

*The New Kid in School, Part II*



Leona peered into the full-length mirror, conducting a last minute inspection before her first day at Bradford. She'd permed her hair straight, abandoning the Afro. After experimenting with a couple of styles, she'd swept it up into a slick ponytail. Her yellow shirtwaist dress had been ironed to perfection, and its matching multicolored belt made her slender waist appear even smaller. Mama did not allow make-up, but cold cream and a coarse, rubber-red powder sponge had smoothed her honey-colored face into a silky glow. Black Cole Haan flats, hand-me-downs from one of Mama's employers, completed the outfit. She gathered her book bag and glanced in the mirror. *Well, Bradford, ready or not, here I come.*

She didn't know what to expect when she turned the corner, but it certainly wasn't two police cruisers flashing red emergency lights. Leona began to feel uneasy. *The street is nearly deserted, so why are the cops here? To keep the colored students out? To escort us in? Why?* She walked past the patrol cars, glancing in the officers' direction, but they didn't even look her way.

In the stillness, acorns rustled through the moss-covered oaks, then plopped softly to the ground. Leona climbed Bradford's steep granite steps, her senses on alert. From somewhere under the white pillared columns, doves cooed. The sound made her think of western movies and phony birdcalls just before the Indians attacked the wagon trains. She was positive an ambush awaited her behind the tall mahogany door. Her hand shook as she reached for the polished brass knob.

But there had been nothing to fear. It was well into the first period and the grand marble-tiled hallway was deserted. She consulted her map and discovered the Guidance Counselor's office was located at the back of the school, towards the newer section of the campus.

As she walked towards the office, she saw that the inequity between Carver and Bradford was far greater than mere books and desks. No expense had been spared in making Bradford one of Georgia's most imposing high schools. Had Leona not witnessed the opulence of ornate fixtures and gilded frescos for herself, the grandeur would have been impossible to imagine. For years she'd struggled at Carver, denied a decent textbook or even heat in winter, and all the while Bradford's students had evolved in luxury, ensconced in a citadel of academic excellence. Dilliann's long-ago words reverberate in Leona's astonished head—*That's white folks property, no niggers allowed*—and for the first time in her segregated existence, Leona's vague perceptions of discrimination came fully into focus.

She reached the guidance office and hesitated. Should she just walk in? Should she knock? At Carver she would have just breezed in, not giving it a second thought. That's when it dawned on her that a new set of rules, different patterns of behavior, would have to be learned. She decided to knock. Her fist was in midair when the door flew open. The girl standing on the other side was as startled as Leona. They did a couple of clumsy quick steps and maneuvered around each other. The student hurried on down the hall, but Leona remained in place, and for a split second had the eerie sensation that she'd stood in this very spot, facing this same girl before. She knew then what the old folks meant when they said they had a feeling; a feeling they described as "a rabbit hopping on my grave."

A cheery voice from within the room called out to her. Leona quickly refocused and entered. A redheaded woman stood behind a cluttered desk. She waved Leona to a chair.

"Good morning, I'm Henrietta Prichard."

*Hmmm, Henrietta*, thought Leona and inwardly smiled. The guidance counselor's hair, a brassy high-piled beehive, along with her thin lips and chalk-power make-up reminded Leona of a hen—a plump little, red-rouged pullet.

"And you are...?" the woman asked.

Leona tried to answer, but was surprised when her voice nervously stayed in her throat, and her name emerged as a hoarse whisper. She coughed slightly then tried again. "Leona, Leona Johnson." This time her voice obeyed.

"Oh, yes...I remember seeing that name," said the woman, shuffling through the clutter.

"Ah, here we are," said Mrs. Pritchard, extracting a class schedule from the pile. "Leona Johnson—last one."

“Last one? Why, wh—?” Again, Leona’s voice faltered.

Mrs. Pritchard looked into the girl’s questioning eyes. “There was a change in plans. I met with the other transferees Friday. Didn’t anyone notify you?” She gave Leona the schedule. “You’re the only senior in the group, right?”

Leona nodded. *Where is my voice?*

“Well, look over your classes, make sure everything’s in order.”

The schedule was a disaster. *What is this chicken lady trying to pull?*

Suddenly Leona’s voice came back strong and she explained the schedule’s inconsistencies. “I can’t take this social studies class, I haven’t had the pre-requis—”

“But—” sputtered Mrs. Prichard.

“—and I need *two* science classes in order to graduate; you haven’t even placed me in one.”

“But I—”

“English is my *best* subject, and you have me in a remedial class.” Leona frowned and gave the schedule back. “I don’t know how this mix-up happened, but this is serious; if my classes aren’t straight, I won’t graduate this spring.”

“But I made that schedule based on the information I received,” protested Mrs. Pritchard. “I can’t understand how this happened.”

Leona had her own ideas, but kept quiet about it. Her mind raced. “Look, I have my schedule from Carver; would that help straighten this out?”

“Well, it might; let me take a look at it.”

Leona reached into her book sack, remembering she also had a copy of her transcript. She handed them both to the counselor, watching Mrs. Pritchard’s cheeks turn a deeper red as she glanced over the items.

“Oh, dear, oh, dear,” she said.

Leona was certain the hen-lady was going to start clucking any minute.

“I do apologize for this mistake. I can see why you’re so upset; and by the way, your grades are excellent.” She looked at her watch. “It’s going to take me a while to adjust your schedule and it’s already second period.”

*What? They’ve already changed classes? Wow! It’s sure not this quiet in Carver’s halls. These students are like mice...or maybe this office is out in the boonies somewhere.*

“Tell you what,” said Mrs. Pritchard, returning the Bradford schedule. “Why don’t you just follow this for today, okay? Come back after school and I *promise* I’ll have your new schedule ready.”

*Mmmm, that was easy. Yeah, but maybe too easy. The day isn’t over yet and I don’t know what this ol’ biddy’s going to do; I guess I’ll just have to trust her, can’t do anything else, anyway.*

“Thank you, Mrs. Pullet, er, I mean Mrs. Pritchard. I appreciate your help.”

“You’re very welcome. See you this afternoon.”

Leona stood in the hallway studying the schedule and consulting the map. Her second period class was in room 209, remedial English. *Ugh!*

The Language Arts Department was housed on the second floor of the original building. Leona climbed the winding balustered stairs and the nearly century-old wooden steps creaked in protest. She reached the landing then walked towards the sound of rowdy laughter coming from the end of the hall—room 209. She listened to the commotion for a few seconds; then, after taking a deep breath, turned the doorknob and stepped inside.

The room went stark still. Some of the faces were sullen, most were curious, and all were turned toward Leona. She walked front and center, feeling their grey, blue, hazel eyes training her every step. Mr. Tate, a one-armed man sat at his desk; his white shirt's long, empty sleeve was neatly folded and pinned. He did not stand, smile, or speak, but pointed to an empty student desk in the back of the room. The desk was jammed into the corner, facing the wall. A white dunce cap with the word *Dummy* written in black had been placed in the seat. They had expected her, or at least somebody like her. Leona walked the narrow aisle, careful of the outstretched legs. She turned the desk around and held up the dunce cap.

“Does this belong to any of you?” she asked.

One of the hostile faces sprung out of his seat, knocking it over.

“You better watch your mouth, you smart-ass nigger!” He started towards her, but the teacher quickly stopped him.

“Sit down, Carl. Nigra's not worth your trouble.”

Carl mumbled another curse word, but retreated to his desk.

The outburst had rattled Leona. Although she hadn't anticipated a warm, fuzzy welcome, the least she had expected was fair play. *They could dish it, so why couldn't they take it?* Her mouth felt dry and she realized she was trapped in a corner, surrounded by twenty-five curious, negative white people. She remembered Mr. Neely's words ...students *who could handle themselves in any situation*. Her mind struggled—*Think, Leona, think! Handle this*.

“Well,” she exclaimed, taking a pen, and adding the missing *m* in the word *Dumy*. “I guess this belongs to me!”

She stuffed the dunce cap into her book sack. A couple of titters lightened the mood, but Carl's rage still hung dark. The class spent the remainder of the period trying to top each other's racist jokes and Leona kept her eyes averted, pretending to concentrate on her book, *Rosewood is Burning*.

The bell finally signaled the end of second period and Leona eagerly exited the room. She rushed into the crowded hallway and was immediately transformed into a different world—a multicolored world of flaxen blonds, chestnut brunettes, and russet auburns; a multi-tonal world of slow drawls and nasal southern twangs. Faces, seemingly without bodies, floated the length and breadth of the wide corridor—freckled ones, ruddy ones, alabaster ones; faces whose thin-lipped mouths hurled taunts of *jungle bunny*, *KKK*, *Martin Luther Coon*. Through the clamor she realized that for the first time in her life she was utterly alone in her blackness. There were no brown faces or copper faces; no smooth ebones. Afros, corn rows, nappy, kinky, hot-combed black hair—not here!

*I'm on another planet—like Star Trek on TV. Or maybe I'm still on Earth, but I'm the last human*. She struggled to stay calm. *No, no; none of that. We're people here; we're all just*

*people*. But that encouraging self-thought quickly fizzled when the first blonde-haired, cherub-faced girl sharply elbowed Leona's breasts and burly boys shoved her back and forth. The faces walked close behind, assaulting her heels with their stiff leather loafers and chunky-heeled Mary Janes. She had dressed to impress, but now her dress was wrinkled and the crushed backs of her scuffed shoes slipped up and down against her chaffed, bruised heels.

The swarm of faces inundated her until finally the bell rang and the swarm thinned, then completely vanished into third period. Leona leaned against the wall, disorientated and bewildered. She gently touched her sore, smarting breasts and watched the bruises on her arm become tainted green. She had expected intolerance, but not this—no; she had not been prepared for this. Her stomach tensed and began to cramp; she felt the urge to use the bathroom. But the stereotype—black people stink—compelled her to squash it. For a split second she considered returning to Carver and its familiar poverty, remembering the promise she'd made to Mama if things got rough at Bradford. But leaving could never be that simple. There were very few things Leona had ever given up on, and she knew for certain running from Bradford Academy was not going to be one of them. She checked her schedule against the school map then limped toward the Math wing. She decided she would wear her ankle boots tomorrow.

Trigonometry was one of Leona's favorite subjects and it was easy for her to follow the lesson. Thankfully, there were no distractions and for the very first time in her life, she opened a brand new math book. The teacher was vague when asked about the math club, but her class had been Leona's best one all day. When the period ended, she waited until the hall was clear before going to the cafeteria.

Leona entered the lunchroom and noticed that the Carver group had avoided an all-the-way-in-the-back table; but they hadn't chosen an in-your-face-front-and-center one either. They sat midway the cafeteria and the Bradford students gave them wide berth. Most of the students totally ignored the newcomers, but a few stared and made catcalls from across the room.

Leona hobbled over to the Carver group and was received like she was a long-lost sister. At their old school the two entities would not have even spoken to one another, let alone sit together. She didn't have to ask how their day was going—their expressions told the story.

“Nobody's eating?” Leona asked.

“I'm not hungry,” Portia said. She was a junior and had been the biggest snob at Carver. But snobbery wasn't happening at Bradford. Portia's shoe heels looked worse than Leona's. The other two girls slowly shook their heads. Everyone seemed emotionally drained.

“What have we gotten ourselves into?” Barbara said softly.

“It's not us—it's our *parents*,” Audrey answered.

Suddenly it dawned on Leona that she probably was the only one who really wanted to be at Bradford.

“Well, we're in it now,” Xavier said, “so we might as well—”

The cherry bomb exploded just behind the group, startling them. They ducked under the table and behind chairs, scrambling for cover. Many of Bradford's students had been in on the gag, and the cafeteria erupted in guffaws and rebel yells. Carl, the hostile face from remedial English was closest to the group's table and got a bigger charge out of it than anyone.

“Did you see them darkies run?” he sniggered.

“Yeah, Carl, but I never knew they could jump *that* high!” his sidekick said.

An effigy of a black man had been attached to the bomb. It landed near Leona, and as she crawled from under the table, she impulsively picked it up. A charred noose dangled around its neck.

“Is everybody all right?” Xavier asked.

Adam, the preacher’s son glared furiously at the still-yukking Carl.

“Oh, hell no! I am *not* alright,” he said. “I’m sick and tired of all this sh—*BS!*”

He started towards Carl and an expectant hush immediately fell over the cafeteria. Xavier, a gentle giant, stepped in front of Adam, holding him back. A few of Carl’s cronies and curiosity seekers ambled over, forming a loose circle. Leona sensed trouble and felt everyone’s emotions riding high. She stood beside Adam, clutching his arm.

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” she said, indicating Carl. “Don’t let him get all of us kicked out.”

Adam shook free of Xavier and Leona.

“Look, they can kick *me* out right now, I don’t give a crap. Damn red-necks walking on my heels, throwing cherry bombs—and what’s *that* mess suppose to mean?” He pointed to the charred effigy in Leona’s hand.

“What...this?” she held it up. “It doesn’t mean a thing; it’s just a doll, and not even well-made at that.”

“Yeah! It’s no big deal” Barbara Ann said.

“It’s just cloth and a little cotton stuffing, that’s all,” Portia chimed in.

Leona propped the grotesque thing on the table and the former Carver students gathered around.

“You know, this little man needs a name,” said Leona.

“Yes, I agree,” Audrey said. “Got any ideas?”

Leona pressed her finger against her forehead, pretending to think. “Now let me see.... How about...Carl? Yes—that’s it—Crazy Carl!”

The little group hooted. A few ‘tee-hees’ even came from the white students.

Carl’s ears and face turned scarlet and he looked daggers at Leona. Suddenly Principal Hurley and the sentry cops that had been stationed in front of the school pushed through the crowd.

“All right! All right! Break it up!” the principal said. One of the officers already had his notepad in hand, ready for statements. The day was not over and Leona had already been rescued twice.

*End of Part II. Stay tuned for the final section in June’s Newsletter.*