



The New Kid in School (Part Three)

Mrs. Prichard was true to her word. Not only was the new schedule ready, she had recommended Leona for AAP—the Accelerated Academics Program.

“Here’s your schedule; I think you’ll be satisfied with it.”

Leona looked over her classes and beamed when she saw the AAP recommendation. It wasn’t offered at Carver, but she’d heard about the program.

“This is wonderful! Looks like I’m set—thanks to you.” She rose to leave.

“Wait, Leona. I need to ask you something. We have suspects in mind, but did you see who threw that cherry bomb?”

“No, I didn’t see anything, it happened so fast. But it seems to me the whole school was in on it; why don’t you ask them?”

“I wouldn’t say it was the *whole* school. We have some...shall we say, characters, but most of our students are good kids. They’re mainly just curious about coloreds—after all, *Jim Crow’s* been around almost a hundred years.”

Huh? You’re telling me about Jim Crow? After all I’ve been through today? She walked to the door, then paused and turned.

“Mrs. Prichard, my reason for coming to Bradford is to get the best education I can. What about the teachers? Are they...well, are they just...curious, too?”

The counselor didn't answer immediately. After a few seconds she said, “You know, Leona, it's sad but true. It really *is* hard to teach old dogs new tricks.”

And young ones too, like Carl. Leona waved her new schedule in the air. “Well, I'm hoping these teachers aren't dogs—young or old. Hopefully they'll be people who're willing to teach *and* learn something new.”

Mrs. Prichard smiled ruefully. “I hope so, too. I sincerely do.”

“And I believe you. I appreciate all you've done to help me.”

“You're very welcome.” Then the perky little pullet brightened. “I'm sure everything will be just fine. Come by tomorrow, let me know how things went.”

“I will, and thanks, again.”

Leona walked into the deserted hall and exited the school's back door. Her house was visible across the expansive school yard and she would be home in less than five minutes. *This sure beats walking all the way from Carver.* She headed toward the field, recalling how her first day had gone. *It wasn't too bad,* she concluded, *not if you compare it with Central High in the fifties...now that was bad!* Deep in thought, she was unaware of the figure lurking under the fire escape.

The attack came from behind. Grabbing her hair, he yanked her beneath the shadowy stairs, slamming her against the red brick wall. Breathing hard, she felt his tobacco breath, hot and nauseating against her cheek. Pinned against the wall, the assailant's face was a pale blur.

Then he jeered. “I'm gonna make your life living hell, nigger!”

It was *Crazy Carl!* His muscular arm anchored cross-wise her neck, choking her. She tried to speak, persuade him to stop, but only a guttural wheeze escaped her blocked windpipe. She clutched at his arm, struggling for breath. Mr. Neely's warning echoed in her mind, "*It's your funeral...it's your funeral....*" Terror seized her, engulfing her body from head to toe. The rumbling fear centered in her gut, rendering it flaccid and loose. That's when the feces gushed out, sullyng the air, sloshing over Carl's pants and shoes.

He jumped back. "Stinking bitch!" he shrieked. He released his hold and Leona broke away. She ran like she was eight again; she ran like the wind. Carl gave chase and she was half way across the school yard when she saw a familiar shape striding toward her. Leona stopped, hunched over gasping for air. Bracing her hands on her knees, she waited between the two approaching figures, panting. Carl drew up short and the three of them came face to face. There was no grinning mouth this time, and Mama spoke angrily, gritting her teeth. Her words were brief and emphatic.

"I swear on my grave, boy, if you ever come near my child again, I'll *kill* you!"

She raised her fist to strike and Carl stepped back.

"You threatening me, you old jungle ape?"

Mama started toward him, beckoning. "Come," she said, "come find out."

He glowered, but continued to back off, widening the distance between them. Finally, he turned and slunk away, muttering to himself, "...crazy black bitches...."

Leona tried to talk but could only suck in big gulps of air.

"Shhhh, baby. Mama's here, let's go on home."

Leona sat in bed, sipping hot lemon tea; Mama had laced it with a spot of knotty-head gin. It soothed everything—her throat, stomach, fears. She was woozy, already dozing, when Mrs. Prichard’s voice drift through the open window: “Is Leona alright. . . .” Two hours later the girl woke to find Mama sitting on the side of her bed.

“How you feelin’? Better?” she said.

Leona nodded.

“Your teacher came—Miz Perkhard—.”

“Mrs. Pritchard, the counselor,” Leona mumbled.

“She was headed to the parking lot, on her way home, when she saw that boy runnin’ after you. She called the front office for help. The principal don’t want no trouble—said he gonna take care of the situation.”

Leona stared straight ahead.

“She brought your book sack, too; got your schedule and stuff in it.”

Leona glanced at the book sack; the tip of the dunce cap peeked over its edge. She turned her face to the wall.

“I don’t need that anymore,” she said.

“What you mean? You know Bradford is your dream, Leona.”

“No, Mama, that school is my nightmare.”

They sat quietly, and then Mama let out a deep sigh. It was as if she had resigned herself to something. Gently, she turned Leona’s face back towards her.

“Let me tell you about *my* nightmare, Baby.”

She sat, hands folded in her lap, and told her story. She was just four years old when the white men surrounded the house. Her father had stood on the porch with his shotgun, giving her

and her mother a chance to run. They'd hid in a clump of trees at the edge of the yard, her mother's hand clamped over her mouth. Mama said she had wished to God many a time that her mother had covered her eyes, her ears, instead of her mouth. She watched the men throw the rope over the stout tree limb and heard screams no four-year-old should have ever heard. Then they set the house on fire. When her mother was certain the men were gone, they made their way out of the woods through the burning town, to papa's boss man, Mr. Charlie. It seemed like the whole town was on fire. She found out later that it was.

"Mama," Leona interrupted. "W-was that town in Florida...Rosewood?"

"Why, yes; how come you know that?"

"I just know. What happened then?"

"Mr. Charlie snuck us to the train station. My mama put me on the floor of Mr. Charlie's car, and then she scrunched down on top of me. We stayed like that 'til the train come. To this day, I can still feel the sand on that car floor stingin' my face, and that smoke burnin' my eyes."

"Where did you go?"

"My mama had a sister, Tyrone's grandmama, here in Bradford. She ain't had much, and all we owned was on our backs; but she took us in. She and my mama talked hush-hush about what happened, called it "The Trouble". I heard snatches, bits and pieces about the whole town burnin' to the ground. They whispered, too, about people being hung, shot to death. Nobody know 'zactly how many people got killed. Then, just like that, nobody ever mention Rosewood again. Nobody *want* to talk about them horrible things they done to us." She shook her head, as if willing away the memories, then stood and went to the window. She turned her back to Leona, unwilling to look into her daughter's eyes. Yet she had to say what needed to be said.

“I grew up scared, Leona; always so scared of white folks. Well, *most* white folks; there’s a few good ones, I guess, like Mr. Charlie.”

And Mrs. Pritchard, thought Leona.

“This the first time I ever told what happened out loud, not even to your daddy.” Mama spoke softly and her words were barely a whisper. “But I lived it; every day in my head I lived it.”

She returned to the bed and stood over Leona.

“I tried to keep all that evil away from you, protect you. I *know* firsthand what them people can do; so I tried. Tried the best I know how, to...to—b-but I didn’t have no power. I just couldn’t....” Mama bowed her head, unable to go on.

Leona reached over and hugged Mama around her legs, holding her tight.

“I’m so sorry, Mama. The names I called you—the way I acted... I’m just so sorry....” She blinked back the tears.

“No, Leona. You got no reason to be sorry; you caused me to see I wasn’t that four-year-old girl no mo’; helped me see things in a different light.”

“How’s that, Mama?” asked Leona.

Mama looked down on Leona, caressing her hair.

“Well, for one thing if you hadn’t-a gone to that school, I’d a-never had to cross that road, get nerve enough to go over to—”

“*Ring-g-g-g-g!* The jangling telephone interrupted her.

“Doggone phone,” said Mama. “I’ll be right back.”

Leona heard Mama’s slides flip-flop to the living room. She leaned back on the pillow, trying to sort out everything that had happened, remembering Mr. Neely’s words: “*It’s about*

character and being dedicated to making the plan work, a noble cause....” She realized the only cause she’d been dedicated to was her own. The only reason she’d wanted to attend Bradford was to show people that *she* was somebody; to convince others to respect *her* ability. But just a day at Bradford had shown her that you can’t *make* people see what they don’t want to see. People who, like Carl and Dilliann, refused to look beyond skin color and accept others for who they are.

Leona walked to the window and looked across the oyster-shell road to Bradford Academy. She had to go back. There were too many folks like Mama, so weak from demon-wrestling they would never recognize their own strength or potential. She had to return for them. And the other folks, the Mr. Charlies and Mrs. Prichards, people willing to go the extra mile, do the right thing no matter the personal risk. If they were willing to take chances in order to make a difference, could she do anything less? No. No matter what the outcome might be, she had to go back, finish what she’d begun. If she became Bradford’s first Negro graduate, so be it. If not, the world wasn’t going to end because she wasn’t.

She walked to the nightstand and opened the drawer. The plastic wallet lay on top of the clutter as if it had been waiting for her all these years. Leona placed it on the bed while she searched the drawer for something else. Then she found what she was looking for—a picture of a grinning little eight-year-old girl, her own picture. She slipped the photo into the wallet’s plastic picture holder, finally laying claim to her mother’s perfect gift.

Mama peeked into the room. “That was Tyrone,” she said. “He wanted to know all about your first day; how it went and everything. I told that nosey boy it went ‘Fine! Just fine!’”

Leona clutched the wallet and smiled. “You told him right, Mama. Everything went fine; just fine.”

The End