

SHORTLISTED FOR THE CARNEGIE MEDAL



LIES
WE TELL
OURSELVES

ROBIN
TALLEY

'Even though she's a GIRL.
Even though she's COLOURED.
I want to keep kissing Sarah forever.'

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LIE #1

There's no need to be afraid.

*Jefferson High School, Davisburg, Virginia
February 2, 1959*

THE WHITE PEOPLE are waiting for us.

Chuck sees them first. He's gone out ahead of our group to peer around the corner by the hardware store. From there you can see all of Jefferson High.

The gleaming redbrick walls run forty feet high. The building is a block wide, and the windowpanes are spotless. A heavy concrete arch hangs over the two-story wood-and-glass doors at the front entrance.

The only thing between us and the school is the parking lot. And the white people.

We've all walked past Jefferson a thousand times before, but this will be the first time any of us steps inside. Until today, those big wooden doors might as well have been triple-locked, and we didn't have the key.

Our school, on the other side of town, is only one story. It's narrow—no wider than the Food Town. Our teachers put boards in the windows to cover the cracks in the glass, but that's not enough to stop the wind from whistling past us at our desks.

Our old school, anyway. Jefferson is supposed to be our school now.

If we can make it through those big brown doors.

"They're out there all right," Chuck says when he comes back. He's trying to smile, but he just looks frozen. "Somebody sent out the welcome committee."

No one laughs. We can hear the white people. They're shouting, but the sound is too disjointed for us to make out the words.

I'm glad. I don't want to hear. I don't want my little sister Ruth to hear it, either. I try to pull her closer to me, but she jerks away. Ruth will be fifteen in two weeks, and she already thinks she's too old to need help from her big sister.

"If anything happens, you come find me, all right?" I whisper. "Don't trust the teachers or the white people. Come straight to me."

"I can take care of myself," Ruth whispers back. She steps away from me and links arms with Yvonne, one of the other freshmen.

"What are you gonna do if they try something?" Chuck asks Ennis. He keeps his voice low, trying to blend in with the dull roar coming from the school, so the younger kids won't hear him. Chuck, Ennis and I are the only three seniors in our group. Most of the others are freshmen and sophomores. "They've got some big guys on that football team."

"Never mind that," Ennis says, raising his voice so the others can hear. "They won't try anything, not in school. All they'll do is call us names, and we'll just ignore them and keep walking. Isn't that right, Sarah?"

"That's right," I echo. I want to sound in charge, like Mrs. Mullins, but my voice wobbles.

Ennis holds my eye. His face looks like Daddy's did this morning, when he watched Ruth and me climb into the carpool station wagon. Like he's taking a good, long look, in case he doesn't get another chance.

Ennis sounds like Daddy, too. My father and Mrs. Mullins and the rest of the NAACP leaders have been coaching us on the rules since the summer, when the court first said the school board had to let us into the white school. Rule One: Ignore anything the white people say to you and keep walking. Rule Two: Always sit at the front of the classroom, near the door, so you can make a quick getaway if you need to. And Rule Three: Stay together whenever you possibly can.

"What if they spit on us?" one of the freshmen boys whispers. The ten of us are walking so tightly together down the narrow sidewalk we can't help but hear each other now, but none of us makes any move to separate. "We're supposed to stand there and take it?"

"You take it unless you want to get something worse after school lets out," Chuck says.

There's a glint in Chuck's eye. I don't think he'll take anything he doesn't want to take.

I wonder what he thinks is going to happen today. I wonder if he's ready.

I thought I was. Now I'm not so sure.

"Listen up, everybody, this is important." Ennis sounds serious and official, like the NAACP men. "Remember what they told us. Look straight ahead and act like you don't hear the white people. If a teacher says something to you, you don't talk back. Don't let anybody get you alone in the bathroom or on the stairs. And no matter what happens, you just keep walking."

"What if somebody tries to hang us from the flagpole?" the freshman says. "Do we just keep walking then, too?"

"You watch your mouth," Chuck tells him. "You'll scare the girls."

I want to tell him the girls are plenty scared already.

Instead I straighten my shoulders and lift my head. The younger kids are watching me. I can't let them see how my stomach is dropping to my feet. How the fear is buzzing in my ear like a mosquito that won't be swatted away.

We round the corner. Across the street, Jefferson High School sweeps into view. The white people are spread out across the front steps and the massive parking lot. Now I know why we could hear the crowd so well. There must be hundreds of them. The whole student body, all standing there. Waiting.

"Just like I said," Chuck says. He lets out a low whistle. "Our very own personal welcome wagon."

Ahead of me, Ruth shivers, despite her bulky winter coat. Under it she's wearing her favorite blue plaid dress with the crinoline slip and brand-new saddle shoes. I'm in my best white blouse, starched stiff. Our hair is done so nice it might as well be Easter Sunday. Mama fixed it last night, heating the hot combs on the stove and yanking each strand smooth. Everything's topsy-turvy with school starting in February instead of September, but we're all in our best clothes anyway. No one wants the white people to think we can't afford things as nice as theirs.

I try to catch Chuck's eye, but he isn't paying attention to me. He's looking at the crowd.

They're watching us.

They're shouting.

Each new voice is sharper and angrier than the last.

I still can't make out what they're saying, but we're not far now.

I want to cover Ruth's ears. She'd never let me. Besides, she'll hear it soon enough no matter what I do.

Our group has gone quiet. The boys are done blustering. Ruth lets go of Yvonne and steps back toward me. Behind us, a girl hiccups.

Further recommendations:

