

The New Kid in School

By Gracie L. Chandler



Leona thwacked Tyrone’s newspaper, causing a loud rustle to echo throughout the musty library.

Tyrone lowered the paper and glared at her. “Hey! What’s wrong with you!”

“Shush!” ordered Miss Willis, Carver High School’s librarian. Her wrinkled face looked as antiquated as the books she guarded.

“See what you did!” hissed Leona.

“What *I* did?” he whispered back.

“Your book report—you did it yet?” she asked.

Her older cousin rattled the paper back in place and slouched lower in the seat. “No,” he mumbled.

“Uh huh...you know what Auntie’s gonna do if you flunk out. Your mama don’t play, not even the radio!” She pulled a book from her bag. “Just read a short book, like this one.”

He lowered the paper and read the title. "*Rosewood is Burning*. So?" He returned to the newspaper.

"So you need to get—."

"Hey!" Tyrone bolted upright. "Check this out—they fixin' to integrate the schools!"

"You lying," said Leona, snatching the newspaper. Her eyes raced across the headline: *Bradford County to Integrate High Schools*. "No way!" she said then read the article aloud: "The school board, in response to the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. the Board of Education II* ruling, has announced its desegregation plan. Known as the Freedom of Choice Plan, the plan gives students the legal option of attending either George Washington Carver..., " Leona paused, "...or Bradford Academy."

Tyrone turned to the comics and yawned. "Who'd wanna go to that honky school?"

"Me!" Leona scanned the page, stopping at a list of names. "Huh? Who picked *them*?"

"Picked who?"

"Black kids to go to Bradford—that uppity doctor's kids; the teachers' brats and the rest of them. *My* name should've been first on this list!"

Her cousin chuckled. "And first to get beat up at Bradford."

"Aw, Tyrone, this is the sixties; things aren't *that* bad anymore."

"Yeah, right. Sidney Poitier won an Academy Award, so now white people want your black behind at their school."

"Well, that's what *I* want! I'm going to get a handle on this!"

Leona barged into Carver High's Main Office. Mrs. Hudson, the principal's secretary, recognized her and stood up, ready for battle.

"What do *you* want?" she asked.

"To see Mr. Neely...a *personal* matter," Leona replied.

"Personal, eh?"

"*Very!*" Leona pushed open the swinging gate and stepped behind the counter.

"Just a minute, you little huss—young lady!" Mrs. Hudson folded her arms across her ample bosom, blocking the way.

A baritone voice crackled through the intercom, breaking the impasse. "It's okay, let her in."

The secretary muttered something about "low-life people having no manners" as Leona triumphantly smirked past her.

Mr. Neely, tall and muscular, commanded respect even while seated. He didn't greet her or indicate a chair, and for a second Leona regretted having been so pushy.

Well, I've come this far, she thought. "Mr. Neely, sir, what—um, how were these students chosen?" She pointed to the newspaper article. "To go to Bradford Academy, I mean...."

The principal stared quietly through half-closed lids and she became acutely aware of her puffy Afro and multi-colored dashiki. His silence forced her to continue.

“I mean, nobody told *me* about this—the free choice plan. How do I—.”

His face held the annoyance of a busy man. “Integration is a very sensitive issue, Leona. We must tread this new path carefully.” He paused to tidy his already neat desk. “Those of us involved—the Colored Citizens Council, the faculty, parents—we recommended the brightest, most intelligent—.”

“*I’m* intelligent.”

“I know—4.0; but this isn’t just about grade-point averages.”

“Well, then, what *is* it about?”

He reared back in his chair, swiveling it slightly.

“The School Board specifically requested we send students who could handle themselves in, . . . er, shall we say, a new environment; unexpected situations are bound to come up.”

“I think I handle myself very well.”

“Look, you’re an excellent student, and we considered you; but since this is your senior year we thought you might—.”

“You thought wrong.”

Mr. Neely’s eyes widened and he sat up straight.

“Now look here—,” he said, his voice edgy. Then he sighed, softening his tone. “This is a delicate situation, Leona, a noble undertaking. It requires students with character, dedication to the plan.”

“I’m dedicated.”

“Wearing a nappy Afro, dressing like an African—that ‘Power to the people mess’? That’s *not* the image we want to portray at Bradford.”

“No disrespect, sir, but what *is* that image? Black faces—no, excuse me—*colored* faces wrapped around white thinking?” She held up newspaper. “That’s who I see here—*Oreos*. A bunch of hand-picked *Ore*—.”

“That’s enough, Leona. Don’t cross that line!”

She stepped in closer and leaned on the desk.

“Sir, that plan offers free choice, and my choice is Bradford Academy. If I have to write to every black newspaper editor in America, visit Dr. King up in Atlanta, or call on the Black Panthers, I’m going to Bradford!”

The principal leaned back, pressed his fingers into a tent, and assessed her threat. “I just bet you will,” he concluded. He plopped a manila packet in her direction. “Here’s the information you need. We’ve worked too hard to let outsiders come in to make trouble.”

“Thank you, sir. I promi—.”

“It’s your funeral. And I mean that...literally. Good day.”

The long walk home gave her time to rethink, her mind reeling. *He just tried to scare me because I don’t fit his middle-class mold. I’m entitled to a good education just like the Oreos. I’m not barging in, staging a sit-in or nothing. Besides, Bradford’s almost in my front yard, I won’t have to get up so early now.* She walked faster, anxious to tell her mother the news. *I’ll make history—the first Negro to graduate from Bradford Academy. Wow!*

Mama laid the parental permission form on the coffee table then reared back in Daddy's big green recliner; her long legs stretched out over the footrest. "No! I'm not signing no paper for you to go to that white school. Carver's good enough—been good enough for you ever since first grade; gonna be good enough for you in twelfth, too."

"Ma, I'm not trying to put Carver down or nothing, but you know good and well how messed up that school is. I've been there eleven years and the school board never, *ever* gave us anything new. Just think about it—year after year, starting off knowing all you gonna get is the white kids' raggedy leftovers—raggedy books, raggedy basketballs, raggedy window shades, raggedy everything!"

"But you got good teachers," Mama recounted.

"Yeah, you're right about that," conceded Leona, flopping down on the sofa. "But still, don't we deserve to have the good stuff like they got. How come *we* can't have a real gym, or new desks? Our desks so scarred up you can't even find a smooth place to write on. And books!"

Leona rummaged in her book sack and pulled out a textbook. The spine was as limp as cooked spaghetti; the cloth cover was tattered beyond repair. "Just look at this! The title so faded you can't even tell what kind of book it is." She shook it and pages floated to the floor. "*They* get the new books and we get this...this—trash!"

She leafed through the torn, scribbled pages. "Half the time the teachers don't even give 'em to us 'cause the information is so old. You won't find President Kennedy's assassination in here, but I bet it's in the new edition at Bradford." She slammed the book on the table.

“At least ya’ll *got* a school and some kind of book,” said Mama. “When I went to Carver we just had a couple of teachers and one building, and we was plenty happy for that.”

“Yeah, yeah...and that building’s still there—they call it a gym. But what kind of gym is that without a wood court? Don’t our players deserve better than that old linoleum tile covering the floor?”

“Well... ‘course, they do. I’m just saying the time ain’t right, right now. But you learn a lot at Carver; don’t you make the principal honor roll every year?”

“Yeah, the *colored* honor roll.”

Mama let down the footrest. “Then what about that NAACP essay contest the school help put on? Out of all them essays, yours was the best in South Georgia.”

Leona knew Mama was right. She had excelled in everything Carver had to offer, but she wanted more.

“Anybody can write,” she said. “All you need is paper and pencil.”

Mama sighed and walked over to the television. “Time for the six o’clock news,” she said, adjusting the TV’s rabbit-ears antenna. She returned and sat on the sofa.

Leona scooted over, making room for her. “Mama, you know this is my last chance to see what a first-class education would be like. Suppose I want to go to college, be a science teacher or something. Carver don’t even have lab kits. I bet they got everything at Bradford—microscopes, thermometers, all kinds of stuff.”

“Uh-huh.” Mama stared at the TV, intent on Walter Cronkite’s report about draft dodgers evading the war.

Leona feigned interest as her eyes wandered around the tiny living room, settling on her brother's picture. It was in a shiny plastic frame and Willie Junior's Army uniform made his serious expression seem even more somber. She wished he was here. Or Daddy even. Maybe they could talk some sense into Mama. But Willie Junior had been in Viet Nam for over a month now, and Daddy was down in the Florida Keys, shrimping. The boat, the *Alice Faye*, wasn't due back in port until sometime in December, too late for him to be of any help to her then.

A commercial came on and Leona seized the chance to plead her case. "Why Mama? Why you so against this? Graduating from a white school will look good on my resume, might even help me get a scholarship."

Mama watched silently. The black and white TV showed grainy figures of long-haired white youths setting draft cards on fire.

Leona began again. "Every other mama would be proud her daughter was chosen to—."

Mama held up the palm of her hand, stopping Leona short.

"First of all, I'm not every other mama. I'm Betty Jo Johnson and I got my own reasons for doin' and *not* doin' what's best for *my* child. Second, you know how them white folks feel about that school. They love it more than they do their church."

If she's trying to wear me down, she's doing a damn good job, thought Leona.

"There's bound to be trouble," Mama said. "Remember when them white girls ran you away from over there? And you wasn't even *inside* the school—just in the *yard*! You must have been 'round seven or eight at the time; ran home scared to death, remember that?"

"No," Leona said. "I must have been too little."

But she'd lied. That day had never left her memory. She was eight, the same age as the girl whose wallet she had found. They had come to the house looking for her—Amy and her big sister, Dilliann; po' white trash. Amy hadn't said much. Dilliann did the talking, throwing out the racial stings—smug in the sanctity of her white skin. Leona had stood defenseless, humiliated, and Mama's wide-mouth grin had consented to the abuse. That was the day Leona learned that the words colored and white meant more than just opposites. That was the day she began to measure her many accomplishments against an invisible standard of white supremacy.

The commercial ended and Cronkite's deep rich voice brought her attention back to the TV. She gently massaged her cramping abdomen, knowing all too well the looseness that came with it. For Leona, every big dilemma seemed to bring diarrhea, but tonight she was determined to stay calm and fight it. Her hand shook slightly when she laid the pen on top of the permission form, then slid it across the coffee table to Mama.

“Well, you gonna sign it or not?” Leona asked.

Mama turned sharply, her honey-brown face a threatening scowl.

“Look, Leona, I told you from the git-go I wasn't signin' nothin'. Them crackers don't want you at that school! Can't you get that through your thick skull? They don't want you 'round 'em, they don't want you 'sociating with 'em, they don't want nothin' to do with you—period! Why you feel like you got to go be with white folks—ain't your own people good enough for you?”

Her day, like the long-ago day she found the wallet, had been tense and stressful; Leona's frustration transformed into words.

“Not when they act like you, a Aunt Jemima nigger!”

The slap was quick—too quick for Leona to duck, and she blinked to stop the shooting stars. Their eyes locked in mutual contempt, and Leona knew the “other mother” had surfaced, widening the deeply buried, yet ever present fissure in their relationship. The sound of a bugler playing *Taps* resonated from the television, signaling the arrival of pieced-together soldiers in flag draped coffins. Mother and daughter looked to Willie’s picture and their hostile impasse ended. Walter Cronkite concluded the news and signed off with a sober “...*and that’s the way it is, September, 6, 1967.*” Leona rushed to the bathroom, the stomach knots now manifested as insistent diarrhea.

She pretended sleep when Mama quietly entered the room and laid the peace offerings on the nightstand—an icy facecloth and the signed permission form. When Leona heard the door close she sat up on the side of the bed and placed the precious permission form inside the manila folder. As she examined the folder’s contents, she held the wet compress against her swollen cheek.

The introductory letter instructed the students to report to the Guidance Counselor’s office September 12, 1967, at 9:00 A.M. *Good, she thought, that gives me almost a week to get ready.* There was a map of the Bradford campus and she studied it, realizing for the first time that it was three times the size of Carver. The yearly Calendar of Events included field trips to places she’d never heard of and wouldn’t have been allowed inside even if she had. Missing, though, was information about clubs and extracurricular activities.

The wet facecloth began to drip. Leona reached into the nightstand drawer, searching for a Kleenex. As she rummaged through the odds and ends, a square object, wrapped loosely in

Christmas paper, surfaced. The lime-green wallet was brand new, just as Mama had given it to her years ago. The plastic, stamped to look like alligator skin, was still smooth and shiny; the red, heart-shaped keychain still dangled. She knew Mama had given her the wallet in lieu of the one she she'd found, the one the white girl, Dilliann, had accused her of stealing. But no *thing* could replace what Leona had lost that day; her anchor of protection, her sense of safety had been violated. Not only had she felt alone, Mama had taken Dilliann's word against hers, hadn't even let her explain what had happened. Leona had constantly thought about the betrayal and those that followed, trying unsuccessfully to figure out the two Mamas. She'd finally decided not to depend on either persona, learning instead to draw upon her own intelligence and rely upon her own strengths. In the process she'd become emotionally tough. She shoved the wallet back in the drawer and slammed it shut. She would not be like Mama—a weak, groveling, ass kisser. This was her chance—she would enter the arena, that white arena, and compete at their level. She would prove to them that she was just as good as they were, better even. She *had* to go to Bradford Academy—her entire being depended on it. *To be continued....*
