us. I looked at my watch. It was after eight-thirty. We'd be very late arriving—even later than I had feared.

Central High was located on Park Street, stretching a two-block distance between Fourteenth and Sixteenth streets. But the route we took confused my sense of direction. I was surprised when suddenly we pulled up to the side entrance at Sixteenth Street, just beyond Park. Amid noise and confusion, the driver urged us to get out quickly. The white hand of a uniformed officer reached out toward the car, opening the door and pulling me toward him as his urgent voice ordered us to hurry. The roar coming from the front of the building made me glance to my right. Only a half block away, I saw hundreds of white people, their bodies in motion, their mouths wide open as they shouted their anger.

"Get along," the voice beside me said. But I couldn't move; I was frozen by what I saw and heard. Policemen stood in front of wooden sawhorse barricades holding the people back. The rumble of the crowd was like that at a football game when the hero runs the ball to the end zone for a touchdown—only this time, none of the voices were cheering.

"The niggers! Keep the niggers out!" The shouts came closer. The roar swelled, as though their frenzy had been fired up by something. It took a moment to digest the fact that it was the sight of us.

Hustled along, we walked up the few concrete stairs, through the heavy double doors that led inside the school, and then up a few more stairs. It was like entering a darkened movie theater—amid the rush of a crowd eager to get seated before the picture begins. I was barely able to see where we were rushing to. There were blurred images all around me as we moved up more stairs. The sounds of footsteps, ugly words, insulting shouts, and whispered commands formed an echoing clamor.

"Niggers, niggers, the niggers are in." They were talking about me. The shouting wouldn't stop; it got louder as more joined in.

"They're in here! Oh, God, the niggers are in here!" one girl shouted, running ahead of us down the hallway.

"They got in. I smell something...."

"You niggers better turn around and go home."

I was racing to keep pace with a woman who shouted orders over her shoulders to us. Nobody had yet told us she was someone we could trust, someone we should be following. I tried to move among the angry voices, blinking, struggling to accustom my eyes to the very dim light. The unfamiliar surroundings reminded me of the inside of a museum—marble floors and stone walls and long winding hallways that seemed to go on forever. It was a huge, cavernous building, the largest I'd ever been in. Breathless, I made my legs carry me quickly past angry white faces, dodging fists that struck out at me.

"The principal's office is this way," whispered a petite woman with dark hair and glasses. "Hurry, now, hurry." I was walking as fast as I could. Then we were shoved into an office where there was more light. Directly in front of us, behind a long counter, a row of white people, mostly women, stood staring at us as though we were the world's eighth wonder.

In the daylight, I recognized Mrs. Huckaby, Central High's vice-principal for girls, who had been present at several of our earlier meetings with the school board.

"This is Jess Matthews, the principal," she said. "You remember him."

No, I didn't remember. He peered at us with an acknowledging frown and nod, then quickly walked away.

"Here are your class schedules and homeroom assignments. Wait for your guides," Mrs. Huckaby said.

That's when I noticed that just beyond the glass panels in the upper part of the door that led to the office clusters of students stood glaring at us. One boy opened the door and walked in, yelling. "You're not gonna let those niggers stay in here, are you?"

All at once, Thelma Mothershed slumped down on the wooden bench just inside the door of the office. Mrs. Huckaby hustled the boy out and turned her attention to Thelma, as we
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all did. She was pale, her lips and fingertips blue. Breathless as she was, she mustered a faint smile and tried to reassure us.

None of us wanted to leave her there with those white strangers, but Mrs. Huckaby seemed to be a take-charge person who would look after her. She ushered us out, saying we had to go. Just for an instant, I worried about how Thelma’s parents would get through the huge crowd outside to pick her up if she were really ill.

Three thirty-nine, that was the number of the homeroom on my card; I was assigned to the third floor. We quickly compared notes. Each of us was assigned to a different homeroom.

“Why can’t any of us be in the same homeroom or take classes together?” I asked. From behind the long desk, a man spoke in an unkind booming voice. “You wanted integration...you got integration.”

I turned to see the hallway swallow up my friends. None of us had an opportunity to say a real good-bye or make plans to meet. I was alone, in a daze, following a muscular, stocky white woman with closely cropped straight black hair. Up the stairs I went, squeezing my way past those who first blocked my path and then shouted hurtful words at me. “Frightened” did not describe my state; I had moved on to terrified. My body was numb. I was only aware of my head and thoughts and visions. I had fantasized about how wonderful it would be to get inside the huge beautiful castle I knew as Central High School. But the reality was so much bigger, darker, and more treacherous than I had imagined. I could easily get lost among its spiral staircases. The angry voices shouting at me made it all the more difficult to find my way through these unfamiliar surroundings. I was panic-stricken at the thought of losing sight of my guide. I ran to keep up with her.

“Move it, girlie,” she called back at me.

“Pheew!” one boy said, backing away from me. Others stopped, and joined in his ridicule. For an instant, I stood paralyzed.

“Don’t stop!” the woman commanded. Her words snapped me into action. I scuffled to move behind her. Suddenly I felt

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it—the sting of a hand slapped across my cheek, and then warm slimy saliva on my face, dropping to the collar of my blouse.

A woman stood toe-to-toe with me, not moving. “Nigger!” she shouted in my face again and again. She appeared to be a little older than my mother. Her face was distorted by rage. “Nigger bitch. Why don’t you go home?” she lashed out at me. “Next thing, you’ll want to marry one of our children.”

Mary, I thought, as I darted around her. I wasn’t even allowed to go on a real date. Grandma wouldn’t let me marry. Besides, why would I choose to marry one of those mean Little Rock white people? My temples throbbed, my cheek stung, the spit was still on my face. It was the first time I had ever been spat upon. I felt hurt, embarrassed...I wondered if I’d catch her germs. Before I could wipe it off, my guide’s harsh command summoned me to move.

“Get going. Now. Do you hear me? Move! Now!” I brushed the saliva off my nose with my hand.

As I entered the classroom, a hush fell over the students. The guide pointed me to an empty seat, and I walked toward it. Students sitting nearby quickly gathered their books and moved away. I sat down, surrounded by empty seats, feeling unbearably self-conscious. Still, I was relieved to be off my feet. I was disoriented, as though my world was blurred and leaning to the left, like a photograph snapped from a twisted angle and out of focus. A middle-aged woman, whom I assumed to be the teacher, ignored me.

“Open your book to page twelve,” she said, without allowing her eyes to acknowledge me.

“Are you gonna let that nigger coon sit in our class?” a boy shouted as he glared at me. I waited for the teacher to say or do something.

“Now, class, if you’ve done the homework, then you know——” A loud voice cut her off, shouting, “We can kick the crap out of this nigger,” the heckler continued. “Look, it’s twenty of us and one of her. They ain’t nothing but animals.”

Again, I waited for the teacher to speak up, but she said
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nothing. Some of the students snickered. The boy took his seat, but he kept shouting ugly words at me throughout the rest of the class. My heart was weeping, but I squeezed back the tears. I squared my shoulders and tried to remember what Grandma had said: “God loves you, child; no matter what, he sees you as his precious idea.”

Walking the gauntlet to my next class was even more harrowing. I had to go out behind the school, through the girls’ dressing room, down a long concrete walkway, and onto the playing field.

“You’d better watch yourself,” the guide warned as we moved at high speed through the hostile students. As we went outside to the walkway in the back of the school, I could hear the roar of the crowd in front of the school. It was even more deafening than the jeers immediately around me.

On the playing field, groups of girls were gathered tossing a volleyball. The teacher appeared to be a no-nonsense person. With a pleasant smile, she pointed me to a spot near the net and warned the other girls not to bother me.

“Let’s keep the game going, girls,” she said in a matter-of-fact way. The girls paused for a moment, looked at each other, looked at me, and then began tossing the ball back and forth. For just one instant, I was actually concerned about whether or not I could hit the ball and score. It took me a moment to realize it was whizzing awfully close to my head. I ducked, but they hit me real hard, shouting and cheering as they found their target.

And even as I was struggling to escape their cruelty, I was at the same time more terrified by the sound of the angry crowd in the distance. It must be enormous, I thought. How would the police keep them back?

“Get inside, Melba. Now!” The face of the gym teacher showed both compassion and alarm as she quietly pointed to a group of women some distance away, jumping over the rear fence as they shouted obscenities at me. “Hurry!”

I started to run for my life. “Nigger... nigger...,” one woman cried, hot on my heels. “Get the nigger.” Three of them had broken away from the pack and were gaining on me. I was running at top speed when someone stuck out a foot and tripped me. I fell face forward, cutting my knee and elbow. Several girls moved closer, and for an instant I hoped they were drawing near to extend a hand and ask me if I needed help. “The nigger is down,” one shouted. “She’s bleeding. What do you know. Niggers bleed red blood. Let’s kick the nigger.” I saw the foot coming my way and grabbed it before it got to my face. I twisted it at the ankle like I’d seen them do at the wrestling match. The girl fell backward.

As I scrambled to my feet, I looked back to see the brigade of attacking mothers within striking distance, shouting about how they weren’t going to have me in school with their kids. I ran up the stairs, hoping I could find my way back to the office. With the mothers close on my heels, shouting their threats, the twisted maze of the hallway seemed even more menacing. I felt I could have gotten lost forever as I struggled to find the door that led to the office and safety, opening first one, then another. I raced through a honeycomb of locker rooms and dead-end hallways.

After several minutes of opening the wrong doors and bumping into people who hit me or called me names, I was in tears, ready to give up, paralyzed by my fear. Suddenly Grandma’s voice came into my head: “God never loses one of His flock.” Shepherd, show me how to go, I said. I stood still and repeated those words over and over again until I gained some composure. I wiped my eyes, and then I saw blood running down my leg and onto my saddle shoe. It was too much! I pressed my thumb to the wounded area to try and stop the bleeding.

“I’ve been looking for you.” The stocky guide’s voice was angry, but I was so glad to see her I almost forgot myself and reached to hug her. “And just where do you think you are going? You are only supposed to travel through the school with me.” She looked at my leg, but said nothing, then looked away.

“Yes, ma’am, but...”

“But nothing. Let’s go to shorthand class.” She didn’t know it, but she was the answer to my prayer. I was so grateful for
her being there. I looked over my shoulder to see the group of mothers standing still, obviously unwilling to come after me with a school official at my side. I choked back tears and speeded my steps.

"Hello, honey, welcome. We're just beginning. I'm Mrs. Pickwick." The warm voice of the tiny dark-haired woman comforted me. Although she was petite, I quickly discovered that my shorthand teacher was definitely not one to tolerate any hanky-panky. When students moved away from me, hurling insults, she gave them a stern reprimand. "If you move, you move to the office and see the principal," she said without so much as a hint of compromise in her voice.

As I headed for the last row of empty seats by the window, she called out to me, "Melba, stay away from the window." Her voice was sympathetic, as though she really cared what happened to me. As I turned back to follow her orders, I caught a glimpse of the crowd across the street from the front of the school. I was so transfixed by the sight, I couldn't move. The ocean of people stretched farther than I could see—waves of people ebbing and flowing, shoving the sawhorses and the policemen who were trying to keep them in place. There were lots of uniformed policemen, but the crowd must have outnumbered them a hundredfold. Every now and then, three or four people broke through and dashed across the street toward the front of the school. The police would run after them.

"Melba, please take your seat."

Slowly, reluctantly, I turned away and stumbled to my seat. As I sat there, trying to focus on the shorthand book before me, I could hear some of the things the crowd was shouting. "Get the niggers," and "Two, four, six, eight, we ain't gonna integrate."

Although I could not erase the images or the sounds of those people outside, somehow Mrs. Pickwick was so sincere and determined to be as normal as possible that I actually listened to what she had to say about shorthand. I even managed to draw several shorthand characters on my tablet as the noise got louder and louder. I looked up from my notes to see my guide entering the door. She wore a frown and was red-faced and perspiring. Something was awfully wrong. It was written all over her face.

"Come with me, now. To the principal's office," she called out nervously. This time she collected my books and shoved them into my arms. I walked even faster than before. We were almost running. "Don't stop for anything," she shouted at me over the noise.

As I followed her through an inner office past very official-looking white men, I was alarmed by the anxious expressions on their faces. I was led to an adjoining anteroom—a smaller office, where some of the eight had gathered. Two of the girls were crying. I stood near the door, which was ajar enough so that although I could not see who was speaking, I could hear much of the men's conversations. I heard their frantic tone of voice, heard them say the mob was out of control, that they would have to call for help. "What are we gonna do about the nigger children?" asked one.

"The crowd is moving fast. They've broken the barricades. These kids are trapped in here."

"Good Lord, you're right," another voice said. "We may have to let the mob have one of these kids, so's we can distract them long enough to get the others out."
"Let one of those kids hang? How's that gonna look? Niggers or not, they're children, and we got a job to do."

Hang one of us? They were talking about hanging one of my friends, or maybe even me. My knees were shaking so badly I thought I would fall over. I held my breath, trying not to make any noise. The two men discussing our fate were just on the other side of the door. I turned my back to the partially opened door, at the same time moving closer to it so I could hear more. I tried to look unconcerned so as not to frighten the others. Already some of them were crying, and Thelma's face was blue. I moved even closer to hear a man's voice say, "They're children. What'll we do, have them draw straws to see which one gets a rope around their neck?"

"It may be the only way out. There must be a thousand people out there, armed and coming this way."

"Some of these patrolmen are throwing down their badges," another breathless voice said. "We gotta get them out of here."

I heard footsteps coming closer. I moved to the center of the room, closer to where my friends stood surrounding Thelma, who sat on her haunches.

A tall, raw-boned, dark-haired man came toward us. "I'm Gene Smith, Assistant Chief of the Little Rock Police Depart-
looked at us and said, "Listen to your driver's instructions and do exactly what he says. Your lives depend on it."

We were surrounded by white men in suits speaking in frightened tones. Their expressions told me we were in the kind of trouble I hadn't even imagined before. The enormous roaring sound coming from the crowd just beyond the door made me wonder whether or not they had waited too long to get us into those cars. Just for one instant I tried to imagine what would happen if the mob got hold of us.

"Now!" Smith shouted. "Let 'er roll."

The driver shifted gears and gunned the engine as I crouched down in the back seat. Suddenly I heard the loud sound of what must have been a heavy chain, dragging. The door was opening, letting streaks of sunlight in. I scooted farther down in my seat, hiding my face. But I decided I had to keep my eyes open. I wanted to know what was happening to me. At least that way I'd know what to pray for.

I felt the car surge ahead. We were climbing upward, out of the basement toward bright sunlight. I could hear the tires spin onto a gravel driveway just beyond the door. The car gained momentum, lunging forward. As the full light of day crept into the windows, the deafening noise of the mob engulfed us.

"Get the niggers! Hang those niggers! Stop those cars," I heard somebody shout. Then I saw wave after wave of white faces, angry white faces, everywhere. Their mouths were open shouting threats. Clusters of white hands with fingers extended seemed for a moment to envelop us . . . clenching, grabbing at us. Some of the faces were moving along with us, coming closer to the car windows.

"Hold on and keep your heads down," the driver shouted. I heard the engine grind and felt us go faster. The people running beside us accelerated their pace, hurling rocks and sticks at the car.

That's when the car really began moving fast, faster than I'd ever ridden before. Finally, there were fewer hands and faces on the car windows, the noises were subsiding. I took a deep breath.
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demanding to see for themselves that only white students remained. A police official convinced them to send representatives inside the school to check. When three women returned to report we were not there, the mob cheered but continued the siege.

Armed with guns, ropes, and clubs, the report said, they surged toward the school, in the doors and through the halls, dancing and shouting, “Two, four, six, eight, we ain’t gonna integrate.”

“Melba, where’s Melba? Is she all right?” Mother Lois came rushing into the living room, disheveled and frantic. “I got here as soon as I could. Those newsmen said you were trapped by the mob.”

“I’m fine, Mama,” I stood to embrace her.

“We’ve made a mistake. You’re definitely not going back to that school.”

“What’s that on your knee?” Grandma India asked.

“I fell.” I decided I didn’t need to add to Mother’s nervousness. I would wait until she calmed down to explain the details of my day.

“I heard they passed the hat and collected a hundred and forty dollars to encourage those policemen to abandon their duties,” Grandma added.

“You must have been scared to death. I’m sorry,” Mother said.

We all listened as the newscast continued airing sounds of the angry mob taking over the school. I discovered that one reason we were able to slip into the school that morning was that the mob had been preoccupied chasing and beating three black reporters, James Hicks, Alex Wilson, and Moses Newsom, whom they had accused of purposefully distracting the crowd in order to allow us time to get in the side door. Mr. Wilson was hit on the head with a brick, and even as he lay wounded on the ground, they continued to kick and beat him.

The mob had then turned to beat up white reporters. Several members of the Life magazine staff were beaten. Other newspeople and out-of-towners were chased and beaten until they reached police lines. Even after they were inside police cars, they were showered with rocks.

A concerned and flustered Conrad rushed into the house to greet me. His friend Clark had told him I was dead. In order to settle him down, Grandma busied him with helping her fix lunch. I remained glued to the news, mulling over whether or not I should tell them what really happened to me that day. I decided it would only make things worse, and maybe it would make them decide I could never go back to the integration.

Later on, we got hold of a copy of the evening newspaper, the Arkansas Democrat. The headlines read: GROWING VIOLENCE FORCES WITHDRAWAL OF NEGRO STUDENTS AT CENTRAL HIGH. CROWD’S YELL TOUCHES OFF BRUTAL BEATING.

“These pictures are enough to curdle your blood,” Grandma said, pointing to the one of reporter Alex Wilson being beaten. There was another showing a white man riding on him piggyback. The paper was filled with pictures of the crowd and the police trying desperately to control it. Only by looking at those pictures did I begin to understand the real danger of that mob.

In my diary I wrote:

*There seems to be no space for me at Central High. I don’t want integration to be like the merry-go-round. Please, God, make space for me.*

The phone started to ring nonstop with calls from angry strangers spewing hatred and threats. There were also calls from our family and friends inquiring about my safety and warning us that the mob was continuing to search out and beat up people in our neighborhood. One phone call came from a news reporter who asked what I felt about the situation. Before Mother or Grandma caught on to what I was doing, I told him. He complimented me, saying I was articulate and asked if I could write. I said yes, and he asked if I would write an article about my first morning at Central. Right there I just jotted down a few notes and started dictating the article to him as it came into my

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head, the way I wrote letters to God every night in my diary. All the while I was talking to the reporter, I kept our instructions in mind: Accentuate the positive—don't complain too much. He said my story would appear in newspapers everywhere just as I had written it because it was on the Associated Press wire. Sure enough, the next day I saw it on the front page:

Would you have exchanged places with me and entered Central as I did this morning? I went, and I am glad.

Previous to making actual entrance into Central I had feelings that I'm sure have never been experienced by a child of 15 years. Sensations of courage, fear, and challenge haunted me. With the morning, came my definite decision: I must go.

"The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped." With this verse in mind and a hopeful prayer in my heart I entered the halls of Central High. The spacious halls brought again the school feeling, however the atmosphere was not conducive to study but one of uneasiness.

The sea of faces represented no special personality to me. Although some were kind, many showed contempt, especially some boys gathered in the halls.

I was beginning to believe that the long hard fight was over, that finally this American way of life was going to pay off. As I walked through the halls alone it seemed as if I were lost on an island, an island of strange people, having no way of communicating with them. I longed to tell them, "I won't hurt you, honest, give me a chance, come on. How about it? I'm an average teenager, just like yourself, with the same aspirations and heartaches." But it was useless, only a few facial expressions told me I had gotten through.

Each time I was about to give up, exhausted from the jeers and insulting remarks, some kind face would come up and say: "I want you here" or "You're pretty" or "Won't you stay and fight it out?"

This above all made all the "Go home, nigger" and "I'm gonna get you before the day is over" fade into the background.

There were a few trying experiences such as being blocked from passage to class by a few rough, tough-looking sideburners, boys who I'm sure if separated would not attack a mouse. Then, there were the three women who jumped the fence and attempted to "get me."

A favorite activity of the kids was to form a group in a circle and scream: "Two, four, six, eight, we ain't gonna integrate." I know of no physical injury to any of the nine students. I was slapped by one girl. I turned and said "Thank you" and continued on my journey to class.

I did not realize the size or the intentions of the crowd outside until I was told for my safety I had to leave Central High. This hurt me deeper than I can ever express. I'm glad I went, Oh, so glad I went, for now I know without out-of-school interference integration is possible in Little Rock, Arkansas.

When I finished the article I realized it was not the whole truth but a version that wouldn't jeopardize the integration. If I had told what really happened, one of the officials might say we couldn't go back. I composed the story in a way that would make my day sound okay. Maybe in a few days if I remained patient and prayed it would really be that way—white students would welcome me and smile and treat me like an ordinary human being.

All that evening we continued our vigilance on the couch in front of the television. Mother seemed to relax a bit, and Grandma settled down with her almanac and handiwork. The newsmen reported more roving gangs of hooligans doing their evil deeds throughout the city.

From his Sea Island, Georgia, retreat, Governor Faubus urged our leaders and school officials to allow a cooling-off period before resuming integration.

President Eisenhower had earlier complimented us on our
bravery in a radio message, saying all parents must have sympathetic understanding for the ordeal to which we nine children had been subjected. Now he issued a warning statement:

I want to make several things very clear in connection with the disgraceful occurrences today at Central High School in the city of Little Rock. I will use the full power of the United States, including whatever force may be necessary, to prevent any obstruction of the law and to carry out the orders of the Federal Court.

He ended his long statement by demanding that all persons engaged in obstruction of justice “cease and desist.”

“At least we’ve got a President who respects the law,” Grandma said, applauding.

“There will be no school for you tomorrow, Melba,” Mother Lois said.

“But I’m going to school tomorrow, aren’t I?” Conrad asked.

“Perhaps. We’ll have to see how things go,” Mother Lois said.

“T’ll bet that mob will heed the President’s words,” Grandma said. “Things will be back to normal tomorrow.”

But this time Grandma was wrong. After a restless night, we awoke on Tuesday to find the mob had not heeded the warning of the President. As early as 7:30 A.M. more than two hundred people had gathered in front of Central High to protest our arrival. The headlines read:

IKE CLEARs WAY TO SEND TROOPS:
COMMANDS CEASE AND DESIST IN LEGAL MOVE
—Arkansas Gazette, Tuesday, September 24, 1957

The article said that President Eisenhower signed a history-making proclamation clearing the way for possible use of federal troops to quash any further school integration violence in Little Rock.

But next I read: FAUBUS CHALLENGES IKE ON USING TROOPS. From Sea Island, Georgia, on September 23, Governor
"Governor Faubus didn't ask for federal troops, but they're up in his face anyhow," Grandma said as we sat watching the arrival of the 101st Airborne Division early Tuesday evening. We were transfixed as we listened to newsmen describe the power of that very special military unit.

Fifty-two planeloads—C123's and C130's have brought 1200 battle-equipped paratroopers to Little Rock to see that integration is carried out at Central High School without further violence.

Planeloads of men of the 101st Airborne Division stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, started landing at Little Rock Air Force Base at 3:30 P.M. this afternoon, at half-hour intervals. The troop convoy is entering Little Rock to take up positions at Central High school.

I sat perfectly still, my attention riveted on the television screen, where the most wonderful pictures moved before my eyes. Silhouetted against the slate gray sky, jeep headlights cast halos in the evening light as the mighty 101st Airborne Division rolled across the Broadway Bridge into Little Rock. It was a caravan of army vehicles that seemed to go on forever.

"More of God's handiwork," Grandma said, her eyes brimming with tears. "Who'd a thought Mr. Faubus' mistreatment of our nine little children would bring the President and the 101st down on his head."

The arrival of the troops made me feel hopeful that I had protection from the mob. But it also made me feel even more frightened because President Eisenhower hadn't chosen to send just any old military unit. The men of the 101st were famous heroes, combat specialists, the newsmen said. If we needed such brave soldiers, the President and those powerful men in his cabinet must have agreed that the integration was as dangerous as a hostile enemy in war.

It felt to me as though the nine of us were expected to wage some kind of war to make integration happen. The thought upset me. I knew Mother was alarmed as well when she suggested I leave the next day for Cincinnati to live with Uncle Cleasey and attend school there. I didn't want to go away because I knew it would get printed in the newspapers and the segregationists would think I was afraid. They would think they had won. Why couldn't she have made this offer earlier? It would have been so much easier then.

For the first time ever, Grandma placed dinner on trays in front of the television so we could hear President Eisenhower speak to the nation. "Let's put things into perspective. He is our President, and he happens to be talking about us. The whole world's watching, why shouldn't we," she said.

Speaking from the White House, President Eisenhower said he sent troops because "Mob rule in Little Rock menaces the very safety of the United States and the free world." This was so, he said, because gloating communists abroad were using school integration riots to misrepresent the United States and undermine its prestige and influence around the globe. And then he looked straight into the camera and said, "Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decision of the courts."

Later Governor Faubus came on television to give what one reporter described as a pleading speech. "We are now an occupied territory. In the name of God, whom we all revere, in the
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name of liberty we hold so dear, in the name of decency which we all cherish, what's happening in America?"

"I can help you figure this out, Mr. Faubus," Mother Lois shouted at the screen. "The President has called your bluff."

Later that night as my head was swimming with news reports and questions about whether or not to go back to Central High, I wrote in my diary:

Everything in my life is so new. Could I please do some of the old things that I know how to do again. I don't know how to go to school with soldiers. Please show me.

P.S. Please help the soldiers to keep the mobs away from me.

Instead of going to sleep in my clothing, as I had for several nights before, I put on my pajamas. With the soldiers in town, I felt safe enough to have a deep sleep, something I hadn't done for a long time. I figured the segregationists wouldn't dare do their late-night raids on our house with the President watching so closely.

It was very quiet as I turned out the light. With the 101st in town, we didn't hear as many sirens going off. Later, when I woke up thirsty and went to get water, I found Grandma snoring with the rifle lying across her lap. Maybe she felt safer, too.

I don't know how long I'd been asleep when I was jolted awake. I sat straight up in bed. The doorbell was ringing, and I heard voices on the front porch. Mama was standing over me. She put her hand over my mouth and motioned me to get up. The doorbell kept ringing over and over again. We moved toward the living room. Sleepy-eyed, Conrad met us in the hallway with a confused expression, asking, "Is somebody shooting at us again?"

"Who is it?" Grandma yelled through the door as she peaked through the covered glass inset. "White men. It's white men wearing black hats. What are they doing on our front porch at this time of night?" Grandma said as she picked up the shotgun.

Warriors Don't Cry

Then she shouted through the door again: "State your business, gentlemen, or I'll be forced to do mine."

"We're from the Office of the President of the United States; please open your door," they called back. "We have a message from your President."

Grandma opened the door ever so slightly and demanded that they show proof of who they were. They passed their identification through the half-opened door. Mother Lois examined the writing closely and nodded a yes.

"How can we help you?" Grandma lowered the gun to her side, keeping it hidden as she opened the front door a bit more. Mother Lois stood beside her. I thought it was funny as I looked around and noticed we were all wearing our nightgowns and pajamas to greet the messengers from the President of the United States.

"Let your daughter go back to school, and she will be protected," one of the men said, handing Mother Lois an envelope.

The next morning, Wednesday, September 25, at 8 A.M. as we turned the corner near the Bates's home, I saw them, about fifty uniformed soldiers of the 101st. Some stood tall with their rifles at their sides, while others manned the jeeps parked at the curb. Still other troops walked about holding walkie-talkies to their ears. As I drew nearer to them I was fascinated by their well-shined boots. Grandma had always said that well-kept shoes were the mark of a disciplined individual. Their guns were also glistening as though they had been polished, and the creases were sharp in the pant legs of their uniforms.

I had heard all those newsmen say "Screaming Eagle Division of the 101st," but those were just words. I was seeing human beings, flesh-and-blood men with eyes that looked back at me. They resembled the men I had seen in army pictures on TV and on the movie screen. Their faces were white, their expressions blank.

There were lots of people of both races standing around, talking to each other in whispers. I recognized some of the ministers from our churches. Several of them nodded or smiled at me. I
was a little concerned because many people, even those who knew me well, were staring as though I were different from them.

Thelma and Minnie Jean stood together inspecting the soldiers close up while the other students milled about. I wondered what we were waiting for. I was told there was an assembly at Central with the military briefing the students.

Reporters hung from trees, perched on fences, stood on cars, and darted about with their usual urgency. Cameras were flashing on all sides. There was an eerie hush over the crowd, not unlike the way I'd seen folks behave outside the home of the deceased just before a funeral.

From time to time, as we walked about, we nine students acknowledged each other with nods and smiles. Like the others, I felt compelled to stare at the uniformed men. Walking up close to them, I saw that some weren't much older than I was. I had been told that only white soldiers would be allowed at Central, because the presence of non-whites would inflame segregationists. Non-whites were sent to the Armory, where they would be used as support teams or to guard our homes in case of a dire emergency.

There were tears in Mother's eyes as she whispered goodbye. "Make this day the best you can," she said.

"Let's bow our heads for a word of prayer." One of our ministers stepped from among the others and began to say comforting words. I noticed tears were streaming down the faces of many of the adults. I wondered why they were crying just at that moment when I had more hope of staying alive and keeping safe than I had since the integration began.

"Protect these youngsters and bring them home. Flood the Holy Spirit into the hearts and minds of those who would attack our children."

"Yes, Lord," several voices echoed.

One of the soldiers stepped forward and beckoned the driver of a station wagon to move it closer to the driveway. Two jeeps moved forward, one in front of the station wagon, one behind. Guns were mounted on the hoods of the jeeps.

We were already a half hour late for school when we heard the order "Move out," and the leader motioned us to get into the station wagon. As we collected ourselves and walked toward the caravan, many of the adults were crying openly. When I turned to wave to Mother Lois, I saw tears in her eyes. I couldn't go back to comfort her.

Suddenly, all the soldiers went into action, moving about with precise steps. I hoped I would be allowed to ride in the jeep, although it occurred to me that it didn't have a top so it wouldn't be as safe. Sure enough, all nine of us were directed to sit in the station wagon.

Sarge, our driver, was friendly and pleasant. He had a Southern accent, different from ours, different even from the one Arkansas whites had. We rolled away from the curb lined with people waving to us. Mama looked even more distraught. I remembered I hadn't kissed her good-bye.

The driver explained that we were not riding in a caravan but a jeep convoy. I could hear helicopters roaring in the distance. Sarge said they were following us to keep watch. We nine said very little to each other, we were too busy asking Sarge about the soldiers. At times the car was so silent I could hear my stomach growl. It was particularly loud because nervousness had caused me to get rid of my breakfast only moments after I'd eaten it.

Our convoy moved through streets lined with people on both sides, who stood as though they were waiting for a parade. A few friendly folks from our community waved as we passed by. Some of the white people looked totally horrified, while others raised their fists to us. Others shouted ugly words.

As we neared the school, I could hear the roar of a helicopter directly overhead. Our convoy was joined by more jeeps. I could see that armed soldiers and jeeps had already blocked off certain intersections approaching the school. Closer to the school, we saw more soldiers and many more hostile white people with scowls on their faces, lining the sidewalk and shaking their fists. But for the first time I wasn't afraid of them.

We pulled up to the front of the school. Groups of soldiers
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on guard were lined at intervals several feet apart. A group of twenty or more was running at breakneck speed up and down the street in front of Central High School, their rifles with bayonets pointed straight ahead. Sarge said they were doing crowd control—keeping the mob away from us.

Sarge said we should wait in the station wagon because the soldiers would come for us. As I looked around, I saw a group of uniformed men walking toward us, their bayonets pointed straight up. Their leader beckoned to us as one of them held open the car door. As I stepped outside the car, I heard a noise behind me. In the distance, there was that chillingly familiar but now muffled chant, “Two, four, six, eight. We ain’t gonna integrate.” I turned to see reporters swarming about across the street from the school. I looked up to see the helicopters hovering overhead, hanging in midair with their blades whirring. The military leader motioned us to stand still.

About twenty soldiers moved toward us, forming an olive-drab square with one end open. I glanced at the faces of my friends. Like me, they appeared to be impressed by the imposing sight of military power. There was so much to see, and everything was happening so quickly. We walked through the open end of the square. Erect, rifles at their sides, their faces stern, the soldiers did not make eye contact as they surrounded us in a protective cocoon. After a long moment, the leader motioned us to move forward.

Hundreds of Central High students milled about. I could see their astonishment. Some were peering out of windows high above us, some were watching from the yard, others were on the landing. Some were tearful, others angry.

I felt proud and sad at the same time. Proud that I lived in a country that would go this far to bring justice to a Little Rock girl like me, but sad that they had to go to such great lengths. Yes, this is the United States, I thought to myself. There is a reason that I salute the flag. If these guys just go with us this first time, everything’s going to be okay.

We began moving forward. The eerie silence of that moment

would forever be etched in my memory. All I could hear was my own heartbeat and the sound of boots clicking on the stone. Everyone seemed to be moving in slow motion as I peered past the raised bayonets of the 101st soldiers. I walked on the concrete path toward the front door of the school, the same path the Arkansas National Guard had blocked us from days before. We approached the stairs, our feet moving in unison to the rhythm of the marching click-clack sound of the Screaming Eagles. Step by step we climbed upward—where none of my people had ever before walked as a student. We stepped up to the front door of Central High School and crossed the threshold into that place where angry segregationist mobs had forbidden us to go.
well, but he seemed not to pay attention. My class was more than a block away from the front door, near the Fourteenth Street entry to the school. I saw other 101st soldiers standing at intervals along the hall. I turned back to make sure there really was a soldier following me. He was there, all right. As I approached the classroom, he speeded up, coming closer to me.

"Melba, my name is Danny." He looked me directly in the eye. He was slight of build, about five feet ten inches tall, with dark hair and deep-set brown eyes. "I'll be waiting for you here. We're not allowed to go inside the classrooms. If you need me, holler."

My heart skipped a beat as the classroom door closed behind me. I looked back once more and saw Danny's eyes peering through the square glass inset in the door.

The teacher beckoned me to take a seat near the door, where I was in full view of the soldier. I was one of about twenty students.

"You all just gonna sit still and let this nigger come in here like this? I'm leaving. Who's coming with me?" A tall dark-haired boy paused for a moment, looking around the room. At first, there was silence, but no one left. I took my seat, hoping to settle down and focus on the classwork. Sunlight flooded into the room through a full bank of windows along the far wall. It was a beautiful morning. I tried hard to concentrate, tuning myself in to what the teacher was saying as she continued her discussion of diagramming sentences.

What a stroke of luck. Mother had played a game with Conrad and me, teaching us diagramming at an early age. It's convenient to have a mom who is an English teacher. I tried hard to ignore the boy, who had now begun a scathing dialogue with one of his companions. He carried on in a low tone, just above a whisper, which everyone could hear, but the teacher could legitimately ignore.

"You ugly niggers think just because you got those army boys following you around you gonna stay here."

I swallowed a sadness lump in the back of my throat. I wondered whether or not I should press the teacher to stop him
from treating me that way. I decided against it because I thought she must be well aware of what he was doing. Besides, we had been instructed not to make a big deal of reporting things in front of other students, lest we be labeled tattletales.

The boy continued his taunting throughout the period. At the end of class, I spoke to the teacher to get a list of back assignments, and during the conversation, I asked if she could do something to calm people down.

"I hope you don't think we're gonna browbeat our students to please you all," she said. I pushed down my anger and walked out.

Danny followed, walking far enough behind so that some students got between him and me. As I walked through the crowded spaces, I felt almost singed by their hostile words and glares. Occasionally students moved in close to elbow me in my side or shove me. That's when Danny would step closer to make certain they saw him. When one boy walked up to try to push me down the stairs, Danny stared him down. The boy backed away, but he shouted at Danny. "Are you proud of protecting a nigger?"

When I entered Mrs. Pickwick's shorthand class things improved decidedly. It was like being on a peaceful island. She remained ever in control. There were a few whispered nasty remarks but no outbursts. Her no-nonsense attitude didn't leave room for unruly behavior.

I had been there about thirty minutes when I realized I was feeling kind of normal, enjoying the classwork and learning the shorthand characters. My stomach muscles let go a little, and I drew a long, deep breath. I didn't know Mrs. Pickwick, but I liked her and felt safe in her presence. I knew I would always be grateful to her for the moments of peace her class provided.

En route to the next class, I had to use the rest room. I had put it off as long as I could. I had hoped I could put it off until I went home. It was what I dreaded most because the girls' rest rooms were so isolated.

Danny leaned against the wall, across from the bathroom door, quite a distance away. I hurried inside. The students appeared astonished at the sight of me.

"There ain't no sign marked 'Colored' on this door, girl," one of them said as I whizzed past.

I couldn't respond or even stop to listen to her. I was desperate to find an empty stall. Once inside, with the door closed, I felt alarmed at their whispering and scrambling about, but I couldn't make out exactly what they were saying.

I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. I promised myself I would drink much less water so I wouldn't have to take that risk so often. The scratching and giggling frightened me. Just as I started to step outside the stall, one of the chorus said, "Nigger. Ain't no soldier in here... We got you all to ourselves. You just wait."

I ran out like a shot, pausing only a second to get a few drops of water to clean my hands. That's when I noticed it—written all over the mirror with lipstick was "Nigger, go home."

Midway through my next class the bells began ringing in a way I'd never heard before. "Fire drill!" students shouted as they rushed out of the classrooms, gleefully chattering. I was terrified. Waves and waves of white faces rushed toward me, some sneering, some smiling, some angry, some angry; still others took the opportunity to shower me with ugly words.

Outside, I was happy to see all those wonderful soldiers parading with precision, going through a kind of changing of the guard with helicopters roaring overhead. It was a real military show, and one that made me feel safe. Even though Danny was only a short distance away, I began to feel uneasy, exposed to so many angry white students. Minnie Jean and Thelma were nearby, and I spoke with them. To our surprise, two or three white students actually exchanged pleasantries with us, but just beyond, a group of whites began whispering hurtful words. After a while, we were left alone while everyone became fascinated with watching the 101st.

Despite the entrancing military activities, time began to drag. At our former school, fire drills had always been brief, three to five minutes, but now twenty-five minutes later we remained
outside Central. I was getting antsy, feeling even more vulnerable standing out in the open that way. There was still a rather large, unhappy crowd gathered across from the school. Photographers and news reporters scrambled about, taking pictures and vying for scraps of information about how we were being received in class. Finally a bell rang, signaling our return to class.

I hesitated as the throng of students made its way back up the front staircase. When the bottom of the stairway had cleared, Danny motioned me to move ahead. By then I was anxious to go to the cafeteria. I was looking forward to being with my friends, with people I could talk to and laugh with, but Danny said we had been summoned to the vice-principal's office.

He walked only a few steps behind me as I moved cautiously through the clogged hallway avoiding close contact with hecklers wherever I could. We moved up to the second floor and into the office, where I was met by Carlotta, Thelma, and Mrs. Huckaby, the girls' vice-principal. She was hard to read. I felt neither wrath nor warmth from her. She seemed a woman determined to carry out her duties and keep things going as smoothly as possible. She insisted on escorting us to the rest room and the cafeteria, and we thanked her.

The four of us walked to the lower level and into a wider hallway, a brightly lit area of what appeared to be a basement corridor leading to the biggest cafeteria I had ever seen.

Danny trailed behind me, taking up a station across from the entry to the cafeteria. I turned to glance at the sea of white faces that stretched before me. The cafeteria seemed to be half the size of a football field, filled with long tables. There was a roar of noise from the hundreds of chatting, laughing students and the clang of utensils. The line of people waiting to pick up their food appeared to go on forever. Many of the students in that room turned to stare at us. All at once I caught a glimpse of nonwhite faces—my people serving food behind the counter. I didn't feel the same twinge of painful embarrassment I sometimes felt when I saw my people in service positions in public places. Instead, I was thrilled to see them smiling back at me.

The cafeteria line was treacherous, but I survived with my tray of food intact. Over lunch, Carlotta, Thelma, and I were joined by a couple of friendly white girls. For a brief moment, we laughed and talked about ordinary things as though it were a typical school day. Indeed, a few white students were trying to reach out to us. They explained that many of their friends would stay away because they feared segregationists who warned them against any show of kindness toward us.

After lunch, as I headed for gym class, I had two more reasons to hope integration could work. Amid all the hecklers taunting me, two girls had smiled and waved a welcome. Danny and I parted company at the door that led to the girls' dressing room. We agreed to meet after I changed into my gym uniform. He would wait near the head of the narrow corridor that led to gym class. I was frightened as I looked down at the bandage on my knee from the last time I had walked those isolated corridors to gym class. I got out of there as fast as I could.

I entered the dressing room and changed my clothing, going about my business briskly, even when someone tried to block my way. The stares and name-calling hurt, but I was growing accustomed to coping with it. With surprising speed, I had changed into my uniform and was on my way out to meet Danny.

He pointed me toward the concrete stairs that led down to the first-level playing field. Several hundred yards beneath us on what had been an enormous playing field, there was now a huge city. Hundreds of olive-drab tents stood in meticulous rows. There were jeeps and larger trucks with tarpaulins. It was an absolute beehive of activity. Several soldiers were posted directly below us in the field where my class would be. The sight of pristine lines of marching soldiers going back and forth in the distance calmed my nerves.

I walked down the steps to where the class would be playing volleyball and joined the others as they divided themselves into teams. But before we could start playing, a girl called out to Danny.

"You like protecting nigger bitches?" She smiled sweetly and
fluttered her eyelashes at him. "Wouldn't you rather be following me around instead of her?"

Danny's facial muscles tightened, but he said nothing as she continued to spew insults at both of us. The gym teacher was quite a distance away, blowing her whistle and refereeing the game. Occasionally she would look back, but I wasn't at all certain she could hear the heckling. I joined the game and tried to be as cooperative as possible.

When class ended, I played a game with myself. I would earn a world record for getting dressed at the fastest speed known to mankind. When Danny greeted me, he confirmed I had far exceeded his expectations. As he trailed me through an isolated passage to the open hallway, we were confronted by a chorus of chants from sideburners. Copying their hairstyle from James Dean and Elvis, they fancied themselves to be "bad boys."

"Hut, one two three, march... march company... march to the beat of the nigger drum," the choir of boys chanted as we walked past. Suddenly, one of them came up to me and slammed my books out of my hand onto the floor. We were surrounded by thugs, many much bigger than Danny.

"Don't move," Danny whispered. "Stand absolutely still." His words stopped me from running for my life. At that moment it was hard to remain still; my knees were shaking as the group closed in on us. All at once, from nowhere, other soldiers appeared and made their presence known by holding on to their nightsticks and moving toward us slowly. I wondered where they had come from so quickly. Then I looked behind me and there were still more, standing against the walls, erect and silent, as though steeled to go into action at any moment.

Reluctantly, the hooligans dispersed, leaving a trail of insults in their wake. The soldiers withdrew as quickly and quietly as they had appeared, out of sight in an instant.

There was no harsh greeting or heckling as I entered French class. In fact, some of the students wore pleasant expressions. It took a while to realize they had a different kind of unwelcome mat for me. I was excited about French class. Mother Lois spoke fluent French; she often gave Conrad and me lessons over the dinner table. I was anxious to get started because I could see that Central had tape recorders and special headphones, things I hadn't had in my French classes before.

The students spent the entire hour speaking in French about suntanning. I understood the language, and I didn't know what to do as one student spoke in French about not wanting to get too dark "for fear of being taken for a... Uh, well, you know, a 'nigger.'" I blinked back tears of disappointment.

A serious headache was overtaking me by the time I headed for study hall with Danny tagging behind. Entering the door was like walking into a zoo with the animals outside their cages. The room was double the size of the largest classroom in my old school. I'd never seen anything like it or imagined in my wildest dreams that an important school like Central could allow such outrageous behavior. Stomping, walking, shouting, sailing paper airplanes through the air, students were milling about as though they were having a wild party. The teacher sat meekly behind his desk, a spectator stripped of the desire or power to make them behave.

I took five steps into the room, and everybody fell silent, abandoning their activities to glare at me.

"Take that seat over there," the study hall teacher said.

"But I need—" I wanted to ask him for a seat near the door where I could see Danny, but he cut me off.

"Did you hear me? I said take the seat over there or see the principal."

The teacher returned to reading his newspaper while the students threw spitballs. They directed only a few at me; mostly they were involved in their own little games. At one point, they started passing notes back and forth. When one was passed to me, I opened it. "Nigger go home," it read. I looked at it without emotion, folded it neatly, and put it aside.

"The helicopters are coming to pick up the nigger," someone shouted. Thank God, I thought. I had lived through the wildest hour where nobody did anything major to me, but their threats, near misses, and flying paper airplanes and pencils had shattered my nerves. "Helicopters. Home," I whispered. It seemed
like a lifetime since I had been home and comfortable and safe. Just then Danny opened the door and beckoned to me. "Let's move out for home!" he said.

The whirring sound of the helicopter overhead drowned out some of the shouted insults as I made my way out of the study hall. Danny and I headed to the principal's office, where I was to connect with the other students and soldiers for the trip home. I had made it through my first day at Central High.

"Readin', writin', and rotin'." The comic dialogue of our group had already begun before we left the building. What I needed most was the kind of laughter that would take my headache away. There we were, the nine of us, smiling, chatting, and behaving as though we were normal teenagers ending a normal school day. At the same time, uniformed and armed soldiers with bayonets held high were gathering around us for the trip out of the building. Nestled within the same protective cocoon that had enveloped us on our way into school, we made our exit through the front door. I looked back to see a group of white students trailing behind us, their hostile feelings painted on their faces.

The engine of the helicopter roared louder as we descended the stairs. Protected by the mighty power of the Screaming Eagles, we walked to the army staff car waiting at the curb. Once again, a group of soldiers was galloping back and forth. Even the chants of "Two, four, six, eight, we ain't gonna integrate!" could not dispel my joy. I was going home. As I stepped into the car, a wave of peace washed over me.

"Relax, we're on the move," Sarge, our driver, said as we snuggled down into our seats. The convoy was the same as it had been that morning; in front, the open jeep filled with soldiers, a machine gun mounted on its hood, with a similar vehicle behind us. As we pulled away from Central High, I looked back to see students gathered on the school lawn, staring at us as though they were watching a parade they hadn't known was coming their way. For just one tiny instant, I even felt a twinge of sympathy for them.

"You all have a good day, did you?" Sarge said, making polite conversation. We all gave our different versions of the same answer:

"Good isn't exactly the word to describe my day."

"All right."

"Depends on what you mean by good."

"My mama never told me there'd be days like this one."

That was the beginning of a funny round-robin to see who could describe their experience in the most colorful language. The ride home brought the joyful relief I had awaited all day. At times, our stories halted all laughter as we noticed someone's eyes filled with tears. There were tales of flying books and pencils and words that pierce the soul. But there were also descriptions of polite students who volunteered to sit beside us or offered to lend back homework assignments or flashed a warm smile just when we needed it most.

Our respite was over all too soon. As we approached Mrs. Bates's home, I saw news reporters. My headache started up again. The cameras began to flash even before Sarge could get the car parked. We said our "thank-you's" to him and turned to face the bombardment of questions as we made our way to Mrs. Bates's front door.

"What was it like inside the school? Were you frightened? How were you treated? Did anybody hit you? Did they call you names? What classes are you taking?" Over and over again came the same questions. Then there was one that stuck in my mind and made me tighten my jaw. "Are you going back tomorrow?"

I wasn't ready to think of another tomorrow at Central High. I sat quietly and pondered the question as I glanced out the front window at the few soldiers standing at attention. But they were there for only a brief moment before they climbed into the jeeps and the station wagon rolled away. And then my attention was quickly brought inside by the rude question being asked.

"Would you like to be white?" I scowled at the reporter, and he must have understood my irritation. "Uh, I mean, does all this trouble make you all wish you were white instead of Negro?" he amended his question.
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"Do you wish you were Negro?" I heard the angry words roll out of my mouth. "I'm proud of who I am. My color is inconvenient right now, but it won't always be like this." I'd said what I felt, despite the fear that it would be considered talking back to an adult.

"Can you write as well as you can speak?" a slender dark-haired man asked.

"I don't know," I answered.

"Why don't you try it? I'm Stan Opotowiski of the New York Post, and this is Ted Posten. Here's my card. I would like you to write what you're thinking, and I'll see to it that it's printed." I looked at them. Posten was the same race as me.

"Yeah, sure, I can try." I took the card from him. I had always written. It was the first thing I remembered about life, writing my thoughts down in letters to God on the pages of the orange-covered tablet with the black ink drawing of an Indian head on the cover. Besides, I was very flattered that he would ask me. I told myself I owed him a favor. If reporters hadn't been covering our story, we might have been hanged. News of our demise would be a three-line notation buried on the back page of a white newspaper were it not for the Northern reporters' nosy persistence in getting the facts and dogging the trail of segregationists.

"We're off to the Dunbar Community Center for another news conference." I couldn't believe my ears, but off we went—once more answering questions in a more formal setting. It was quite a while after dark before we called Thelma's father to pick us up. It felt as if the news conference had gone on forever. Reporters from all the major periodicals I'd read in the library were there asking questions.

As we rode home I looked forward to shedding my day like soiled clothing. But the first thing I saw as I rounded the corner to my house was reporters sitting in the green lawn chairs on my front porch holding cameras and notebooks, and a few neighbors gathered in front of my house talking to them. I can't face them, I thought to myself. But I did—I got through it. I smiled, I said the right things, I pretended to be interested in the questions.

By 9 P.M., I was so tired that I only wanted my pillow and dreams—sweet, happy dreams with no white people and no Central High. The next thing I heard was the song on my radio as the alarm went off, waking me out of a cold, sweaty dream. "Peggy...Peggy Sue-ue-ue..." Buddy Holly was singing. It took me a minute to realize where I was and what I had to do. How I hated that song, hated, hated it! They played it over and over every morning at that time. I picked up my diary and started to write:

It's Thursday, September 26, 1957. Now I have a bodyguard. I know very well that the President didn't send those soldiers just to protect me but to show support for an idea—the idea that a governor can't ignore federal laws. Still, I feel specially cared about because the guard is there. If he wasn't there, I'd hear more of the voices of those people who say I'm a nigger...that I'm not valuable, that I have no right to be alive.

Thank you, Danny.