

10



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

Warriors Don't Cry

greeted each other as though there were a compelling reason not to talk in ordinary tones. I was ushered through the crowd and 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

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

it—the sting of a hand slapping the side of 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."

Marry, 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 were 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

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."