

'57 CENTRAL

Excerpt

Written by

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A SET OF PETITE BLACK HANDS.

They button a stark white blouse.

Don white bobby socks.

Slip on shined white buck loafers.

Zip up a fashionable, yet modest white cotton piqué skirt.

Pin hair into a simple updo.

A SET OF SERIOUS EYES.

They belong to a slight black girl.

ELIZABETH ECKFORD (15).

INT. ELIZABETH'S BEDROOM - DAY

Elizabeth takes a deep breath. Smiles into the mirror. It's crooked – and she knows it. Self-consciousness prevails. She replaces it with a closed, straight mouth.

SUPER: *"September 4, 1957. 6:30AM."*

INT. ECKFORD KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Squat. Square. An unfinished floor. But impeccably tidy and full to capacity with the eight ECKFORDS who crowd it.

ANNA (16) packs notebooks into a worn book-bag. OSCAR THE THIRD (8) rocks back and forth on the floor. Hints of autism in the mannerism. Three other young children giggle amongst themselves at the table.

Elizabeth nibbles her food in reserved silence.

BIRDIE (30s) flits about. Fusses over everyone having their materials. Permanently anxious, she is a basket case of conspicuous nerves.

OSCAR JUNIOR (30s) paces back and forth. The exhausted look of a man just off the night shift. Pipe in his mouth, a cigar in hand. Neither lit. A would-be comical sight – save for his troubled expression.

Birdie shepherds the whole family together. They bow their heads as she opens a bible.

BIRDIE

"The Lord is my light and my
salvation; whom shall I fear? The
Lord is the strength of my life; of
whom shall I be afraid?"

EXT. ECKFORD HOME - CONTINUOUS

Elizabeth leaves with Anna. From the stoop, Birdie waves good-bye with one hand — thumbs the cross necklace around her neck with the other. She looks to the sky with pleading eyes.

BIRDIE (V.O.)

"When the wicked, even mine enemies
and my foes, came upon me to eat up
my flesh, they stumbled and fell."

EXT. BUS STOP - CONTINUOUS

Anna and Elizabeth part ways. Elizabeth boards a city bus.

SIGHTS OF 1957 LITTLE ROCK:

-The LEE THEATER. *An Affair to Remember* and *Island in the Sun* on the marquee.

-RCA Victor televisions battle it out with General Electric sets in an ELECTRONICS STORE display.

-Children play hopscotch and jump rope outside a DRUGSTORE.

-A black laundress, basket of clothes on her hip, chats with a white woman on a CORNER.

BIRDIE (V.O.)

"Though a host should encamp
against me, my heart shall not
fear: Though war should rise
against me, in this will I be
confident."

INT. CITY BUS - CONTINUOUS

Elizabeth watches the sights from the window.

The bus is integrated — at least according to the courts.

Two mischievous black children plant themselves on either side of an elderly white woman. She leaps up, as if nudged by a red-hot fire poker. The two kids giggle with delight.

A close-mouthed smile glows on Elizabeth's face.

...though the older black citizens still cluster in the rear.

EXT. LITTLE ROCK STREET - LATER

INSERT: "7:50AM."

Elizabeth alights from the bus. A residential street, though it's packed with parked cars. A droning hum fills the air. Like the distant roar of a packed football stadium.

Elizabeth frowns. *Strange*. She follows the sound to STREET'S END. Rounds the CORNER. Into view comes an imposing edifice:

EXT. CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL - CONTINUOUS

The stately five-story high building consumes an entire two blocks. But that isn't what grabs Elizabeth's attention:

IT'S THE MOB OF HUNDREDS OUTSIDE IT.

Smirking teenagers. Red-faced fathers. Children waving miniature Confederate flags – faces contorted with glee.

All of them white.

CROWD MEMBERS

Two, four, six, eight, we ain't gonna in'egrate!

OTHER CROWD MEMBERS

Keep them out of our schools!

CROWD MEMBER

Integration is communism!

Elizabeth stops. Taken aback. She spies Arkansas National Guardsmen at Central's perimeter. Standing at attention, rifles in hand. They let students in and keep the mob out.

The only way to them is through.

Elizabeth locks her gaze on a particular set.

She ducks INTO THE CROWD, hoping to slip through unnoticed.

She doesn't realize the miscalculation until it's too late.

CROWD MEMBER (CONT'D)

They're here! The niggers are here!

In an instant, the crowd morphs into an incensed horde. Hate clouds people's expressions. Rage, their voices.

A matronly woman holds a child to her hip with one hand – shakes a balled-up fist with the other.

CROWD MEMBER (CONT'D)
Don't let the Nigra in!

OTHER CROWD MEMBER
Nigger go home! Send her back to
the jungle!

Elizabeth's heart rate picks up. She quickens her step.

EXT. CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL, PERIMETER - SECONDS LATER

Elizabeth arrives where the Guardsmen secure entry against the mob. She makes to walk through – but the guardsmen block her entrance. Elizabeth looks up in surprise.

One guard avoids Elizabeth's eyes. Guilty. Another just directs her towards ANOTHER ENTRANCE down the block.

Elizabeth hesitates. Another group of vehement protesters lie between her and there. Protesters who grow more fierce by the minute. Shaking fists and jeers surround her on all sides.

She peers up at the Guardsmen. They stand firm. She takes a shaky breath – and walks.

CROWD MEMBER
No nigger bitch is going to get in
our school! Get out of here!

OTHER CROWD MEMBER
Go back to where you came from!

The mob shadows Elizabeth down the block. Their angry epithets gain momentum...

EXT. CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL, SECOND ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

Elizabeth arrives, the mob hot on her heels. Relieved to finally find safety–

–but the guards keep their rifles crossed.

Confused, Elizabeth tries to squeeze past. The guards halt her again.

Then a white female student approaches. The guards allow her to pass. Close their ranks once more.

Elizabeth's breath catches. Trying not to give away her panic, she glances around for a friendly face. She spies a kind-looking, old white woman. The woman smiles... before she spits on Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's skin crawls as she truly registers her situation:

She is one black girl against a siege of white hate.

And it's out for blood.

ELIZABETH'S SUBJECTIVE POV:

Individuals taunt from all sides. They stomp and whistle, as if Elizabeth's pain is good sport.

Mouths twist open and closed: *Nigger. Lynch her. Nigger...*

Underneath her composed exterior, Elizabeth's heart hammers through her chest. Her breath snags in her throat. Behind her sunglasses, terrified eyes dart in search of an outlet.

GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)
(above all others)
WHY DON'T YOU GO BACK TO A--

A camera clicks.

CUT TO BLACK.