

The Decision



By Gracie Chandler

Ever since our baseball team became the South Georgia Junior Champions, Coach had been on cloud nine. He stood beaming at the podium, singing our praises as the team clustered around him. “I’ll put my Cougars up against any elementary school in Georgia,” he boasted to the student body. “Tomorrow is school Spirit Day, students against the teachers. It’s been five years since my guys won that trophy, five loong years. But if *any* team can break that jinx, this is the one!” He was hyped and the student-audience egged him on, “Right on, Coach!” and “Power to the students!”

Then he asked the faculty baseball team to stand. “This 1968 team’s gonna kick butt tomorrow, so sit down while you still can!” The students went wild, stomping their feet, chanting, “Cou-gars! Cou-gars! Cou-gars!” Me and my teammates joined in, shouting, “Hubba, hubba!” We tried to look cool, pretending the game’s long-standing tradition was no big deal. But deep within we were determined to claim the bragging rights.

We met coach on the playing field after school, anxious to learn who would be the Spirit Day starters. Finally, after announcing all the positions except pitcher, Coach lowered his clipboard and nodded toward me, then my rival, Dirtball. “This was a hard decision for me; both of you really showed your stuff this season! But I had to pick one; my choice for the Fredrick Douglass School Spirit Day pitcher is...,”

I held my breath—nervous as a broke-leg turtle standing on third—all bases loaded.

“...Andrew Rock Tyson!”

“Oh, wow!” I hollered, grinning from the top of my bushy Afro to the soles of my high-top Converse tennis shoes. The guys shouted “Rock! Rock! Rock!” It was a blast—listening to them cheering *me*, not Dirtball. He and I had skirmished all season, but I’d won out. That’s how I am—playing baseball or playing crazy—I played to win.

“Hey, team!” I yelled. “What do Cougars eat?”

“Teacher meat, not fit to eat!”

Yeah, man! Tomorrow is gonna be *my* day!

I usually hang out with the team after baseball practice, goofing off and doing stuff 10-year-old boys do. But today was different. The second Coach announced the starting line-up, I high-tailed it for the shortcut hole in the fence. I had to hustle home if I wanted Dad to hear the good news from me. Folks in our part of town got a grapevine so long, if someone sneezed on one corner, somebody on the next block’ll shout, “Bless you!”

I was already at midfield when I heard, “Hey, Church Boy! What’s the big rush?”

I didn’t have to turn around to know that it was Dirtball’s loud mouth. He and the whole team had caught up with me. Most times I played along with his jabs about me being the preacher’s kid, but I was in a hurry today and Dirtball didn’t know when to quit.

“What’s the hurry, Choir Boy,” he sneered, “gotta go pray for a miracle tomorrow? That’s the only chance the Cougars got with you pitching!”

I was the best man for the job; the team knew I was the best man, and now they were waiting for me to make sure Dirtball knew it, too. He was eleven, but I’m big for my age, a head taller than he is. I walked over to him, waved my hand over his low-fro and said, “Dirt, go play with somebody your size!” Game over.

I flew up the worn granite steps and charged down the musty hallway. Mount Zion Baptist Church had been built right after the Civil War and I doubted any fresh air had entered the hall since.

“Hey, Dad!” I yelled, barging into the pastor’s study. “Guess—.”

He held up a finger, shushing me as he talked on the phone. “Tomorrow? That’s fantastic!” He paused, listening, then said, “Yes, of course; see ya later.” He hung up the phone and turned to me. “Rock! I just heard—you’re in!”

Wow! Bradford’s a small town, but dang! How could he know already?

“But Dad, *I* wanted to tell you first.”

He looked a bit puzzled, then grinned.

“No matter; tomorrow’s *still* your big day, son. Gimmie five!”

“Outta sight!” I said, tossing my glove to the domed ceiling.

“Hey! I never figured you’d be this excited about Bradford Academy.”

The glove hit the floor.

“Bradford? What about Bradford?”

“The deseg plan; don’t you remember...you volunteered, wrote the essay and everything.”

Then I remembered. Some group had been pushing to integrate all-white Bradford Academy. “B...b...but that was *last* year. The school year’s almost over and...say what! Blacks kids at Bradford? No way!”

Dad walked to the window, his back to me.

“You might be right, Andrew...”

Andrew? Oh, no—that’s not a good sign when he calls me Andrew.

“...this fight began in 1902; you don’t have to—.”

“1902! Who in the world would fight *that* long for anything?”

“The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, that’s who.”

“The who?”

“The N, double A, C-P, that’s who!”

“Oh...them.” I flopped down on couch and took out my baseball, rolling it in my hands. “So, what’d they fight about?” I tried to sound interested.

He returned to his desk and I could tell he had a lot to say. I did too, but decided to keep my mouth shut about tomorrow’s game until later.

“Well, there was a law that says blacks and whites can’t go to the same school,” he said.

“Was? We still don’t.”

“Yeah, but that law said the schools must be equal.”

“Mmm...from the looks of Douglass Elementary, I don’t think so.”

“That’s what the NAACP’s been fighting for—decent schools for Negro kids. Those lawyers have been filing cases for over fifty years.”

“Fifty years! Did they ever win?”

“A few. But most judges threw the lawyers *and* the cases out. Then Oliver Brown, out in Kansas, got with his neighbors and sued to send their kids to a white school.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. An excellent school for white kids was only six blocks from their neighborhood; the tumbledown, run-down school for blacks was a mile away.”

“Yep, like here in Bradford.” I stifled a yawn.

“Well, Brown and his neighbors sued, then asked the NAACP to help them. The problem was, black parents in three other states *and* the District of Columbia had sued, too. They also needed help, the NAACP was already overworked and understaffed.”

“So the Kansas people gave up, right?” I juggled the ball.

“No. Thurgood Marshall combined—.”

“Thurgood Marshall! *The Supreme Court Judge?*”

“The one and only,” Dad said proudly. “Back then he was head of the NAACP’s legal team. Anyway, they put the five cases together in 1954—in Kansas. That’s when things started popping!”

I sat up. “What happened?”

“They called the case *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education*. Attorney Marshall and his team argued it all the way to the Supreme Court. It seems like 1952 was yester—.”

“Wait a minute, Dad, you said things turned in 1954.”

“Oh, so you are listening.”

“Yes sir, I sure am!” *Ka-pow! Point for Rock!*

“Well, you see, they *filed* the case in 1952, but the High Court drug its feet two long years before ruling on it, finally saying that separate schools for blacks and whites were unconstitutional.”

“Oh, I see.”

“But state and local governments ignored the ruling; didn’t change one thing—schools stayed segregated and unequal. Even after the NAACP got the Supreme Court to rule again, saying segregation had to end, and with all deliberate speed.” Dad sighed and shook his head. “The new ruling was called *Brown II*...not so new today, though, since it was passed in 1955.”

“Nineteen fifty-five!” I did some quick figuring. “Thirteen years! I wasn’t even born yet!”

“Yep,” Dad said smiling. He sprang to his feet. “But guess what? *We’ll* be deliberately speeding to Bradford tomorrow!”

Ha! You might be speeding to Bradford—I’ll be pitching at Douglass. I started to say just that—or something like it—when Mrs. Allen, Dad’s secretary, stuck her head in the door.

“NAACP Attorney Stevenson’s downstairs, sir.”

“Already? Tell him I’m on my way!” He bolted through the door and hurried down the hall, whistling.

“Aw man!” I said, stretching out on the leather couch. Just thinking of missing that game made my legs weak. *Suppose Dad made me go to Bradford? ...Nah, he wouldn’t do that. I slapped the ball in my glove. He’d say, ‘Andrew, a man’s word is his bond’.* I sat up straight. “That essay was my bond!” I stood, pacing the room. *But the team won’t stand a snowball chance in hell without me...but then Dirtball’s good—real good. He could end that faculty jinx like that!* I snapped my fingers then slapped the ball again, pounding it in the glove. “What if he pitched a no-hitter? Aw man! He’ll be a big shot at Douglass and I’ll be a nobody at Bradford!” I slammed the ball against the wall, causing it to ricochet. It landed on top of the huge bookcase, out of reach. “Damn!” I felt like putting down some real cussing, but went and got the stepladder instead.

The top shelf was stacked with books, papers, magazines. I searched through the dusty clutter, but didn’t find the ball. But I did uncover a leather-bound album. I wiped off the dust to read the title: *History of the Struggle*, compiled by Andrew Paul Tyson. I lugged the bulky book down to Dad’s desk.

The album bulged with old yellowy newspaper clippings and pictures. There were stories about that *Brown* thing Dad had talked about; pictures of a pretty lady named Rosa going to jail; and shots of empty buses lined up in Montgomery, Alabama.

I flipped the page. Students from North Carolina A&T College sat at a Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, facing a sign that said WHITES ONLY. Grimacing white people punched the students, drenching them in mustard, ketchup, and mayonnaise from head to toe. The article said that the police were called and immediately arrested the students for trespassing. But more and more students kept coming, taking their place on the stools. And getting arrested too.

Another picture showed thick black smoke billowing from a Greyhound bus. The caption read *So-called Freedom Ride Ends in Violence*. I skimmed the story. “Anniston, Alabama... firebomb inferno... escaping passengers brutally beaten by the Ku Klux Klan as lawmen look on....” I turned the pages and endless stories of sit-ins, wade-ins, ride-ins, bombings, and lynchings unfolded. Names like Ella Baker, Malcolm X, Ruby Bridges, and Stokely Carmichael appeared among many others. The stories swirled in my head and I struggled to keep them straight. But when I turned the page and saw Emmitt Till’s handsome picture next to his horrible one in the casket, I’d had enough. I started to close the book, but another picture caught my eye. It was a baby-christening event; I smiled, reading the article:

Many parishioners witnessed the Christian Dedication Ceremony for Andrew Rock Tyson, son of The Reverend and Mrs. Andrew Paul Tyson. The baby, now two months old, was born September 25, 1957, the same day the Screaming Eagles 101st Airborne Division escorted

nine Negro students into all-white Central High School. The baby's middle name, Rock, was bestowed to honor those courageous students, known as the Little Rock Nine.

Aha! So *that's* why Rock's my middle name. Cool! But now I was curious—what was this Little Rock Nine about? I thumbed through the scrapbook until I found the answer:

Federal Guns Force Integration in Little Rock, Arkansas

There was a picture of nine solemn Negroes, teenagers, walking between two protective columns of soldiers—bayonet rifles held high; angry-faced white students strained against saw-horse barricades, taunting the black students, clutching at them. The soldiers stopped at the school's front entrance. Once inside, the Negroes were stalked, spat upon, kicked, and punched. Most of the teachers either ignored or ridiculed them. Eight of the nine lasted until the end of the school term, giving up proms and glee clubs, sports and carefree days, daily risking their lives. The following year, by majority vote, the citizens of Little Rock closed the city's four high schools, creating what was called "The Lost Year". Whites blamed the Negroes for the closures and committed terrifying hate crimes against them.

I closed the scrapbook and stood up, my legs trembled as I walked to the window. Douglass Elementary sat in the distance and I clearly saw the pitcher's 'mound'—a circle of loose dirt within a circle of more dirt. It had remained unchanged ever since Dad was a kid at Douglass. And Bradford Academy's mound? Well, as far as I knew, it had *always* been a smooth hill of molded red clay.

Gripping my glove and the scrapbook, I climbed the ladder and found the ball. After nestling it in the glove, I placed them both beside the scrapbook. Then I climbed down for the last time.

I dialed Coach's number and my hand shook a little as rambling phrases played tag in my brain: *Brown II...Spring Game...deliberate speed...Little Rock Nine...star pitcher....* I took a deep breath, knowing that my decision, like my name, was solid—solid like a rock.

The End