plained that the police advised us not to take the usual route because segregationists might be 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, girle," she called back at me.

"Pheeeew!" 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

- 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! Move!" 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, 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 gone 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-

ment.” He spoke in a calm tone. “It’s time for you to leave for today. Come with me, now.” Right away, I had a good feeling about him because of the way he introduced himself and took charge. He urged us to move faster, acting as though it mattered to him whether or not we got out. “It’s eleven-thirty. I want you out of here before noon.”

Gene Smith. His was the voice I had heard in the next room, saying he would rather get all of us out than hang one to save the others. I decided to forever remember this man in my prayers. I scrambled to keep up with the others as we moved at a quick pace toward the Fourteenth Street side of Central High. It was almost a block away, but suddenly Smith and the other men turned from the main hallway and began descending stairs into passageways that became more and more dim.

What if they were going to kill us? I didn’t really know these men, yet I had no choice but to trust them. I focused on speeding down the narrow concrete passageway, down the stairs into a dark cellar, where one of the men walking ahead of us switched on a flashlight. We were inside some kind of basement garage. In the distance was a huge door that appeared to lift upward with chain pulleys. It resembled a loading dock of some kind. Two cars were sitting with engines running, lights on, hoods pointing toward the door.

“Hurry, now... get in,” Smith said, as he held open one of the doors. I looked at the others getting into the second car. Thelma, Minnie, and Ernie were in the car with me. A white man sat behind the wheel. He had an absolutely terrified expression on his face and was busy looking all around us, his eyes darting back and forth.

“Roll your windows up, lock your doors, keep your faces away from the windows. Put your heads down when we start to move.” His voice quivered. He hunched over to secure something on the floor, and that’s when I saw the gun strapped to his side in a leather holster.

Smith leaned down to talk through the open window to the driver. “Move fast and don’t stop no matter what.” Then he
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 these 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 screwed 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 . . . clutching, 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.

"You'all can sit up now. But keep an eye out." I could see that the others in the car behind us were safe. We were mostly silent on our journey, craning our necks, keeping watch in every direction.

"Thank you for the ride home," I said to the driver as I climbed out of the car. He cast a pleasant but impatient glance my way. I wanted to say, "Thanks for risking your life to save mine," but I didn't know how it would sound to the others. It was an awkward moment with a stranger, a decent white man.

"Get in the house now—go," he said, pausing for an instant, then gunning his engine and pulling away. I waved good-bye to my friends. Standing at the curb for a moment, I peered after the car as it drove away, wondering if he would get into trouble with the segregationists when they found out he was the one who rescued us from the mob. He was the second white man I would pray for God to protect.

I turned to see that some of my neighbors had gathered, a few sitting in our lawn chairs, a few standing around talking. I wondered what they were doing there. Then Grandma Ina rushed out the front door, her arms open to receive me.

"Thank God you're safe. Your mama is on her way home."

She was hugging me, both her hands at my back, not letting me pause to say hello to the alarmed neighbors who kept asking if I was all right.

"Now you've had your lesson. You don't have to go back to that awful school anymore," our neighbor Mrs. Floyd said, as Grandma ushered me past her.

I settled down on the couch in front of the television with the radio blasting loud from the hallway. I sipped the Grapette from Grandma had given me and thought about what the mob might have done to us. I worried that they would come looking for us at our homes.

Although we had left shortly after noon, word came that the mob continued its rampage. Even after the Central High School registrar came out to announce on a microphone that we had been removed, not everyone believed her. Instead, they surged forward, threatening to overrun the barricades and the police,
THE SCREAMING EAGLES HAD DELIVERED US SAFELY INSIDE THE front door of Central High School. The soldiers, we nine students, white school officials—all of us were standing absolutely still as though under a spell. It seemed no one knew what to do next.

Without any warning, a uniformed soldier stepped out of nowhere with an enormous old-fashioned camera. He pointed it toward us and snapped a picture.

The commander of the troops spoke a few words, and our military protectors fell into formation and marched away. I felt naked without that blanket of safety. An alarm warning surged through my body.

Principal Jess Matthews greeted us with a forced smile on his face and directed us to our classrooms. It was then that I saw the other group of soldiers. They were wearing a different uniform from the combat soldiers outside, but they carried the same hardware and had the same placid expressions. As the nine of us turned to go our separate ways, one by one a soldier followed each of us.

Along the winding hallway, near the door we had entered, I passed several clusters of students who stared at me, whispered obscenities, and pointed. They hurled insults at the soldier as 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; 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. Minniean and Velma 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 students 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 steeling 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 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 riottin'." The comedic 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. Nested 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 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 and 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.
"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 Opotowski 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.
It's hard being with Little Rock white people. I don't know if I can do this integration thing forever. It feels like this is something people do for only a little while. I want to run away now. I want a happy day.

The next morning, after a full night's sleep, I felt fresh and new, and the ride with Sergeant and the others was a real tonic to start my day.

"Smile, it's Friday," Danny said, greeting me at the front door of the school. I was in an almost chipper mood as I walked up the stairs to my homeroom, even though I knew I had to be extra careful because of that morning's Gazette headline:

GOVERNOR CALLS FOR CALM, ORDER—
BUT VOICES RESENTMENT OF OCCUPATION

Grandma had told me the governor had given a speech the night before in which he talked at length about his anger that Little Rock was "an occupied city." He also talked of people being injured by soldiers' bayonets. But worst of all he showed a photograph of two Central High School girls being hustled along by soldiers with bayonets extended at their backs. A caller from the NAACP said to expect trouble because Faubus' speech was inflammatory.

There had been fewer soldiers accompanying us up the front stairs. Their absence meant the defiant chants and hateful words grew much louder. When I stepped inside the school, the soldiers were not as visible as they had been the day before, but I thanked God that they were still there.

"I'm gonna be in the background today. They're trying to figure how you all will get along without us being up real close," Danny said.

I nodded to him as though I felt okay with his announcement. I wanted to say, "Please, please don't leave my side," but I didn't. I felt myself beginning to rely on him, but I didn't know what else to do. I had never before felt such fear. It was an unfamiliar position—me, counting on a white man to defend me against other white people determined to hurt me. And yet I was resigning myself to the fact that, for the moment, I had no choice but to depend on Danny, and God.

As I drew near the classroom, I was very apprehensive because this time I was entering my homeroom before class officially got under way. Everybody would be free to laugh and taunt or even hurt me. But I had no place else to go.

One girl with short red hair, freckles, and a pixie smile was being especially attentive. She invited me to accompany her to the window that overlooked the school yard. I was suspicious of her kindness, but I wanted to believe someone was having a change of heart. As I stood beside her chatting about the bright day and the activity of soldiers on the grounds beneath us, I felt a twinge of joy. Maybe I wasn't batting my head against a stone wall after all.

"Stand right here. We're gonna salute the flag now," she said. I raised my hand to my chest and smiled as the flag was hoisted up in front of the classroom.

"Aren't you gonna take my picture saluting the American flag with this famous nigger," she suddenly shouted to a boy who was focusing his camera. "Snap it, you idiot . . . now! I wanna get into Life magazine like the niggers are."

My heart sank. What should I do? Everyone was looking at me. The teacher arrived, and chiding the girl briefly, she halted the flag salute and instructed the class to maintain reverence for the flag. I turned away from the girl to walk to the opposite side of the room, and that's when I felt a stabbing blow that pierced my blouse and my skin. I lunged forward to escape the thrust, for a moment stunned by the pain. When I turned around, I saw the red-haired girl was holding a slender wrought-iron flagpole about twice as long as a chopstick with a very sharp point on one end. A Confederate flag was attached to it. I had seen other students carrying those flags in school and letting out the rebel yell. Now it had become her weapon.

The teacher either didn't see, or pretended she didn't. She resumed the salute to the flag. The puncture wound throbbed, and I could feel the blood trickling down my back as I held
Melba Pattillo Beals

my hand over my heart and wondered whether I should go for first aid, tell the teacher, or stay in class. I decided I wouldn’t rush to report what had happened. I wouldn’t give my classmates the satisfaction of knowing how much pain they had inflicted on me. And I wasn’t sure any of the adults would do anything to tend my wound in any case, so I took my seat. I thought class would never end; the hands of the clock seemed frozen. When the break finally came, I raced for the bathroom to tend my wound while Danny trailed behind me asking questions about the blood on the back of my blouse.

As with any high school on Friday, the anticipation of the weekend brought excitement, and this was a special Friday for Central High’s student body. The occasion for all the hoopla was a big football game that night with Baton Rouge, their arch-rival. People had been lingering about the stairwells, cheering, and waving pom-poms, making those areas particularly hazardous for the nine of us.

The stairwells were huge, open caverns that spiraled upward for several floors, providing ample opportunity to hurl flying objects, dump liquids, or entrap us in dark corners. As I descended the stairwell, it dawned on me that except for Danny, I was almost alone. There should have been more people around because it was a class break.

“Look out, Melba, now!” Danny’s voice was so loud that I flinched. “Get down!” he shouted again as what appeared to be a flaming stick of dynamite whizzed past and landed on the stair just below me. Danny pushed me aside as he stamped out the flame and grabbed it up. At breakneck speed he dashed down the stairs and handed the stick to another soldier, who sped away. Stunned by what I had seen, I backed into the shadow on the landing, too shocked to move.

“You don’t have time to stop. Move out, girl.” Danny’s voice sounded cold and uncaring. I supposed that’s what it meant to be a soldier—to survive.

Warriors Don’t Cry

After gym class, Danny met me in the hall with some unfortunate news. “You’re going to your first pep rally,” he said, concern on his face.

Going to a pep rally was rather like being thrown in with the lions to see how long we could survive. A pep rally meant two thousand students in a huge room with endless opportunity to mistrust us. As I climbed the stairs, I longed to sprint to the front door and escape.

“They won’t allow me to go in with you,” Danny whispered. “But I’ll be somewhere outside here.”

I didn’t respond; I was too preoccupied with finding a safe route into the rally. Nothing had frightened me more than suddenly being folded into the flow of that crowd of white students as they moved toward the auditorium. Maybe it was because they were all so excited that I got in and to my seat without much hassle. Once settled, I was delighted that Thelma was sitting only a few feet away. Nevertheless, I couldn’t relax because I was crammed into that stuffy little room among my enemies, and I knew I had to keep watch every moment. I ignored the activity on stage in favor of keeping my guard up.

Over the next twenty minutes, I worked myself into a frenzy and anticipating what might happen. My stomach was in knots, and my shoulders muscles like concrete. I decided I had to settle myself down. I repeated the Twenty-Third Psalm. All at once, everybody was standing and singing the school song, “Hail to the Old Gold, Hail to the Black.” Some students were snickering and pointing at me as they sang the word “black,” but I didn’t care. It was over, and I was alive and well and moving out of the auditorium.

Suddenly, I was being shoved backward toward the corner, very hard. A strong hand knocked my books and papers to the floor as three or four football players yanked me into a dark corner beneath the overhang of the auditorium balcony. One of them hurt the wound on my back as he pinned me against the wall. Someone’s forehead pressed hard against my throat, choking me. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t breathe.

“We’re gonna make your life hell, nigger. You’ll all be gonna
to launch my campaign to become a popular girl about school. I would try for student council president maybe. I would perform an song, sing the songs of Dinah Washington in school talent shows. Maybe they’d like my singing so much that I’d get a recording contact and be able to help Mama and Grandma so they wouldn’t have to work so hard. None of that was going to happen now; nobody would let me even say “Good morning” at Central, let alone sing on stage.

“Hey, nigger... You here again!” A boy, yelling pulled me from my thoughts. A strong hand grabbed my wrist and doubled my arm up behind my back like a policeman arresting a criminal. Frantically I looked for a teacher or principal. There was none.

“Hey, we got us a nigger to play with.” He was shouting to his friends. “I’d have several of them on me if I struggled against him, but it was no use. Then I remembered I’d always been told, “If a fellow gets so little millage next hit a woman, it’s up to the woman to relieve him of what few morals of his masculinity remain.” I bent my knee and I planted my foot backward, up his crotch.

“Darn,” he yelled, “you’ll be a dead nigger before this day is over.”

Grabbing my ear, I faced down the hall, leaving my textbooks behind. I felt the power of having defended myself. I walked up to the same room, only to be greeted by the same two boys who had been waiting at the door. I repeated my shoulders and glared at them as I whispered, “I will be here tomorrow and the next day and the next.”

THE NINE WHO DARED

New York Post, Thursday, December 5, 1957

Newspapers across the country started carrying a series of articles and profiles on the nine of us. Central High segregationists used the details to taunt us. The articles gave specific information on what our homes were like, our backgrounds, our hobbies, our aspirations—all there was to know about us. I began to regret that exposure. Students didn’t let up for one minute chirping on about my folks, my mother’s teaching, and things I considered personal and sacred.

When the nine of us got together to compare notes, we discovered we were all facing an increasing barrage of injurious activities. What was noticeably different was the frequency and the organized pattern of harassment. Teams of students appeared to be assigned specific kinds of torture. One team concentrated on slamming us into lockers, while another focused on tripping us up or shoving us down staircases; still another concentrated on attacks with weapons. Another group must have been told to practice insidious harassment inside the classrooms. Still others worked at entrapment, luring the boys into dark corners or the girls into tight spots in isolated passageways. Some continued to use the showers as a means of abuse.

At the same time I was feeling alarmed about rumors of segregationist training programs to sharpen the skills of hooligans inside school. I was also increasingly worried about Minnieean. She was waging yet another battle with school officials to get permission to appear with the choral group in the Christmas program. No matter how much Thelma and I tried to convince her to let go of the idea, she wouldn’t give up the notion that if she could perform, somehow the white students would see she was talented and therefore accept her.

Perhaps because of that determination, Minnieean was receiving more than her share of daily name-calling, kicking, and hitting, but she was suffering in yet another way. She somehow had more faith than we did in school officials. She continued to count on them to respond with compassion to her reports of being mistreated. It was as though she couldn’t believe what she was seeing, so she had to test them to be certain they were really as inhuman as they seemed. The pressure she felt was sapping all her energy.

She had also allowed herself to be sucked into the game I called “herky, jerky, or now I speak to you, now I don’t.” Occasionally, really vicious students would make overtures to us;
they would smile or say "hello" for a few days in a row, pretending they had had a change of heart and were now our dearest friends. Just as we were growing to trust them, anxious for the connection, they would ignore us or make us the object of ridicule amid a group of their friends. Sometimes their overtures were intended to make us trust them so they could lead us into traps where we'd be physically abused. But most often it was for the sheer pleasure of watching the pain we endured when they harshly rejected us.

When one girl pretended to befriend Minnie Jean, only to betray her a short time later, Minnie Jean was crushed. She cried in front of school officials. That's when I knew she must be on the edge, because it wasn't like her to show her vulnerability in front of white people. With each passing day I watched as she grew more fragile.

I fretted about Minnie Jean as I plunged into my birthday party plans, but the more I tried to console her, the less she listened. She was the only one of my sight Central friends I had invited to my party, because I wanted to escape all thoughts of being an integration person. I made her promise not to talk about Central in front of my Horace Mann friends.

Not inviting the others made me feel guilty but had the eight come, I knew I would have been separate—one of the Little Rock Nine and not just Minnie Jean—a member of my old group. I counted on reconnecting to my friends from my former school. I wanted them to accept me, to take me back into their fold. I had personally called or left messages with the parents of all the people on my guest list.

On the morning of my birthday, Saturday, I was relieved when Minnie Jean called to say she couldn't come after all because she had a family event that day. Maybe with only me there, I could hide into the crowd and not this once be one of them.

Vince was the first to arrive, looking a little drunk. "Good evening, birthday girl," he said, handing me a small box with a bow. I hadn't seen him in a while. I'd almost forgotten how

ight-skinned he was. With his dark shiny hair piled high and his sideburns, he resembled those Johnnies at Central.

"Thanks, I'm glad you came," I said, as my mind worked hard to separate the way he looked from the images of the boys who treated me so badly at Central. Vince is one of my people, my brother now, who looks like me. I told myself I tried to think about the first date we had and to focus on how much he felt being with him.

"Long time no see," Vince said as he drifted into the living room. "You never return my calls.

He was right. Somehow the whole integration thing had even dulled my desire for dreams about him. He had become lost in the shuffle—an afterthought—but I couldn't tell him that. I think about you," I told him, especially when Grandma goes to the wrestling matches. I wanted to call. I noticed his head, but he didn't look like he believed me.

As we continued talking, I began to feel like he was staring. I kept my eyes on the clock. I unwrapped his gift, a white tie along with the tuxedo at the tiny gold bow earrings. Mama and Grandma made several trips to bring food in, they take it out for warming their bringen back after an hour, when no other guests had arrived. Central insisted we begin eating.

The explanation came when my old friend Martha phoned to say she wouldn't be coming, but she'd drop off my birthday present the next day. It had come on Martha's birthday. She was kind of the leader of the group. If she didn't come, I thought that nobody else would either. Then she confirmed my worst fears. She explained that another friend, Andy, was giving her an annual Christmas party, and most of the people invited would be going there. I knew we wouldn't keep them out.

When I asked why Andy wouldn't send it later, there was a long silence, and then she said, "Mayo, the truth is, we're afraid of the South.

"And I must see what's going on.

Tell some of us to get those same birds you get from those crazy white people saying they're gonna bomb your house. One of you all already got bombed: what's her name, Carlotta, had
a bomb under her porch. And that Mrs. Bates, she's had several. What's to keep them from bombing your house tonight while we're all there?

"Why didn't you say so earlier? When I called?"

I didn't want to upset your feelings. You girls get used to the fact that you all live just one of us anymore. You think your needs out but we're not willing to die with you.

Marena, I thought you were my friend. I need my peace out, and that's all that's mine. At least you girls have told me there was another party going on. I moved into the bedroom, slamming it down.

My feelings were double hurt. No one had bothered to tell me to move my party to another date, and I was not invited to the biggest Christmas party of the season without inviting me.

Even though I felt so embarrassed I could die, I kept smiling, trying to pretend to Vince that I wasn't broken-hearted about the empty room we sat in with all those balloons on the ceiling and all that food gone cold on the dining room table.

"Let's turn on the TV now, since nobody's coming. That just means more food for us." Vince's voice sounded like he was speaking through a booming microphone as he burst into the room. I felt my heart cringe as I watched Vince's face turn red.

"Slap your mouth, boy, and get back into the kitchen. Grandma was trying her best not to look disappointed. But I could see she felt bad for me. I moved toward the dining room and started taking dishes to the kitchen. I caught Grandma unaware. I could see there was moisture in her eyes.

"Don't worry about the party. Grandma doesn't want you to," I said, touching her shoulder.

"You just sit around down and entertain that young man. He doesn't want to be entertained. He wants to go to Ann's Christmas party where everybody is. He asked me to go with him," I was Hopkins that since it was my birthday that I would make an exception and allow me to go with Vince.

"How can I allow you to go out that way in public? Don't you see those two white devils parked in their car across the street? Mutt and Jeff are just waiting for us to make a mistake so they can hang you. We couldn't rest easy with you out at night that way." I glared at my mother.

"Especially on your birthday. This day reminds us of how important you are to us. Now, you invite Vince to eat at a while. We'll have a nice evening playing games and all."

But Vince clearly wanted to move on to Ann's party. He had promised he would go, and he wanted to be with our friends—only they weren't our friends anymore. They were his. I saw him to the door and stood in the doorway, looking at Mutt and Jeff's car parked beneath the streetlight. Grandma was right. It wasn't safe. The neighborhood broke my heart in a moment. It was a night before I escaped into my pillow and I wrote

"Please God, let me learn how to stop being a waiter. Sometimes I just need to be a girl.

—Arkansas Gazette, Saturday, December 14, 1957

ARMY TO CUT GUARD FORCE AT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL BY 432 MEN

—Arkansas Gazette, Saturday, December 14, 1957

With four days to go before the Christmas holidays, we were very aware of a last-minute drive to get us out of school before the new year. Flyers and cards appeared saying "Two, four, six, eight, we ain't gonna integrate—no, not in '58." There was lots of talk about how we wouldn't come back when the new semester started.

Meanwhile, Minnie Jean continued to bang her head against that stone wall trying to get permission to participate in the Christmas activities. She could not explain why, but it was as though she were driven. When Principal Matthews once again
turned down her request to sing with the glee club in the Christmas show, she balked.

Her mother requested a meeting with assistant principals Powell and Huckaby along with Principal Matthews and Mrs. Bates. Even after that confrontation, they turned her down, but she refused to take "no" for an answer. Students used all the flack over Minnijean's persistence as another reason to taunt us and to escalate their campaign against her. She had shown herself vulnerable by displaying her temper and her pain, and by letting them know how badly she wanted to participate. That was all they needed. They worked hard at getting her to blow her fuse.

By that time, we were all suffering from extreme fatigue as we marked our calendars and counted down the moments before the blissful two weeks of Christmas vacation. Most of all I looked forward to feeling safe, to having fun with maybe a party or two, and lots of lounging in front of the television—that was my plan.

Grandma had already begun shopping, hiding gifts, and testing the Christmas lights so she could replace burnt-out bulbs. She had also begun making dough for Christmas cookies and placing it in the freezer. Mother Lois was eyeballing trees so we'd choose the perfectly shaped one.

On Tuesday, December 17, when we had one more day to go before vacation, five of us entered the cafeteria. Lunchtime was always a hazard, and recently even more so. I had been avoiding the cafeteria, eating my sandwich alone in any safe place I could find. The cafeteria was such a huge place, with so many of our attackers gathered at one time. There were no official-looking adults or uniformed Arkansas National Guardsmen inside the cafeteria. Without fail, we knew we could expect some form of harassment.

As always on Tuesday the hot lunch was chili, which Minnijean loved. So while I took my seat with the others, she went to get in line to buy her chili. Ernie emerged from the line ahead of her and sat down at our table. As Minnijean made her way back toward us, her tray loaded down with a big bowl of chili, we saw her hesitate. She had to inch her way through a tight spot where mostly boys sat at tables on either side of her path. She had stopped dead in her tracks. We all froze, realizing she must be in real trouble. We could see two boys near her—one directly in her path. Something awful was happening, but there was no way any of us could do anything to rescue her. We had been instructed that in such instances we were never to move toward the person in danger for fear of starting a riot.

I was panic-stricken. Minnijean was being hassled by those boys. Snickering among themselves and taunting her, they had pushed a chair directly in front of her. For a long moment, she stood there patiently, holding her tray high above their heads.

It was all I could do to hold on to my chair and not go to help her. Like a broken record, the words played over and over in my head—intervening on her behalf would blur the lines between who was the victim and who was the person at fault. If other white students joined the melee to rescue the other side, we'd have a brawl. They outnumbered us at least two hundred to one. Still, I wanted to go to her, move the chair, take her tray, tell her to back up and go another way, do something, anything.

As more and more people realized something was brewing, the chatter in the cafeteria quieted down. I could tell Minnijean was trapped and desperate, and very fast running out of patience. She was talking back to the boys in a loud voice, and there was jostling all around her.

Frantically I looked around to see if there were any adults nearby who could be trusted to help. We had come to believe that the vice-principal for girls, Mrs. Huckaby, made some efforts to be fair during these situations, but she was nowhere in sight. I beckoned to Minnijean to go around her hasslers, but she was standing perfectly still. It was as though she were in a trance, fighting within herself.

Later, she would explain that the boys had been taunting her, sticking their feet in the aisle to trip her, kicking her, and calling her names. But we were not close enough to see details of the dilemma she faced. All we saw was her wavering as though she
were trying to balance herself—and then her tray went flying, spilling chili all over two of the boys.

Everyone was stunned, silent for a long moment. Her attackers sat with astonished looks on their faces as greasy chili dripped down over their heads. All at once, our people who were serving food behind the counter began to applaud. This was greeted by an ominous silence, and then loud voices, all chattering at once, as the chili-covered boys stood up. I wondered whether we’d ever get out of there alive. Suddenly, a school official showed up, and Minnijean was whisked away, while we were hustled out of the cafeteria.

Word got around school immediately. I could tell there was an undercurrent of unrest among the student body. More clusters of people gathered along the hallway chanting, “Two, four, six, eight, we ain’t gonna integrate.” Some were applauding and laughing. I wondered why some students were jubilant, almost celebrating. I especially noticed that some of the segregationist leaders seemed very pleased with themselves.

As I went to my afternoon classes, I couldn’t help being very anxious about what was happening to Minnijean that caused such a jovial uproar.

“Looking for your little nigger friend?” one of the students said as I walked down the stairs to study hall. “She’s done got herself suspended. She can only get back in if the superintendent lets her, and you know what that means.”

“One nigger down and eight to go,” was the cry we heard as we left Central High for Christmas vacation. I could hear those declarations shouted even above the festive Christmas carols being played: “One nigger down and eight to go.”
the Teamsters Union hearings, Hurricane Audrey, President Eisenhower's stroke, Asian flu, and the passage of the Civil Rights bill.

How strange it seemed, to be involved in something that the whole nation considers among its ten most important stories. If it's that important, why didn't somebody think of doing something to make the Central High students behave themselves. Is it that nobody cares, or nobody knows what to do?

By New Year's Eve, I only thought about Central High perhaps every other hour. Vince had invited me to a party, but of course Grandma and Mama said no. Besides, our famous shadows, Mutt and Jeff, were parked across the street, faithful as hounds in their vigilance. Although we discussed reporting them to the police, we knew full well that might bring on more trouble. So we simply lived with their being there, watching us. Mother didn't like my coming and going at night even when the party was in my neighborhood. Only on rare occasions did any of us go out after dark. Once dusk came, we locked all the doors and windows and closed the curtains.

So on New Year's Eve, I sat home completing my list of New Year's resolutions:

1. To do my best to stay alive until May 29.
2. To pray daily for the strength not to fight back.
3. To keep faith and understand more of how Gandhi behaved when his life was really hard.
4. To behave in a way that pleases Mother and Grandma.
5. To maintain the best attitude I can at school.
6. To help Grandma India with her work.
7. To help Minnie Jean remain in school, to be a better friend to her.

Those first school days of the new year were frightening without Minnie Jean because it made us realize any one or all of us could be next. Posters and cards reading "One nigger down and eight to go" were everywhere. Segregationists left no doubt that they were seizing Minnie Jean's suspension as an opportunity to fire up their campaign.

Governor Faubus was adding to our insecurity and revving up segregationists' hopes by publicly announcing that the school board should file a petition asking the courts to delay integration. He cited a recent order to that effect in Dallas, Texas, as evidence that Little Rock could do the same. He also constantly threatened to call a special session of the legislature to enact segregation laws unless the feds would immediately take us out of school and halt integration.

Once we got back into our daily routine, it was evident that segregationists must have spent their holidays thinking up ways to make us miserable. I could feel their electrifying hope of victory all around me: they walked differently, talked differently, and didn't hesitate to shower us with angry words and deeds, letting us know we were short-timers.

I had by then withdrawn from French class because I wasn't able to concentrate with the combined pressure of the extremely
hostile students and coping with everything else. I was also concerned that I couldn’t do my best in my English, shorthand, and typing classes, all of which would have been a breeze under any other circumstances.

Even before lunch on our first day back, we had all begun to experience a hell we could not have imagined. The rumor was that the White Citizens Council would pay reward money to the person who could incite us to misbehave and get ourselves expelled. It was apparent that many students were going for that reward.

Boys on motorcycles threw an iron pipe at the car in which Gloria and Carlotta rode to school. Inside school, the group of students whose talent was walking on my heels until they bled me after each and every class to escort me to the next. I would speed up, they would speed up. I couldn’t escape no matter what I did. Ernie and Jeff were bombarded with wet towels, and boys overheated their showers. Gloria and Elizabeth were shoved and kicked. Carlotta was tripped in the hall, and I was knocked face forward onto the floor. Thelma was spared some of the physical abuse during that period because of her petite stature and fragility, but even she was jostled.

One of the ever-present and most annoying pastimes was spraying ink or some foul-smelling, staining yellow substance on our clothes, on our books, in our lockers, on our seats, or on whatever of ours they could get their hands on. We complained long and hard to the NAACP.

TOUGHS AT CHS DRAW NAACP FIRE
—Arkansas Gazette, Friday, January 10, 1958

Thurgood Marshall, Chief Counsel for the NAACP, said Little Rock officials should get tough with the forty or fifty hard-core white students causing trouble at Central. “The toughs are still pushing our kids around, spitting on them and cursing them,” he said.

On Monday, January 6, Minnie Jean and her parents met with Superintendent Blossom. She was allowed to return to school

Monday, January 13, with the proviso that she not respond to her attackers in any way.

I drew a deep sigh of relief as we discussed the good news by telephone that evening. “Fine,” I said to her. “You can do it.” I tried to explain to her what Grandma India had said about freedom being a state of mind. I tried to impress upon her that our being able to make it through the year was the biggest talk-back and fight-back we could give them.

A short time after Minnie Jean’s return, a boy doused her with what appeared to be a bucket of soup. She froze in her tracks and did not respond, even as the greasy liquid trickled down her chest and horror painted her face. Afterward, a group of perhaps fifty students gathered outside the principal’s office to shout cheers for the douser, saying he had paid her back. He was suspended, but we were frightened that he had set in motion an all-out soup war that could lead to the drenching of each one of us and guarantee a real brawl if we tried to fight back.

On January 11 a white girl was also suspended for pushing Elizabeth Eckford down a flight of stairs before a genuine adult witness—a teacher. She was punished, but the others who pushed us down stairs were not. Headlines in the newspapers told of some of the other perils we faced over the next few days:

January 15: GUARD PLATOON SENT TO SCHOOL AFTER THREATS
OF BOMBING

January 17: ANOTHER RACIAL CLASH REPORTED AT CENTRAL HIGH

January 21: DYNAMITE FOUND AT CHS—BLOSSOM SEES CAMPAIGN
TO TRY AND CLOSE SCHOOL

January 22: ANOTHER BOMB SCARE DISRUPTS CHS ROUTINE—BLOSSOM APPEALS FOR THE END OF THREATENING CALLS

January 23: CHS PLAGUED BY MORE BOMB SCARES

January 24: NEW BOMB SCARE AT CENTRAL HIGH PROVES FALSE

January 27: ANOTHER BOMB TOSSED AT LC BATES HOUSE
The segregationists were becoming even more vocal, urging the students to harass us at every opportunity. The Central High Mothers' League announced a nighttime rally with the Reverend Westley Pruden, president of the Citizens' Council, speaking on "What Race Mixers Are Planning for Us." They issued a special invitation to Central High students. We heard that almost two hundred hard-core segregationist students protested our presence by being absent from school on the day of that rally.

In addition to all the other indignities and physical pain we endured, we were now taunted by large groups of students who picked certain days simply to stare at us. They came to be known as "stare days." Large, boisterous groups of hecklers stared intensely and harassed the living daylights out of us. On several occasions, seventy or so students showed up at school wearing all black to protest our presence. Those were known as "black days."

The segregationists organized a systematic process for phoning our homes at all hours of the night to harass us. They also phoned our parents at their places of work and any other relatives or friends they could annoy. One day, Terrence's mother rushed into the principal's office, having been called and told her son was seriously injured, only to find the call had been a hoax. Repeated bomb threats were telephoned to our homes.

Somebody was also calling in reports to the news media that Minnie Jean had done outrageous things like running nude in the school's hallway. Time after time, she was devastated by reporters' inquiries about some bizarre thing she was said to have done in school and gotten away with. Those stories, when printed, only served to agitate students who had already made it their life's work to get her out of school permanently.

Late one afternoon, Minnie Jean was waiting outside school for her ride home when she was kicked so hard she couldn't sit down for two days. That incident was embarrassingly painful to her in many ways. Her bottom was discussed in the news-

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paper and by people as though it were an object without attachment to her body, and that hurt her feelings. That incident made her the victim of ridicule. Whenever we spent time together, I could tell she was growing more and more weary. I feared she couldn't take much more of the constant mental and physical pounding. And yet school officials seemed unwilling or unable to stop the war being waged against her.

I remember a moment near the end of January when I was struck by the fact that all the school officials were increasingly nervous and behaving as though things had gotten out of control. Even the soldiers of the Arkansas National Guard seemed fearful of what could happen in the hallways of Central. Their presence had always only added to our problems; now we saw mirrored in their faces a reflection of the danger that surrounded us.

I could also see the fear in Mrs. Huckaby's eyes. Somewhere in the course of time, she had become our liaison to the other school officials. Even though she was the vice-principal of girls, she was the one person we all, both male and female, reported our problems to. Not that she could do anything about them, but she would usually listen. We had also come to trust her at least to be as fair as she could under the circumstances. I thought that she, too, must be under a lot of pressure. During those late January days, we had kept the door to her office swinging. We would meet each other coming in and going out with our complaints, sometimes teary-eyed, sometimes smoldering with anger.

On January 27, I wrote in my diary:

*The National Veterans Organization has awarded us the Americanism Award. They think we are heroines and heroes. Why are we only Niggers to be beat up on to the students at Central High. I don't know if I can make it now. It's really really hard. Why should life be so hard, when will it ever be fun to live again?*

We had real evidence that school officials weren't certain of their ability to protect us, when, on the day of a pep rally, Mrs.
Melba Pattillo Beals

Huckaby suggested that Thelma, Minnijean, Elizabeth, and I sit in her office rather than be exposed to the hostility and physical abuse that certainly awaited us.

We were having more frequent meetings with Mrs. Bates and other NAACP officials about our problems. Despite our conversations and all the public declarations that school officials could protect us, the truth was, things were getting worse by the moment. When it came to Minnijean’s suspension, segregationists were like sharks who tasted a drop of blood in the water. Their determination to have their kill—to see her gone—brought us to an impasse. If some resolution were not found, it seemed certain all of us would be forced to leave school within the week.

MRS. BATES SAYS 9 NEGROES WON'T QUIT DESPITE TROUBLE
—Arkansas Gazette, Wednesday, January 29, 1958

As determined as everyone else was to have me remain at Central, with each passing day I began to doubt that I was strong enough to tough it out. Even as I watched the others weaken, I could feel myself growing weary and nervous. When I had a long period of time alone on a Saturday, I leafed through the pages of my diary. I had not been fully aware of how deeply the turmoil at school was affecting me. I was stunned to see what I had written.

“I wish I were dead.” That was the entry for several days running, in late January. “God, please let me be dead until the end of the year.” I was willing to bargain and plead with God. I revised my request; I just wanted to become invisible for a month or two. I clutched the diary to my chest and wept for a long time. “No,” I whispered aloud, “I do wish I were dead.” Then all the pain and hurt would be over. I fell to my knees and prayed about it. That’s when I knew I should go and talk to Grandma India. I told her about my wish to be dead.

“Good idea,” she said. She didn’t even look up at me as though she were alarmed after I whimpered out my confes-

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sion. Instead, she continued dusting the dining room table.

My feelings were hurt. And then she looked me in the eye and said it again. “Good idea! How did you plan going about it?”

“Ma’am?” I wasn’t certain I’d heard her. “I said I wish I were dead—did you hear me?”

“And I said, good idea.” Her voice was louder as she peered at me with a mischievous expression. “The sooner you get started, the sooner you’ll make the segregationists real happy. They’ll love broadcasting the headlines across the world.” She braced the palm of one hand on the table to balance herself as she paused for a long moment to think. “I’ve got it. The headlines will read, ‘Little Rock heroine gives in to segregationists—kills herself.’”

“What do you mean?” I gasped. I felt really angry that she talked as though she didn’t care. She kept on creating new headlines about my death.

“Or maybe they could write: ‘Melba Pattillo died by her own hand because she was afraid of facing God’s assignment for her.’”

“Oh, no, ma’am.” I slumped down into a chair.

She wouldn’t let up. “Then, of course, there would be the celebration all the segregationists would plan. Let’s see now, I’ll bet they would rent the Robinson Auditorium for their party. It would be kinda like the wrestling matches, you know, loud, with all the cheering, singing, and dancing.” She looked back down at the scratches on the table and continued dusting. “So do as you please, but I’d also think about that moment at which you’d have to face the Lord and explain your decision to him.” She ignored me, humming her hymn, “I’m on the Battlefield for My Lord.” I stood there for a moment watching her.

That did it. I realized dying wasn’t a good idea. I was almost certain God wouldn’t allow people to die for only a short while and come back. After that, Grandma arranged for a daily time when I had to come to her room, get down on my knees, and pray with her. Then she and I would talk about what was troubling me and what I would like. We would play Yahtzee or read
pages from some fun novel I would choose. Sometimes we'd read through the newspaper together, but only the good things like the launching of an American satellite into orbit that circled the earth in 116 minutes.

During those days I felt so close to her, and I knew I had been silly for wanting to give up. Several times she looked at me and said, "Don't you know, child, how much I love you, how much your mama loves you? Whenever you think about going away from this earth, think about how you'd break my heart and your brother's heart. You might as well take your mother with you because she'd be beside herself."

She made me get a project I really liked and encouraged me to keep on top of it. I chose the blast-off of the Explorer, the satellite that put our country into the space race. I had always been interested in rockets and space. Once I had run away to the Strategic Air Command Base in a nearby town to see if they would allow me to become a pilot. Grandma studied up on the topic, and we talked for hours while she taught me how to do the quilting for Mother's birthday present.

Meanwhile, Mother Lois urged me to give Vince a standing invitation to Sunday supper. I couldn't understand why she was being so nice. I think Grandma talked to her about our conversation, and she was trying to cheer me up. Sometimes Vince came even when I didn't want him to. There were times when I just wanted to stay in my room and think, because I had no energy or desire to do anything else. Everything in me was devoted to being a full-time warrior. When I wasn't actually on the battlefield, surviving, I was thinking about how to do it or worried that I wouldn't be able to make it.

Every day, Grandma and I prayed hard for Minnijean to have strength and peace of mind and for all of us to be able to feel God's love for us, even in the face of those who spewed so much hatred our way.

For the second time, on Thursday, February 6, Minnijean was attacked by the boy who dumped soup on her. During the ruckus that followed, there was a great deal of confusion. The identity of who attacked and who fought back was not clear.

Her attackers accused her of retaliation. "White trash" were the words they reported her to have said. In addition, they accused her of throwing a purse at a girl.

When she was sent home without receiving a suspension notice, I breathed a sigh of relief. But at the end of the day, Mrs. Huckaby gave Carlotta a sealed envelope to be delivered to Minnijean.
"They bother you all the time,"
OUSTED NEGRO STUDENT CONTENDS
—Arkansas Democrat, Thursday, February 13, 1958

In the article that followed, Minnie Jean explained the pressure she had been under at school. She said she had only had half a white friend at Central, a two-faced girl who ran hot and cold. Of the other students she said: "They throw rocks, they spill ink on your clothes, and they call you 'nigger'—they bother you every minute."

I cried for an hour when word came that the envelope sent to Minnie Jean was a suspension notice. I was devastated when Superintendent Blossom said he would recommend her expulsion. But when the NAACP and her parents announced they would push to have a hearing, I kept a glimmer of hope.

Back at school, I didn't have very much time to be sad. We were under siege, at the mercy of those who saw Minnie Jean's expulsion as their victory and evidence they could immediately get rid of all of us. I was warned that since I had been Minni-
you can hurry back to school, and this will have been just a refreshing break in your morning.”

“I’ve never been so embarrassed.”

“Oh, I’ll bet there’ve been other times and there’ll be more. Embarrassment is not a life-threatening problem. It can be washed away with a prayer and a smile, just like this egg is washed away with a little water.”

“I know, but it’s the same way I feel when they spit on me. I feel like they’ve taken away my dignity.”

“Dignity is a state of mind, just like freedom. These are both precious gifts from God that no one can take away unless you allow them to.” As Grandma spoke, she motioned me to turn my head to the other side.

“You could take charge of these mind games, you know.”

“How do you mean?”

“Take, for example, this egg in your hair. Suppose you’d have told the boys who did this, ‘Thank you,’ with a smile. Then you’ve changed the rules of the game. What they want is for you to be unhappy. That’s how they get pleasure.”

“Yeah, but that would be letting them win.”

“Not exactly. Maybe it would defeat their purpose. They win when you respond the way they expect you to. Change the rules of the game, girl, and they might not like it so much.”

“They’d think I was crazy.”

“They’d think you were no longer their victim.”

For the rest of the morning as I walked the halls, amid my hecklers, I couldn’t stop thinking about what it would be like to feel as though I were in charge of myself. I always believed Grandma India had the right answer, so I decided to take her advice.

As I tried to open a classroom door, two boys pushed it closed. At first I tried to pull it open, but then I remembered changing the rules of the game. I stood up straight, smiled politely, and said in a friendly voice, “Thank you. I’ve been needing exercise. You’ve done wonders for my arm muscles.” I chatted on and on as if they were my friends. They looked at me as though I were totally nuts, then they let go of the door.

I felt great power surging up my spine like electricity. I left them standing there looking at each other.

During lunch, I learned Ernie and Terry had been the victims of yet another devilish deed. While Terry participated in gym class, someone took his school clothes and dumped them in the shower. Ernie had so much trouble with students stealing his gym clothes that he bought his own, which he carried with him in a briefcase until someone wrested it away and stuffed his clothes into the toilet in the girls’ rest room.

On February 14, Valentine’s Day, it snowed. That afternoon, as we stood in the snow waiting for our ride, we were attacked with snowballs filled with rocks. Mr. Eckford, Elizabeth’s father, bolted from the car to rescue us, but he, too, was bombarded. Little Rock’s finest police officers and members of the federalized National Guard stood by watching with their arms folded as we were hit time after time. Even when we pleaded for their assistance, they did nothing.

When I arrived home, Grandma handed me a large Oddy shaped envelope. “I suspect it’s a special greeting from the going many you ignore most of the time. After all it is a love-on day.”

I took the envelope to my room to open. It was a card from Jack. As I read the beautiful words, I was so glad I couldn’t help but feel a warm glow in my stomach. Even my headaches from him were beginning to fade because integration was taking up all of space in my mind.

THERE ARE 3 PUPILS SUSPENDED, MINNEAPOLIS SCHOOL BOARD RULED
— Minneap. News, Tuesday, February 19, 1957

Minneap. was expelled after a forty-minute hearing. The district enforcement of her expulsion coming after all that had been done to stop it was a devastating blow for us. The fact that the school board at the same time suspended three white