

Nancy Bourne

Massive Resistance



Civil Rights Movement, 1960s

Massive Resistance was a policy adopted in 1956 by the Virginia State Government to block the desegregation of public schools mandated by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Public schools were shut down in several cities throughout the state to prevent desegregation. Although the courts eventually overturned the policy, schools in Prince Edward County remained closed until the mid-1960's.

June 1957

Bryce Nolan breathed in the sweet scent of new grass as he headed through Harvard Yard. Buds exploded on the dogwoods. Scarlet blossoms crowned the crab apples. Like home. Almost. He glanced down at the brown bag in his dimpled fist. Another beer? Sure. He had time. He was feeling okay. Better than okay. In fact, he could almost forget the phone call last night.

"I just heard from Womack, son."

Oh shit. Just his luck his dad's campaign manager would land a job here as a Dean, snooping around, ratting on him.

"Yeah?"

"Says you're on probation."

"It's okay, dad. I'll take care of it."

"Says you're skipping class."

Was that all?

"I spent some time in the infirmary. Missed a few classes. Nothing I can't make up."

"I'm disappointed, son."

So Womack hadn't told him, which meant he didn't know. Bryce felt his plump shoulders relax. Those meetings had to be secret.

"You tell mama?"

"Not yet. You fix it, boy. You hear? We can't have your mama worrying about you."

"Yeah, I know." He wondered what she would say, his beautiful mama, if she knew the real reason he was cutting classes.

"You still swimming every day?"

“Yep.” One more lie.

“Good. Gotta go. I’m counting on you. Don’t let me down.”

But he would. He didn’t want to, but he would. It was just too hard to keep it up. Even though the good grades and prizes were the only way he knew to assuage his father’s disappointment in the soft round bookworm that was his son. But now that he was over six hundred miles away, it no longer seemed important to knock himself out for his father’s glory.

Back in his room he tossed the empty beer bottle in the trash and studied his doughy face in the mirror.

“She’s a real sweetheart,” his roommate Miles had told him. Which was code for not being pretty enough to get dates on her own. “You’ll love her.”

“Where’s she from?”

“Some place in Virginia. Culpepper?”

He knew it. Apple country. A chubby farm girl from Virginia. He glanced down at the loose white flesh rolling over the waistband of his jockey shorts as he squirmed into a navy polo shirt. Who was he to judge? And it was just as well. The pretty ones always had excuses when he telephoned for a second date.

He tugged at the zipper of his madras Bermuda shorts, dug bare feet into his loafers, and reached for his keys.

One for the road?

Better not. He got grabby when he’d had too much. On the other hand, he felt on edge. A short bourbon wouldn’t hurt him.

The wind hit him full in the face, warm, humid, as he raced his Buick convertible down route 16 toward Pine Manor Junior College. He loved that car. He’d had to work hard to persuade his dad he needed it to drive back and forth to Harvard, even though most students didn’t have cars. On the radio, Elvis was moaning, “I’m all shook up.”

Why had he let the old man set him up as the town genius?

He was twelve when he got talked into entering the County Chess Tournament. Everybody else was older. High school slide-rule types, old guys who played in the park.

“Can’t I wait ’til next year?” he’d begged his father.

“Are you kidding? Here’s the thing, son. They’re going to underestimate you. They’ll be concentrating on each other, studying each other’s plays from earlier tournaments. They won’t pay attention to you, even the first time you make a smart move.”

“If I get the chance.”

“You will, boy. You’re sharp. And by the time they’ve caught on to the fact that you’re winning, they’ll be too surprised to anticipate your moves.”

“And what if I lose?”

“Don’t let me hear that loser talk.”

And when by some miracle he’d won, there was his father, Roger Nolan, Virginia State Senator, one arm holding him close, the other hand waiving the trophy over their heads, smiling for the photographer. The warmth, the lemony smell of his father’s aftershave almost made his pre-tournament nausea worth it.

But later that night at the dinner table, as Bryce sat between his sister Liz, smiling up at him, half-shy and adoring, and his mother, who had filled his plate with barbecued

chicken and mashed potatoes, his favorites, Roger Nolan said, "You need to work on your Sicilian defense. The State isn't going to be as easy as this one." He looked at his mother, waiting for her to say something like, this is Bryce's night, let's celebrate. But she just smiled.

And when he lost at the State level, because how could a thirteen year old win such a thing, his father was nowhere around.

What was pathetic was he'd tried. He'd tried so hard.

Liz hadn't been saddled with a superlative. Lucky Liz, he called her. His sweet, sweet sister.

"Fuck champions," he suddenly yelled over the radio, into the wind. The noon sun streamed in the front windshield, half blinding him; sweat dripped into his eyes. He hit the curve at 65 miles an hour. Too fast, he thought, slow down.

"Fuck the bookworm," he screamed. "Fuck the walking dictionary."

But his high-pitched laugh was drowned out by metal smashing, glass shattering, brakes screeching, a horn bleating.

June 1958

Betsy Nolan sat absolutely still in the spindle-backed rocking chair, except to lift her hand to turn the pages of *Middlemarch*, which lay open on her lap. Her dark hair, streaked with gray, was pulled back from her wide forehead into a bun; her cheeks were thin, silky; her large eyes, blue-gray.

If she concentrated on Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon, she could forget for hours at a time. Forget the telephone ringing that June afternoon a year ago. Ringing and ringing. The sheriff's polite voice on the line, asking for the Senator.

"He's not here. I'm his wife. Can you tell me what this is about?" The fear rising.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I must talk to the Senator. Would you please tell me where I can reach him?"

She had given him the office number, the private line, the number in Richmond, every number she could think of. And still the phone kept ringing and the sheriff kept asking for the Senator. So that when Roger finally came home, explaining that he'd unplugged his phone to write a speech, when he yelled, "No!" into the receiver, when he stared at her, still holding the phone, she knew.

A year later and she still dreamed about him, Bryce, in the car, swerving, not crashing into the tree, running to her, laughing. Feeling herself light, buoyant for the split second before pulling the pillow over her face to stifle the screams.

Fortunately there were whole days, weeks she couldn't remember. The sleeping pills, the dark rooms. Time lost.

And then the pathetic effort to resume her role as Roger's wife.

"Sweetheart, I need you," he'd said three months after the funeral. "The new governor is coming through to meet some of the school people. There's a small party."

"I don't have anything to wear." Where did that come from?

"Call Lucile. Have her sew you something new. Treat yourself." Practical Roger.

So she'd numbly picked through patterns and ordered several yards of lavender lace to cover a full taffeta skirt and black silk for the top.

The stout Lucile paused to remove several pins she'd held pinched between her lips. "You're a dream to sew for," she said. "Waist like a girl, and that dark hair goes so good with this black silk."

She huffed and puffed in Betsy's face, shoving pins into the delicate fabric with swollen pink fingers. "Miz Nolan, ain't you proud of the Senator, standing up for us like he is?"

Betsy nodded. She wasn't sure what Lucile was referring to and didn't want the burden of finding out.

"Yes ma'am, he's standing firm. And you're the lady for him."

She made her first public appearance six months after the funeral at the dedication of the new high school gymnasium, a graceless brick square of a building, plopped down on a raw field of red earth. She stood next to Roger, shivering in the damp December air, arranging her face to smile up at him while he gave his speech, which she almost completely ignored.

Almost. But then she heard him say, "...Now you and I know that certain people in this town want to use this handsome facility to bring about a mixing of the races." She was suddenly attentive. "But I give you my solemn promise..." She looked out over the starchy white faces bobbing up and down, nodding, frowning, and thought, who is this man?

Back home she confronted him. "That sounded like segregationist talk."

He didn't meet her eyes. "Well, I've been wanting to tell you, sweetheart, but you've been so, I don't know, distant. It's something of a feather in my cap."

"What is?"

"It's the Governor's baby, you know that. Massive Resistance. That's how he got elected."

"How's that a feather in your cap?" But she knew.

"Well, he's asked me to play a leadership role here in Southside."

Her charismatic Roger? The idealistic Harvard student who had pulled her into his orbit and taken total possession of her years ago when she was a Vassar girl? Wooed her with his dark eyes and high cheekbones and cleft chin, his smooth spare body, his lilting southern accent. Brought her back to his home state after college to "knock some heads together," as he put it, and usher in the future. Racism is just wrong, he'd said, and something had to be done about it.

"You're fighting integration? You?"

His eyes shifted away from hers. "Honey, I'm representing my part of the state, the folks who elected me."

"I thought you were supposed to lead them."

"This is good for me. For us. You'll see."

He was smiling, watching her now with careful eyes.

"I suppose I will," she said. Because she realized, at just that moment, she no longer cared.

And so she had quietly, permanently slipped away from the only life that was real to her husband. She avoided political dinners, stopped going to Bridge Club, which she'd always secretly hated, stayed home from the Baptist Church. Florene, the maid, told the

visitors, prying do-gooders as well as the genuinely sympathetic, that she wasn't home or was ill. Roger cautioned his curious constituents to be patient, that she was taking the death hard. The retreat to the bland impersonal guest room, to George Eliot and Jane Austen and Henry James, had been gradual. At home, Florene cooked the meals, did the shopping, cleaned the house, without instruction, without asking questions. Liz had her life at the high school. So that once Betsy renounced her role as political wife, there was a vast silence. Initially, she had tried to fill it with projects, a crocheted pillow, a vegetable garden that first terrible summer. The final project, sorting through a large cardboard box of family photos, almost destroyed her.

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A faded photo of Bryce, staring, unsmiling, at a birthday cake with six lit candles, his soft cheeks already too round.

"Make a wish," someone shouts. "Quick. Before they go out." It's Roger, outside the photo, his voice ungentle. There are other faces outside the photo, small boys mostly, dressed in white shirts and brown corduroy knickers, their faces red, their hair standing up in wet clumps from racing up and down the gracefully curved staircase, throwing peanuts and popcorn at each other.

"Hurry. Blow them out."

But he doesn't. He looks at her. I told you, his eyes say. His eyes already brimming with tears. Then he runs. Out of the room, up the stairs.

"Too much party," Roger says into the silence. "Who wants to blow out the candles?"

But she doesn't wait to see. She's on the stairs, in the hall, opening the door to an empty room.

"Come out, Bryce," she calls gently, gently. She's been here before. She reaches under the double decker bed and runs her fingers over a soft arm.

"I'm sorry," she says. "You were right. We won't do it again."

"Daddy will make me."

And then she's sitting in the spindle-back rocking chair holding him, wiping his tears with the edge of the cowboy and Indian bedspread she has pulled off the bed and wrapped him in, humming.

"I hate them."

"They're not bad boys," she says. "They're just not your friends."

She wants to hold him forever.

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And she could have held Roger at bay, could have listened for words her awkward son didn't say. The details of her failure kept her staring into dark space, robbed of sleep, night after night. Signing him up for tennis lessons, when she knew he hated them, backing up his father when he begged her not to have to compete in chess tournaments, nagging him about too many desserts. Finally, at six o'clock one morning, the back of her eyes aching from lack of sleep, she threw the photos back into the carton, boxed up Bryce's trophies and books and shoved them all into the closet in Bryce's bedroom. She hadn't opened the bedroom door again.

She began to take naps in the upstairs guest room, then to have Florene bring her

meals up there. Now she slept alone in the four-poster mahogany bed that had belonged to Roger's Alabama grandmother. Once a week, she left the house to walk the three short blocks to the public library. Then back to the dark, silent house, bearable only because she had sealed off her son's memories.

February 1959

That afternoon, like every afternoon after school, Liz lit up the house. First, the bronze chandelier in the hall, next the four Chinese table lamps in the living room, then the crystal chandelier over the dining room table. She drew back the maroon and gray flowered drapes to let in what sun remained in the late winter sky. She didn't have to light up the kitchen. Fluorescent tubes shone harshly on the straight-backed boney woman with cocoa-colored skin who was standing over the sink.

"How you, baby?" Florene looked up from the potatoes she was peeling.

"I'm okay. What's for dinner?" Liz asked.

"Pork chops, scalloped potatoes, snap beans from the freezer. You hungry?"

"Maybe later. You need anything?"

"I'm short on flour and milk."

"Okay. I'll run down the street in a minute."

"Get yourself some of that butter pecan ice cream while you're there."

"You mean, get you some."

Florene laughed. "How you make out on that French test, baby?"

"Lousy. Don't tell Daddy."

"What do'you think I am?"

"Mama resting?"

It wasn't really a question and Florene didn't bother to answer.

Liz opened the door of her mother's room cautiously, as if she half expected something embarrassing to spring out of a corner. But it was the same colorless, featureless room it had always been. Beige carpet, beige curtains fully drawn, the off-white Martha Washington bedspread on Grandmother Bryce's bed, the wrought iron reading lamp, and the rocking chair where her mother now sat.

"Hi Mama."

Betsy Nolan looked up from the book in her lap, rubbed the bridge of her nose above her glasses, and stretched her pale lips into a smile. Liz was struck, as she often was, by her mother's beauty. No make-up. No need for it. It was a beauty neither she nor her brother had inherited. Unlike her tall willowy mother, Liz was short, her legs slightly bowed, her brown hair coarse, straight. Only her smile, her father's smile, and his dark eyes, saved her from being outright homely.

"How was school?" Betsy asked.

Liz sat on the bed, as she always did, and tried to interest her mother in the latest craze of gold circle pins the girls were wearing.

"Where's your list, Mama?" she finally asked, when it was clear her mother was only pretending to listen.

Betsy pulled an index card from the copy of *Middlemarch* in her lap and handed it to Liz.

“Are you going today?”

“Sure. I’ve got some groceries to pick up for Florene, and I can stop by the library on the way. Any returns?”

Betsy pointed to a stack of thick books with worn covers on the bedside table.

“Thank you, dear.” She settled her glasses on the narrow bridge of her thin, straight nose and returned to her book.

Some days Liz could barely remember there had been another life, a different mother. She almost forgot the long hot summer days at Nags Head, white caps crashing over her, salt water in her nose and mouth, laughing, laughing with her big brother, his bathing trunks slipping below his bulging belly.

She avoided the obvious triggers, averted her eyes from the large, framed photograph in the entrance hall of the high school where she was now a junior. “In Memory Of Bryce Templeton Nolan.” The tassel from his graduation cap half-covering his pasty, solemn face, an uneasy valedictorian. At home she rushed, unseeing, past his bedroom door, a door opened only by Florene, and only once a month, to dust and vacuum.

But sometimes she’d see lumbering toward her, in the crowded halls of her high school, a hulking shape of a boy with a canvas book bag slung over his shoulder, and she’d feel as if she were suffocating.

She’d been in her ninth grade history class, watching a movie about Bethlehem Steel, one of those tedious educational films where the voice was all wobbly and the picture jumped on the makeshift screen. She was taking the opportunity of the dark room and her inattentive teacher to write a note to Toby Watkins when she looked up and found herself staring into Mr. Jennings’ shiny red face. The Principal. He was talking, but the roar of the projector and the narrator’s gravelly voice were so loud she couldn’t hear him.

And then, “I need to take you home.”

“What is it?” she kept asking as he walked her out of the dark classroom into the blinding sunlight. “What’s wrong?” Begging, pleading all the way home in his Jeep station wagon.

“Don’t worry. Your dad wants to see you. I’m sure it’s nothing” was all he would say. She’d hated him ever since.

Then she was running into the living room. To her father, who was holding out his arms. His face all distorted, not his face at all.

She screamed, “No,” and pushed against him, twisted in his grip.

“No, no, no, no.”

March 1959

When the crushing pain began to ease, Roger Nolan experienced a lightness of being that surprised him. His slightly hunched shoulders relaxed, his smile was no longer forced, his heels, when he walked from fundraiser to ceremony to party meeting, bounced off the pavement. He had loved his son. And not just for his brilliance, although that’s what Betsy believed. She was wrong. He’d loved the way the boy needed him when he was small, the way he looked to Roger for approval. The way he’d lift up his arms to be held when he was frightened. Those memories tortured Roger. But he was too honest a man not to admit that his love for Bryce had been mixed with disappointment, sometimes

even fury. At his son's unhappy fat face, his unsociable nature. Most recently at his poor performance at his own Alma Mater.

And then there was his irritating purity. This was Virginia, for Christ's sake, southern Virginia, and he, Roger Nolan, was its representative. Everyone he knew, everyone who could vote for him wanted to keep the colored in their place. History was not on the side of his complacent constituents; he was smart enough to know that. And he planned to be around when the courts and, more important, business interests forced the south to give up its losing battle. But in the meantime, he represented Southside Virginia, for better, for worse. They weren't bad people. But they hadn't gone to school with Negroes, and they were damned if their children were going to.

"The colored prefer to be with their own kind," was how they put it. "Ask my girl; she'll tell you."

And it wasn't as if they didn't have schools of their own.

"They're not as good," Bryce had reminded him. Sixteen-year-old Bryce, at the breakfast table. Two years ago.

"Hold on there, boy," he'd said. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"You got me that job last summer, patching the books at the schools. I know what I saw."

"Yeah, what was that?" But he knew. He'd seen it himself.

"The books at Luther Burbank were the books we white kids threw away. The pages were torn, the spines all broken, a mess."

"Isn't that the point? Those kids over at Burbank don't respect property."

"The colored schools are inferior, that's my point."

He'd sat there, watching his boy stuff his fat cheeks with bacon and eggs and cereal and muffins.

"God-dammit, Bryce! Don't eat so fast."

Those were the memories that cut deep. The shamed look on the boy's face, the eyes avoiding his. He should have agreed with his son. Luther Burbank was dilapidated, the books out of date, the teachers overwhelmed. But he didn't. He couldn't. He was too caught up in the political reality of the people who put him in office. They weren't ready.

The problem was, the NAACP was organizing to integrate the schools, and the folks in Maple Hill were talking about setting up a segregated private academy for their kids. He had to take sides. And he didn't have a choice.

He wished Betsy were with him on this. He wanted those intelligent blue-gray eyes smiling up at him as he worked the crowds. God, he loved her. It drove him crazy seeing her sitting in that room, practically in the dark, day after day.

He'd loved her right from the beginning. It was 1935, the year he graduated from high school.

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She was sitting, all alone, on the expansive wooden porch of the Old Colony Inn at Nags Head. Rocking back and forth in one of the dozens of white rockers set out for guests and gazing out toward the ocean with eyes the same color as the Atlantic. Her dark hair was coiled on top of her head in thick braids, leaving her long, satin neck exposed. He even remembered what she was wearing: a high-necked white blouse and a soft dark

cotton skirt. But what had stopped him, what had made him sit down in the rocking chair next to her, was the ivory white of her skin. The searing North Carolina sun hadn't touched it.

"I'm Roger Nolan," he'd said and then just stared at her, stunned by all that ivory skin into silence.

The girl's quick smile suggested she was eager to meet someone, anyone, who might provide distraction from the boredom she didn't bother to conceal.

"I'm Betsy Newell, visiting with my aunt Evelyn. She's sweet but awfully old, and she didn't know what to do with me in Greensboro. That's where she lives. So she packed us up and took off for the seashore. And here I am."

"Is it so bad?" he asked.

"You'll think I'm horrid."

"Try me."

"Well, to tell you the truth, yes. It's my first visit to the southern states, and I don't know what I was expecting, but I find it all mystifying. And, I have to say, backward."

Roger laughed. "You're right about backward. But don't you think the sand here is just about the finest you ever put your foot on?"

She admitted the sand was soft and white and she liked to float in the warm waves. But she was a New England girl and she was bored.

"Oh yeah? What do you do up in New England to keep from getting bored?"

"I don't know. Play tennis, sail, all kinds of things." She watched him rocking back and forth before she spoke, in a tone almost challenging. "And I'm going to college in a month."

"Goodness me. Where?" The girls he knew went to finishing schools; hardly any went to a real college.

"You probably never heard of it. It's called Vassar."

He laughed out loud. "Vassar? No kidding." He jumped up and faced her, forcing her to stop rocking. "Then, I bet you've heard of Harvard."

She smiled up at him with large gray-blue eyes. "Well, pleased to meet you, Harvard," she said.

They quickly established that they were fervent New Dealers even though, or maybe because, their parents disapproved. Roger confessed his dream of one day running for the U.S. Congress; Betsy wanted, in some ill-defined way, to help the poor. But it wasn't dreams of the future that changed his life that summer. It was the taste of salt on her lips, the sting of the hot North Carolina sun, the powdery sand on the cool dunes at night. It was slogging clumsily to the top of the dunes, then racing, tumbling to the flat beach below, Betsy holding onto her wide brimmed straw hat with one hand, the other clinging to Roger's sunburned arm. There were millions of places to hide in the dark sand, behind the dunes, in crevices on top. They couldn't stop talking; they couldn't stop touching. At the beginning, the aunt from Greensboro felt obligated to accompany her niece whenever she left the hotel for the beach, and when Roger came to call, she chose a rocking chair on the porch near, but not too near, the infatuated couple. Ultimately, however, she relaxed her vigilance, impressed by the supposed safety net of Harvard. Roger's high school friends, who had driven down from Virginia with him, marveled at his good luck.

But Roger knew it was for the rest of his life.

Back at college, they filled in the blanks, his ambition, her devotion, their plan to go back south and make a better world.

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In the years that followed, Roger never stopped marveling at her beauty, her cool charm, her helpless love for their clumsy boy. He loved her, and her distance after Bryce's death pained him, more, if he let himself admit it, than the boy's death.

Finally, out of desperation, he got her an appointment with Ashby Fuller, even though he thought psychiatry was baloney. And she'd gone dutifully.

"How'd it go?" he'd asked afterwards.

"Fine, I guess."

"What'd he say?"

"Not much."

"Did he give you any pills or anything?"

"No."

"When are you going again?"

"I'm not." And that was it. Roger tried to get Ashby to tell him what was wrong with his wife, but the man had refused. Patient confidentiality.

She'll come round, he thought, eventually. Meanwhile, Roger Nolan was a practical man, a forward-thinking man. And whether he liked it or not, this Massive Resistance movement was his future.

April 1960

Liz Nolan raced her red Schwinn down the hills and around the sharp curves of her tree-lined neighborhood. The maples were in first tender-green leaf. She couldn't get enough of the sun, the sweet air, the soft breeze in her face. The relief after the dark house, her sad mama. A stack of books was in her basket on the handlebars.

She loved the musty old Victorian on Main Street, which served as Maple Hills' library, loved the smell of the books, the hush in the spacious cedar paneled, book-lined room, the polished cherry-wood tables over to the left where several women sat reading, the balcony up above with its painted white bannister and bookshelves to the ceiling. Miss Wyatt, who had presided over the library for as long as Liz could remember, had read all those books. At least that's what Liz had concluded because the old lady never ran out of suggestions or enthusiasm.

"I don't think your mama has read Trollope lately," she said as Liz handed her the returns.

The diminutive, bone-thin librarian spent the next ten minutes pulling books off the shelves and whispering to Liz the delicious intricacies of each plot. Despite her fragile appearance and advanced years, she moved briskly about the old building, hopping up and down ladders, stacks of books in her wiry arms.

Liz was looking forward to spending an hour or so, sprawled on the grass in front of the library, sampling the books, then choosing one and losing herself in her mother's world of nineteenth century English manners. So after checking out as many books as she could handle on her bicycle, she headed for the door.

But the massive oak door was blocked. Four boys stood, shoulder to shoulder, in front of it. Boys about her age, seventeen or eighteen years old, dressed in ill-fitting sports jackets and dark blue ties. They barely noticed her because they were looking all around the library, as if they'd never seen so many books, as if they didn't know what to do next.

And they were colored boys.

"May I help you?" Miss Wyatt slipped in front of her, pushing her back with a hand that was surprisingly strong.

"We'd like some books, ma'am." The tallest one stared down at the librarian and thrust his hands out to his sides, palms facing backwards, as if to silence the others. Later, when her father asked her to describe this boy, she couldn't remember what color his coat was. All she remembered was his dark skin and big hands.

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that," Miss Wyatt said. Her voice was soft. "You must know this is a whites only library."

"It's a public library, ma'am," the boy said. "And we're the public." The other boys were beginning to mumble and shift from foot to foot, but their spokesman kept them in check with his long, outspread fingers.

"There's a branch of this library on Calhoun Street." Miss Wyatt's voice squeaked midway through the sentence. "You can get books there."

"There ain't any good books there, lady," one of the other boys said, stepping out in front of the spokesman and staring down into Miss Wyatt's face, which was white as powder. "It's a mess."

"I'm very sorry. But I can't let you in this library."

"We're from Burbank," the tall one said. "We need books for school."

"If you tell me what books you want, I can send them to Burbank," she said.

But it was too late. They were moving forward, shoulder to shoulder, forcing the old lady backwards into the room. Liz jumped out of the way. The handful of women who had been reading stood up and without a word formed a frightened huddle behind one of the library tables. Liz was sure something terrible was about to happen. But she just stood there, in a trance, and watched these boys march over to a shelf on the wall opposite the ladies. Without a word, they began to pull out books at random, glance at a few pages, then stack the books carefully on a nearby table.

Within minutes sirens were screaming and six policemen pounded through the door.

"Everybody stay where you are," one of them yelled.

The boys continued to pull books from the shelf, but Liz could tell from the way they looked at each other that they were frightened.

"I said stay where you are!" the policeman yelled. "And put your hands up."

One by one, skinny brown arms waved in the air.

"We have the right to be here," the tall one said. But his shrill voice lacked confidence.

"You're trespassing, you nigger scum," the officer bellowed. "Cuff 'em," he ordered his men.

Minutes later, the men pushed the boys out the door, their wrists handcuffed behind their backs, their heads down. One of them was crying.

A woman who had witnessed the whole thing patted the librarian on the back. "Good for you," she said. "I was frightened half out of my wits."

The other women clustered around Miss Wyatt, nodding, clutching at her trembling hands. The old lady didn't say a word; she just sat down at the cherry wood table and put her head in her hands. Liz wanted to say something to comfort her but didn't know how.

Afterwards, riding her bicycle back through the leafy streets of Maple Hills, Liz couldn't get those boys out of her mind. They looked so scared, and they were so orderly, pulling the books from the shelves, stacking them neatly. She would have expected them to talk back or start to run once the police showed up. But they stayed polite the whole time. She knew what her father would say. Those boys had no place in the white library, and maybe they shouldn't have been there. But putting them in handcuffs? Taking them off in a police car? Suppose it had been Jess. She began to pedal faster. She needed to get home. She needed to talk to Florene.

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Florene, rigid in her gray cotton uniform with the starched white collar and apron, stared down at a tall, scrawny boy with close-cropped frizzled hair.

"You know anything bout them boys getting the white library closed?"

Jess looked up from his cornflakes. "I heard of it."

"Well, you stay out of it, you hear me?"

"What you mad at me for? I ain't involved." The boy got up from the metal-topped table, which was shoved up against the wall, and looked square into his mother's eyes. His mattress, a blanket tucked neatly under the sides, was on the opposite side of the room, and in between bed and table was a wooden bench and two armchairs, upholstered in faded wool plaid. The wood floor of the small, crowded room was bare.

"You better not be. This the best job I ever had, and you ain't going to mess with it."

Jess laughed. "The old racist!"

"That old racist's gonna pay for your college long as you behave yourself."

"I behave."

"Well, don't let me catch you making trouble for the Senator."

"Mama, listen to you talk. You know them boys are right."

"I don't know nothing," she said. "I keep my opinions to myself, and I'll thank you to do the same."

After Jess left for school, Florene sat on the wooden bench for a few minutes, staring out the window at a black and white mutt running down the unpaved road in front of her house, barking.

She thought about the mothers. What they go'n do, knowing their boys are in jail and they can't do nothing about it. Mr. Nolan could do something about it; but he won't. He treated her decent, but he had no notion how folks lived. And with all the sadness in that house after that business with Mr. Bryce, he'd never know. Those boys were foolish going into that library. But brave too.

"Lord, keep my boy safe," she prayed under her breath, as she pulled herself up from the bench and headed down the dirt road to the bus stop. "Just keep him safe."

§

"It's a damn shame," Roger announced, barging into his wife's room. "Some kids

from Luther Burbank forced their way into the library after school and started taking books. John Dodson had to close the place down."

Betsy jumped up. "What do you mean, close it down?"

"Just what I said, honey. Old Miss Wyatt asked them to leave, they refused, and she called the police."

"Liz told me that part, but I didn't know that stuffed shirt mayor had closed the library." She turned to face the window; she needed fresh air.

"It might be good for you," Roger said, opening the window. "Get you out of this room."

You have no idea, she thought.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, her back to him, breathing in the outdoors.

"Right now, we're letting things simmer down. If we open the library, the colored will be back and there'll be a fight. So we'll wait for the lawsuit and work something out."

"The law takes a long time."

"Time is on our side, honey."

"I can't," she said.

"What's that mean?"

She didn't bother to explain.

She rarely left her room after that. She still had books, in the house and on regular order from Book of the Month Club, but she didn't read the paper or listen to the radio. She didn't ask Roger about the library. She didn't want to hear it.

June 1960

Then one summer afternoon two months after the mayor closed the library, Florene announced, "Miz Nolan, there's a man at the door."

"What man?"

"I guess it's a boy. Says he wants to see you."

"You know what to tell him." Why was the woman bothering her with this?

"Yes'm. I did already."

"Well then, would you please close my door?"

Florene just stood there. "Miz Nolan, he says he was a friend of Mr. Bryce."

She let out a sharp cry. "Tell him to see Mr. Nolan in his office downtown," she said.

"I already done that, ma'am. He wants to see you."

She searched her maid's impassive face. "No!"

"I told him to leave, told him you won't see him. But he won't go way."

Betsy started to close the door, but then she thought, suppose he's telling the truth. Suppose he was... She had to see. Her legs trembled as she started down the stairs.

"Mrs. Nolan?"

A young man was standing in the front hall, at the bottom of the stairs, peering up at her from under heavy black eyebrows, not smiling. His shoulders under his rumpled seersucker jacket were slightly hunched, his skin pale, his scrawny arms hung limp.

"Please, Mrs. Nolan." His voice was high pitched and nasal. New York?

She called out sharply. "Florene!"

The boy backed away, swiping at his sweaty forehead with his sleeve. "I'm George

Bradstreet, ma'am." The words rushed out. "Bryce's friend. I mean, was his friend."

She was frightened now. He could be anybody. Pretending to be her son's friend. "What do you want?"

"I'm part of the protest, Mrs. Nolan."

Betsy walked to the bottom of the stairs and faced him. "I don't understand."

"The protest." His voice was insistent. "We were down at the library, holding up signs, trying to get it back open. But the cops showed up and started arresting all the blacks. I got out of there fast as I could."

The cops? What was he talking about? She looked at her maid. "I been hearing about it, ma'am," Florene said.

The boy took advantage of Betsy's silence and began talking very fast. "A bunch of us from Harvard came down here this summer to join the fight for integration." He suddenly looked so young, so innocent.

"That has nothing to do with me," she said.

But he kept talking. "Bryce was one of us. Only he didn't tell you because he was scared it would leak out and somebody would use it against his dad."

No.

He pulled from his pocket a single sheet of paper, folded so many times it was beginning to tear.

"This is our manifesto," he said.

Manifesto! What a child, she thought. What an absolute baby.

He handed it to her and pointed to a name at the bottom. Bryce Nolan. It was his handwriting, slanted to the left, letters close together.

She struggled to get her breath. "Where did you get this?"

"He said you might understand—what we're doing."

"I don't," she whispered. "I don't understand."

"He was my friend." The boy's voice was hoarse.

She wanted to run back up the stairs, pick up her book, get this boy out of her house. Instead, something made her ask, "What did you say your name is?"

"George. George Bradstreet."

It sounded vaguely familiar. Maybe when Bryce was home for Christmas? He could be. She didn't know.

"Maybe some time you could visit my husband in his office," she said.

"I'll do that, Mrs. Nolan. I'm sorry to bother you."

"Take him to the kitchen," she said to Florene. "Get him some ice tea."

She heard the boy whisper, "Thank you," to Florene.

"Thank you for what?" Betsy asked Florene, her voice sharp.

"I think he meant it for you, ma'am," Florene said.

§

Ten minutes later the door to the kitchen burst open. Roger Nolan filled the room, tall, imposing, fierce. His dark eyes fixed on the young man perched on the edge of a straight-backed wooden chair. George Bradstreet sprang up and stuck out his hand. Florene disappeared into the pantry.

"I got a call just now from my wife," Roger said, ignoring the offered hand. "Says

you came to my house uninvited, claiming to be a friend of my son.”

“I’m sorry if I offended her, sir. But it’s true I was Bryce’s friend, good friend. I’m George Bradstreet. From New York.” They stood in the middle of the kitchen staring at each other.

“You in trouble with the police?”

“I hope not.”

“You involved in that business downtown?”

George hesitated. “I was part of a march.”

“A lot of folks got arrested.”

“I know. I made myself scarce.”

“And ran for safety here? To my house?” Roger’s voice was sharp.

“I’m sorry, sir,” George said. “I guess that wasn’t too smart.”

“Damned right, it wasn’t smart. You put my wife, who isn’t well, in a terrible position. Dangerous even.”

“I’ll leave right now.” George headed for the kitchen door.

“Wait.”

George turned back.

“You say you knew Bryce?”

“Yes sir.”

Roger’s dark eyes searched his face. “I’ll check that out,” he said. “Meanwhile, do not disturb my wife again. Do not come here again. Ever. Understood?”

“Yes sir.” And he was gone.

Roger took the stairs two at a time. Betsy was standing at the window when he rushed into her room.

“I got rid of him,” he said. He tried to put his arms around her. She held herself stiff, staring out the window.

“He could be telling the truth,” she murmured.

“I’ll find out. But even if he did know Bryce, he had no business coming here scaring you like that.”

She turned to face him. “You’re right. It scared me.”

“He won’t be back, honey. I promise.”

He felt her body soften against him. He wanted to take hold of her, pull her into him.

She looked into his eyes. “How do you feel?”

“Right now I’m mostly angry that he came here and compromised you.”

She smiled and pulled herself away from him. “You mean, compromised you.”

“Fair enough,” he said.

“I want it to be true,” she said.

She turned back to the window.

“I love you, Betsy,” he said.

She didn’t answer. And Roger knew he’d been dismissed.

§

“You seen Jess?” Florene was pushing through tangled knots of boys, not just black, white ones too, blocking the street, shouting, “Unlock the doors,” shouting “Books for

freedom,” chanting, chanting until she thought her head would burst.

Then suddenly sirens screaming full blast. Cop cars speeding into the crowd, thick-necked bullies in uniform jumping out, waving Billy sticks. A boy went down close to where Florene was standing, a kid, maybe twelve years old, his head bloody. She felt herself being shoved to the side of the road as screaming boys raced to escape the police. Jess. Where was he? They'd been doing it for two days now, the cops. Driving their cars right into the middle of the protest. Picking up the boys, children really, carting 'em off to jail. Beating up on the ones who fought back. Where was Jess?

Somebody had to stop it. Maybe the Senator, if he came down here with his megaphone. He'd been known to do it, get up on a stump and yell at a crowd to move back. Mr. Big Shot. But what if he spotted Jess? Or her?

Then suddenly there was Jess, standing on the outside of the crowd. Thank you, God. Staring, his mouth open.

“Get your black ass home,” she shouted in his ear.

“What you doing here?”

“Getting you out of trouble.”

He followed her, at a distance so it wouldn't look like he was a mama's boy, but he followed her.

Back home, safe, she could hear the sirens, the loud voice, not the Senator's, on the megaphone, the screaming.

“That could be you screaming,” she said.

Jess lay down on his mattress and stared up at the ceiling. “I'm careful, Mama. The cops don't pay me no mind.”

“You stay out there yelling and carrying on and see what mind they pay,” she said.

“I gotta be involved,” he said. “Dr. King, he says the time is now. And you know he's right.”

She wanted to say, I know. I'm the one that sits in Reverend Thomas's Bible class every Sunday and hears him talk protest, protest, protest. I know bout the marches. I want to be out there bad as you do.

But she didn't say that. Instead she said, “Well Dr. King's not your mama, I am, and I say you can't be out there getting beat up and going to jail.”

But she knew he'd be back.

§

“Where you off to, honey?”

Liz stopped short. Florene was standing near the entrance hall of the unlit living room, in her broad-brimmed straw hat, ready to leave for home.

“I'm meeting some friends.”

“At this hour?” It was close to eight o'clock.

“What is this, the third degree?”

Florene laughed. “Somebody got to look after you.” Poor little girl. No mama to speak of.

“Well, maybe I just won't go,” Liz said, slipping out of her red cotton sweater.

“I reckon you'll just wait till I'm gone?” Florene looked closely at the girl.

Liz stood silent.

“Cause I’m betting you going to the protest downtown.”

“What protest?”

“Don’t you give me that ‘what protest’! You know what I’m talking bout.”

Liz sat down on the gray velveteen sofa, her sweater bunched up beside her, and looked up at Florene.

“You know you can’t be out there,” Florene said. But she was thinking, I wish I hadn’t seen her. Let her go on out there, show up her daddy for a change.

“Why not?” Liz asked.

Pretending all innocence.

“Well, to start with, it’s dangerous.”

“I want to help.”

“Well, it ain’t going to help nobody if you get your daddy in trouble.”

“If Bryce were here, he’d go.”

“If Bryce were here, he’d tell you to stay home.” God help me, she thought, I got to save this one too. She was dog tired. She wanted to shove the girl’s sweater to the side and sit down on the sofa. But she couldn’t.

“I want to do something.”

“Well, you can’t go prancing about in public. You’ll have them reporters all over you.” Course, she’d never thought of that, poor baby. “You remember Miss Foster?”

Liz looked up, surprised. “The old chemistry teacher, that Miss Foster?”

“That’s the one.”

“What about her?”

“You might look her up.”

“What for?”

“I’m not saying another word.”

“Look her up where, Florene?”

“I bet she’s in the book.”

“The phone book?” Liz thought a minute. “Are you saying Miss Foster’s protesting?”

“I already said too much. Now go on upstairs.”

Liz just sat there.

“Look here. If you go to that protest and I saw you leaving, I’ll be in hot water.”

“I won’t tell.”

“He’ll ask, and you won’t lie.”

Liz stood up and put her arms around Florene’s neck. “Okay. Next time I’ll make sure you aren’t around.”

“Whatever. Now get on upstairs like a good girl.”

July 1960

Two weeks after George Bradstreet visited the Nolans, he appeared at Roger’s law office, once again in the rumpled seersucker jacket. But this time he was wearing a white, buttoned shirt and striped tie.

“Come on in,” Roger said, leading the way to a spacious office dominated by a grand mahogany roll-top desk with multiple drawers. Roger eased himself into a leather armchair next to a rectangular table on which stacks of paper were piled.

"Sit down," he commanded, pointing to the plush blue sofa across from him. George backed himself onto the sofa, his eyes never leaving the older man.

"Thank you for inviting me here," he said.

"I said I'd check up on you," Roger said.

George laughed nervously. "Yeah? Did I pass?"

"Looks like you're telling the truth. About knowing my son."

"I am." George smiled for the first time and looked around the room. A lush red Oriental carpet covered most of the dark hardwood floor. And drawings hung on the light gray walls, drawings of buildings mostly. Elaborate Colonial houses with columns, including one of Monticello. And one of those drawings of a tobacco barn that he'd seen on the wall of every white southerner's house he'd visited.

"My wife tells me you boys are down here plotting to save the south from itself," Roger said.

"I don't know about that, sir, but Bryce was one of us."

"Well, the little son of a bitch," Roger muttered under his breath.

George hesitated, then spoke in a rush of words. "We want to help get the library back open for Negroes."

"We?"

"A few of us from college."

Roger's eyes narrowed. "You came to my house. I assume it wasn't just a friendly visit. What do you want from me?"

George looked directly into the black eyes. "Nothing, sir. I was scared that day when the cops showed up at the protest. First thing I thought of was Bryce. So I came to your house. It was a bad idea."

"It was a terrible idea."

"I know, but Bryce talked about his mother a lot. I thought she might..."

About her. Of course, Roger thought. I hate to think what he said about me.

"You can't visit her. You know that."

"I know."

"So? What do you have in mind?"

"I was participating in the marches, but I've stopped."

"I'm glad to hear it. What made you stop?"

"It only makes the cops more violent, seeing white boys in the mix."

Roger nodded. "You're right about that. So what now?"

"I'm thinking of writing letters."

"What kind of letters?"

"Well, for example, letters about the poor selection of books in the colored library."

Roger thought a minute. "You can't sign them."

"Maybe the Reverend Thomas could sign them. I've been going to meetings at his house. Or one of the Burbank high school teachers."

"Where're you living? Surely not with Reverend Thomas."

"There are white people who put me up."

"Really?"

"You wouldn't mind me writing letters?"

"Of course I mind, and I know nothing about it. What's more, if it ever gets out that you're writing letters, I'll deny knowing anything about it. I'll say you came here under false pretenses taking advantage of my grief. You understand?"

"Yes sir."

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

Then Roger leaned forward once again fixing George with fierce, dark eyes. "Son, has it occurred to you that a town without a library can't attract new business?"

"Not really."

Roger stood up. "You didn't hear it from me."

"Thank you, sir. You can trust me to keep this under wraps."

George jumped up and held out his hand for Roger to shake just as Roger reached out to pat him on the shoulder. They bumped against each other and laughed awkwardly.

"He really looked up to you," George said.

Don't, Roger wanted to say. The truth is I bullied him, the poor devil.

George picked up his jacket to leave.

"By the way," Roger asked, "who are these letters going to?"

George shifted his eyes away from the older man. "The mayor and members of the library board. The press of course." He hesitated. "And you."

Roger laughed. "Get out of here," he said.

August 1960

Betsy Nolan, elegant in her spectator pumps, edged along the broken pavement of Wilson Street, peering at the house numbers, some of which were missing, some covered with honeysuckle. Her green paisley dress fell in soft folds from a patent leather belt. The wide collar emphasized her long, white neck, not yet marred by the folds that would come soon enough.

She didn't know this street, didn't know this part of town. She stumbled on a fragment of sidewalk and quickly righted herself. Staring at peeling paint and unswept walkways, she thought, absentmindedly, that the colored would be moving in before too long.

To her relief, the house she was looking for, 157 Wilson, struck a happy contrast to the general state of disintegration surrounding it. Fresh looking off-white stucco, maroon wooden shutters, recently painted. No cobwebs, grass in front, a doorbell that worked. A stout, buxom woman appeared at the door. Her stone-white hair was piled up on her large head in a loose knot and glasses hung from a chain around her neck.

"Well hello, Mrs. Nolan," she said pushing open the screen door. "What a surprise."

The woman looked familiar. Did she know her?

"I'm Thelma Foster," the woman said. "I taught Bryce chemistry."

"Of course. Miss Foster. I'm so sorry. I..."

"Thelma. And don't worry. I've been retired so long nobody recognizes me. Come in."

"What a lovely room," Betsy said.

The sun streamed through the stained glass oval above the door, bounced off a glass coffee table, made blue and red patterns of light on the white walls, and burnished the

room in a warm honey gold.

"Thank you. Mama did it all those years ago, and I found no cause to change it after she passed." She motioned to a blue silk Wedgewood chair. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Nolan?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I was told a George Bradstreet was staying here."

"Who told you that?"

"A friend." Roger had let it slip that he knew where George was living. But he was adamant that no one suspect he had any connection with the boy.

Miss Foster studied her for a minute. "Was it Liz?" she finally asked.

Liz? Was she mixed up in this? "A friend said he was here," Betsy repeated. "Would it be possible for me to see him?"

The old teacher hesitated. "Could I ask what this is about?"

"He was Bryce's friend. I'd like to talk to him."

"I see. Wait here a minute."

When the old lady returned, she motioned for Betsy to follow her down a dimly lit hallway to a roomy closed-in back porch, paneled in cedar. George Bradstreet jumped up from a wrought-iron reclining chair.

"Mrs. Nolan!"

"Don't look so scared," she laughed. "It's a friendly visit."

"If you don't need me..." Miss Foster said and disappeared.

The bright sunlight streamed in from the wall of French doors, open to warm afternoon breezes and the smell of newly cut grass. A round oak table dominated the room with captain chairs pushed under it. Papers were stacked all over the table. The wood floor of the original porch was still in place, painted white.

"How are you managing?" Betsy asked. This was the first time she had seen him since he'd turned up at her house.

George's words spilled out. "Fine, thank you. I'm being really careful, I want you to know that, so I don't get the Senator in trouble."

"I know."

"I'll leave town, I promise, the minute anyone finds out what I'm doing here."

It occurred to her for the first time that this young boy had courage.

"That's not why I wanted to see you," she said.

He rushed on. "I mean, I'll tell them you didn't know what I was doing..."

"I don't," she said, settling into one of the captain chairs, "but that's not why I'm here."

George sat back down, watching her under thick eyebrows.

"I want to know about Bryce."

"Sure."

"I know he was unhappy."

He frowned. "Unhappy?"

She leaned forward.

"The truth. Tell me the truth."

"The truth? Okay. Nobody's happy in college, especially freshman year, especially at Harvard."

"I don't mean everybody. I mean my son. What was it like for him?"

"He was smart, like everybody there, but he wasn't very interested in his studies. Is that what you mean?"

"Go on."

"Look, Mrs. Nolan, the world is changing. I mean the Brown decision changed everything. School is just irrelevant. I think that's how Bryce felt. I know I did. Still do." His voice was excited.

"And the meetings you told me about, did they make you feel relevant?"

"Yes ma'am. We wanted to make a difference."

"What about Bryce?"

"He felt the same."

"He wanted to make a difference?"

"Sure. The 'cause' gave us something to believe in."

She smiled faintly. "The manifesto?"

"He would have told you about it, but he didn't want to upset his dad."

Betsy thought for a moment, then blurted out, "Then, how come he was drinking?"

"Ma'am?"

"You knew him, George. Why was he drinking?"

"Everybody was drinking."

She looked away, her face drained of color. "Not everybody ran a car into a tree." Why had they ever agreed to let him take that car to college?

"It was an accident."

"He was drunk."

"He'd had a drink or two."

"I saw the police report," she said. "They tried to keep it from me, but I saw it." Her gray-blue eyes were fixed on him.

George looked away. "He didn't drink at our meetings," he said. "That was going to save him."

The words shocked her. "Save him?"

George stood up. Betsy watched him as he circled the room, clearly agitated. He's trying to find a way to say it without hurting me, she thought. He stopped at the bank of French doors and looked out.

"He loved you both," he said.

"But he felt he was letting us down."

"I didn't say that," George said.

"But it's true."

"He loved you. Look, the meetings made him happy. We were happy, all of us."

George looked out into the bright sunlight.

"I loved him," he said. "Not like that sounds. He was my friend."

She walked over to him and took hold of his sharp shoulders and pulled him toward her.

"Thank you," she said.

"By the way," George said as she turned to leave the room. "Was it Liz?"

"Was what Liz?"

He looked confused. "How'd you find me? Was it Jess?"
Liz again? And Jess? Florene's son? "What do you mean?"
"Look, Mrs. Nolan, forget I said anything."

She looked at him closely. "Is Jess involved in this?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you do."

"Look, don't say anything to the Senator. Please."

"I know that," Betsy said. "Take care of yourself, George."

As she turned to leave, George said, "Bryce thought you would agree with him."

He swept his arm over the table, piled high with papers. "About all this. He said it many times. Said you couldn't do anything because of the Senator, but Bryce believed you'd understand."

"I haven't been very good at it so far," she said, her voice hoarse. Bryce, her own Bryce, had believed she'd understand. And she hadn't. Her head hurt from holding back tears.

As she picked her way over broken concrete on the way back home, she thought, that dull old chemistry teacher understood. Who would have guessed? And Jess. Florene's son. Florene must know. Working every day in the State Senator's house. And Liz? What was she up to? It almost made her laugh.

§

Liz softly opened the door to her mother's room and tiptoed in. Taking a nap? No. Instead her mother was sitting in the rocking chair by the window, staring out. Good.

"Where've you been, honey?" Betsy asked without turning around. "Seems like I haven't seen you for days."

Liz pulled up a footstool. "You know, Mama. Daddy got me that summer job at Johnsons, selling shoes."

"How's that coming along?"

"Lots of sweaty feet."

Betsy smiled. "Florene says you haven't been home for dinner."

She'd noticed? That was new. "I've been eating downtown with friends."

"What friends?"

What's she getting at? "You know, high school friends."

"I see."

"See what?"

"Well," Betsy paused. "I thought you might be involved in what they call the 'movement'."

Liz stiffened. "What are you talking about, Mama?"

Betsy looked at her daughter for the first time. "I paid George Bradstreet a visit last week," she said.

"You did what?" Was this possible?

"At Miss Foster's. She seemed to think you told me where he lived."

Liz didn't know what to say. She'd been so careful.

"You visited George? At Miss Foster's?"

"I wanted to know more...about Bryce," Betsy said. "I'm beginning to think I

don't know much about either of my children."

Liz looked away from her mother, out the window. The grass stood stiff, yellow under the harsh August sun. The leaves on the maple hung dry, ready to drop with the first wind of fall.

Betsy hesitated for a minute as if she were trying to figure out what to say. "Are you working with George?"

Might as well get it over with. "Yes ma'am."

"Doing what?"

"Typing. Keeping records."

"Records?"

"They're going all over town with a petition to reopen the library."

"You're doing that?"

"Of course not," Liz said quickly. "Daddy would kill me. But they need a record of the petitions, how many people are signing, how many are refusing to sign, what neighborhoods they're in, that kind of thing." Liz sounded excited.

"Who's they?"

"For the lawsuit?"

"Does your daddy know?"

"That I'm involved, I sure hope not."

Betsy paused. "How did you get started in this?"

Liz was relieved. Her mother didn't sound angry or accusing, just puzzled. Maybe even interested. But she couldn't get Florene in trouble.

"Somebody told me Miss Foster was helping open the library."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She almost said, I didn't think you'd be interested, but stopped herself.

Betsy lightly touched her daughter's arm. "I wish you wouldn't keep all this a secret from me."

Liz looked at her mother for the first time and smiled. "I'm protecting you."

Betsy laughed. "From your father?"

Liz nodded.

October 1960

It was almost ten o'clock when Roger thought he heard a knock at the kitchen door. He peered out into the dark and saw somebody tall standing there.

"Mr. Nolan, I needs to talk to you." Florene looked directly at him, her eyes boring into his.

"Come in." What could she want?

When he had closed the door behind her, she said, "It's my boy."

Roger took a deep breath. Thank God. It wasn't Betsy. She'd seemed so much better recently, but she wasn't out of the woods.

"They got him in the jail."

"For what?" He remembered a small boy, shy, his thin brown arm hanging onto his mama. How old was he now?

"Some kids from the high school came by tonight. Said the police had Jess."

He must be a teenager by now. Getting into trouble already. "What'd he do?"
"They said he was disturbing the peace."

Roger sat down heavily on a kitchen stool. Why was she coming to him? She knew he couldn't get involved.

"Have you talked to him?"

"No sir. I went to the jail but they say he can't have no visitors."

"I'm sure they'll let you see him later."

Florene seemed to grow taller. She looked straight at him with wet eyes. "Mr. Nolan, I want you to get him out of there."

That's all he needed. He could see the headlines. Nolan backs protest movement. Gets agitator out of jail.

"You know I can't do that."

"They beating up boys in there," she said.

"That's just talk, Florene. The out of town press makes up that stuff to sell newspapers. Don't believe it."

"I seen the bruises myself. I seen the blood."

"When?"

"Last week. Not Jess. Other boys."

She was right, of course. He'd tried to talk to the Chief, told him it was hurting the town's reputation, which as a State Senator was his concern. But that good old boy just denied it. "Hell," he'd said, "we ain't laying a hand on 'em. We're only asking questions. Sons of bitches are lying."

"Look, Florene," he said. "I'd like to help, but my hands are tied." The easy cliché embarrassed him.

She turned away. "I know all bout that, sir." He leaned forward to hear her, her voice was so soft. "It was crazy to come here asking you. I could get myself fired. But he's my boy. He might be out there protesting, but he's not breaking the law. That's the God's truth, Mr. Nolan."

He sat there, gazing at her skinny back, silently cursing her for locking him into this strait-jacket. The newspapers were all over this goddamn business. If they found out Senator Nolan's maid was somehow part of it, he'd have to do something. Fire the maid for sure. And that's the last thing he wanted to do; he'd have hell to pay from Betsy and Liz. And if he pulled strings to get her boy out of jail and somebody found out, it would be even worse. He didn't want to think about that.

"I'm sorry, Florene," he said.

"You mighty smart, Mr. Nolan. That's why I come here."

He smiled. "Not that smart." But it got him to thinking about Police Chief Williams and how he'd pulled his butt out of the fire several years ago when the Chief got a little over zealous in his search and seizure practices. Roger had quietly, effectively put an end to an investigation and the Chief owed him one and knew it. But was this the time to play that card?

"Go on home, Florene. The jails are overflowing right now. They'll have to let your boy out in a day or two."

"But they'll charge him, and the judge will send him back."

They were both standing now, facing each other. "Look, Florene, there's a possibility he could get out without any charges against him. If that happens, we never had this conversation. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir. Thank you."

"I haven't done anything."

"Yes sir."

After she'd gone, Roger headed up to bed and found Betsy standing at the top of the stairs.

"What are you doing out here, sweetheart?"

"I heard you talking to somebody."

"It was Florene. She was just leaving. Go on back to bed."

"What's Florene doing here at this hour? It's about Jess, isn't it?"

"What do you know about Jess?"

"Nothing. I'm guessing."

Roger put his arm around Betsy's shoulders and started walking her back to her bedroom.

"He's in trouble, isn't he?" she said.

Roger stopped abruptly. Betsy turned to face him.

"I'm only guessing, but Jess is just the right age to be out there protesting. And the police are rounding up colored boys right and left and hauling them off to jail."

"That's what the papers say."

"Come on, Roger. You know it's true. And Florene is asking you to help Jess, isn't she?"

"How do you know..."

"I'm right, aren't I?"

She's so smart, he thought, she's always been smarter than anybody.

He nodded.

"You have to help her."

"I can't."

"Yes you can."

"Go to bed."

"Only if you'll promise to help her."

"I can't," he said, and turned to leave. But she was smiling. She knows, he thought. She knows me better than anybody in the whole world.

§

The next evening when Florene opened her front door, she found Jess sprawled out on his mattress. Asleep.

"Thank you, sweet Jesus," she whispered and sat down on the floor next to him. Rocking back and forth, she ran her fingers lightly over his bare arms, over his scrawny neck, through his tightly curled hair, feeling for cuts, looking for bruises.

Then he was throwing his arms around her, this large almost man who was her boy. Squeezing her so tight she had to pull herself away to catch her breath.

"I was so scared. Mama, I was so scared." Over and over.

Finally, "How'd you get out?"

"I was in this cell with a bunch of other guys and this cop opened the door and yelled out, 'Which one of you coons is Jess?' Scared me to death cause they been calling boys out and beating on 'em. Somebody pointed at me. So I stood up. 'Come on,' the cop said. Next thing I knew, I was out the jailhouse door and heading home."

"Nobody told you why they were letting you go?"

"No ma'am."

"They say anything about charges?"

"No'm. Said I was free."

They struggled to their feet, still tangled up together.

"You hungry?"

"What do you think?"

They sat together at the metal-topped table, eating warmed over spoonbread, drinking milk.

"You gotta stop," Florene finally said.

"Stop what?"

"Don't play dumb with me. Next time you be staying in that jail."

"You talked to him, didn't you, Mama?"

"Who?"

"You know who."

"No."

"You not going to get fired, are you?"

She smiled. "Not if you keep clear of those protests."

"I mean to," he said. But she knew how young he was, how innocent, even now, and she could only pray he'd listen to her this time.

§

The following evening after work, when Roger opened the front door, he found Florene inside waiting for him.

"My boy's home," she said.

"Well, that's good news."

"Thank you."

"What for?"

"I just wanted to say it."

"Well, thank you for all the help you give this family," he said.

"You're welcome," she said.

February 1961

"What's your husband say about George writing these letters?" Thelma Foster reached over with spindly fingers and picked up a letter George Bradstreet had just finished typing and handed it to Betsy.

Betsy ran her eyes over the letter.

"Roger makes it his business not to know," she said. "And from what I hear, George is discreet."

The old lady raised an eyebrow. "Writing letters to the City Counsel urging them to open the library is discreet?"

"Somebody else is signing them."

Betsy stood perfectly still, staring out the window. Her hair was almost entirely gray now, and there were lines on her broad forehead and along the sides of her eyes. Since her first visit to Thelma Foster's house, she had come several times with Liz. She told herself she was keeping an eye on her daughter, making sure she was safe, but in fact Betsy was becoming more immersed in George's work, editing letters, tallying petitions.

"Do you think this will do it?" the teacher asked, watching Betsy with hooded green eyes.

"You got a better idea?" George asked her.

"No."

"Look," he said. "None of those Neanderthals actually wants to live in a city without a public library. It's embarrassing. That's why we're pushing the risk-of-losing-business angle. Mr. Nolan actually agrees with the concept. It's the argument he's using with the mayor to get a settlement."

"Preaching won't do it," the old lady said.

"We're not preaching. We're pointing out the facts."

"And the facts are?"

"No commercial enterprise will look at a town without a library."

Betsy was still staring out the window. "The facts," she suddenly said. "Here's one. It's not about the books."

"Huh?"

"No one actually minds the colored reading books. At least that's what the mayor says."

"Just not in our library," Miss Foster said.

Betsy stood very still, her eyes focused on the dark limbs of the maple silhouetted against the gray sky. It was as if George and Miss Foster weren't in the room.

"What they don't want is the mixing. That's the important fact. We keep forgetting it."

They both stared at her.

"It's chairs," she said.

They waited, puzzled.

"If you can't sit down in the library..."

George finished her sentence. "You can't stick around to mix." He started laughing, a high whinny of a laugh. Betsy realized she'd never heard him laugh before.

"Brilliant," he said, "You get your books and you go home."

Betsy smiled. "It's just an idea."

June 1961

Roger waved the newspaper in the air.

Betsy sat on the rose velvet sofa, watching him, her shoulders, as always, straight. Her slender, veined hands rested in her lap.

He pointed to the headline, *Library Opens With No Chairs, No Fanfare* and began to read aloud.

The Maple Hills City Public Library opened its doors today for the first time since April 1960, when Mayor John Dodson was forced to close it to prevent racial conflict. The reopening of the library resulted from the settlement of a lawsuit brought against the city by the N.A.A.C.P and other national Negro organizations. According to the terms of the settlement, all chairs have been removed from the library premises.

The library opened quietly without disturbance. Contacted in his office, Senator Roger Nolan stated, "I am pleased we have resolved this unfortunate lawsuit in a peaceful manner. My family and I intend to patronize the library on a regular basis."

"Chairs," Roger said, "Just brilliant. Wish I'd thought of it."

September 1961

Roger knocked softly on his wife's bedroom door.

"Can I talk to you?"

She opened the door wide and smiled. "Come in."

"The governor just called."

Betsy's smile vanished. She nodded in the direction of the green damask daybed and eased herself into the rocker.

"He wants me to run in the '62 election."

"For?"

"The Senate."

"You're in the Senate."

"The U.S. Senate."

Her smile was back. "Congratulations. I can see the library settlement paid off." But Roger wasn't smiling. He was watching her carefully. "You know why I'm here."

"Yes." Of course. The inevitable. And she dreaded it with her whole being.

"The Senate is big, you know that. I have to be seen and heard. Every day. For the next year. And if my wife doesn't show up now and then, people will ask questions."

"What exactly do you want?"

"I need you next to me when I make speeches. Not every time, of course. And I need you at fundraisers."

"Is the governor writing the speeches?"

"Of course not."

"You know what I mean."

"You mean, do I have to support his stand on segregation?"

She nodded.

"Jesus, Betsy. Be realistic."

"I am realistic. I'd like to help you. But I can't. And you know it."

Roger stood up, reached for her hand and pulled her to her feet. They stood facing each other, not touching.

"It means I can't run."

"I don't think so."

"They'll say we're estranged. Or that you're depressed or worse."

"I'm not depressed. I was worse. But not now."

"Then why can't you do this for me?"

"It would destroy me."

He paused a minute. Then, "You're too strong for that. But if you don't, it might destroy me."

"No it won't. You're too clever. You'll figure out some story. I'm no longer hibernating; I'm back in the world. I'm working on Bryce's Scholarship Fund. Use that. Use my grief; that's always available." She gave a small laugh.

"You'll at least come to fundraisers?"

"Only if they're local and only if they don't involve segregation politics."

He laughed. "I'll see if I can organize one." He took her hands and pulled her to him. She felt his chest, hard after all these years, his stomach, flat. He'd been exercising. How nice it would be to stay there, breathe in the mix of fresh laundry and aftershave.

"You know," he murmured in her ear, "that I agree with you."

She pushed him away. "When you say things like that I get crazy. I know you agree. That's why I can't watch you make those awful speeches about 'mixing the races'."

"You know I have to support the Governor's position to get elected in this state."

"Yes, and I know you can't resist running for office. I just don't have to be a part of it."

"But you are."

"Not anymore. Every time you make one of those feel-good southern speeches, all I can think about is Bryce."

"Don't!" Roger moaned.

"We need to talk about it and we never do. You know, as well as I, that he was fighting against your governor..."

"Stop, goddammit. You're using him against me."

"I hate what you stand for."

"I hate it too. But if I can just get elected, I can work on solutions. We're stuck with a losing cause here in the south, but somebody smart's going to find a way out. And that's what I'm good at."

"I wish I could believe you."

"You don't have to believe me, just don't hate me."

She looked him in the eyes. "I don't hate you."

He put his arms around her slender shoulders and pressed her against him. "I used to be good at loving," he said. "I was good at loving you."

"I know," she said, pulling away.

"I still do."

She looked up at him, her college sweetheart, handsome still, earnest, his dark eyes begging her. She knew every contour of his back, could feel, this minute, the strength of his arms, knew he loved her.

"But love doesn't save us anymore," she said, "it died with..."

"Don't," he cried.

"Running for Congress saves you. The Scholarship Fund saves me. I think, all

things considered, we're lucky."

"So do we have a deal?"

"I'm here, I'm your wife, through the election. But be careful not to let the press near me."

"What do you mean, through the election?" His voice was sharp.

"We'll see."

"No. It's not worth it." He pulled her close, held her hard against him. "Nothing's worth losing you. I'll tell the Governor, no. That's final." When she didn't respond, he kissed her forehead, then turned and left the room.

But she knew it wasn't final. He would run. He couldn't help himself. After that? Who knew? Right now it didn't matter.

She felt alive. That's what mattered.

October 1962

Liz stood at the back of the crowd, peering around the heads in front of her, straining to see the speaker.

"Let me tell you, I am proud to be a Virginian. Just like every one of you. Proud of this state. Our state. And you know? We have the right to be proud. George Washington was a Virginian; Thomas Jefferson was a Virginian; James Madison was a Virginian. Virginians fought the American Revolution for our right to independence. And today we're still fighting for our independence."

The crowd cheered.

Liz tried to tell herself it wasn't him.

She'd come up to Farmville, Virginia, this October morning, on a busload of students from Duke. She'd been riding the Freedom Bus every weekend since she'd joined the Students for Racial Equality, visiting towns all over North Carolina and southern Virginia, picketing segregated movie houses and restaurants and swimming pools, walking alongside colored boys, carrying signs. It felt scary and she was always worried she'd run into somebody from home, although how could she? At the same time, it felt right to be on those picket lines. Bryce would have been there. She imagined him, her big brother, walking just ahead of her, a bag full of petitions slung over his shoulder. Like when he was a paperboy.

They'd wanted her to go with them to Maple Hills. That town's as redneck as they come, they'd said. Schools still lily white. And you know it inside out. But, brave as she felt on all those picket lines, she wasn't ready to face her hometown. Even more, she didn't want to make trouble for her daddy. Farmville wasn't home. The students planned to picket the all-white private high school the County had been supporting since 1959 when it had closed the public schools to avoid desegregation.

As they drove into town, they saw a large crowd gathered in front of what looked like a courthouse. Everybody was white and there was a lot of yelling.

"Okay," Dickie Sutherlin, the group leader, shouted. "Let's check it out."

Liz waded into the crowd behind Dickie, edging herself past the swollen bellies of middle-age men in plaid wool shirts open at the collar. The men were clapping and hollering.

The amplified voice broke through the din. "Our state has the right under the United States Constitution to make its own decisions about public education. You in this town, in this great Prince Edward County, are fighting for that Constitutional right."

It was him. No mistaking. Liz turned and started inching her way back through the crowd.

But Dickie was raising his fist in the air and yelling, "Boo!" in a shrill voice that cut through all the cheering, and the other students started yelling with him. Liz felt a hand on her shoulder jerking her so hard she fell back into a mass of arms and legs. She was breathing hard, trying not to cry, when the area around her suddenly cleared and a policeman, his round face dirty with sweat, yanked her wrists in front of her with one large fleshy hand and pulled her to her feet. He held a Billy club in his other hand. "Let me go!" she screamed as she twisted back and forth, but he just glowered at her.

But then he suddenly twisted his head in the direction of the speaker's stand. She followed his gaze. Her father had stopped speaking and was walking down the stairs, wading into the crowd toward the policemen, who stood frozen, watching.

Liz started to call to him, to acknowledge him, to let him rescue her. To cry out the word, Daddy. But there were her friends, their wrists in handcuffs, watching her with puzzled frowns, waiting to see what she would do.

Liz looked straight at her father and began to sing in a low voice. "We shall overcome. We shall overcome." Then her friends joined in, louder and louder. "We shall overcome some day ay ay ay."

"Let 'em go," her father said to the policeman who was holding her wrists. "They're just kids. I don't want trouble from some college."

The tension broke. The fat cop let go of Liz. Her fellow students rubbed their wrists as the handcuffs came off. Roger Nolan squared his shoulders, marched back to the speaker's stand, and picked up the microphone.

"We're supposed to be at that private school," Liz said. "Let's get out of here." And to her relief they followed her.

§

What in the hell was Liz doing here? It wasn't easy to make these damn speeches, encouraging these rednecks to defy the Supreme Court and keep their schools closed. He hated it. Hated every minute of it. Surely she knew that. Knew he had no choice. If he wanted to be elected, these speeches were mandatory. And he wanted to be elected. He wanted to be a United States Senator. That was real power. But she was too naïve, this daughter of his, too full of misplaced idealism. She couldn't, or wouldn't, see that once he was a Senator, he could work behind the scenes, straighten Virginia out, get all the goddamn schools back open. Like he did with the library.

He'd been warming up his audience, watching the faces smile, watching the eyes follow him, watching the heads nodding at him. Then out of the corner of his eye, he'd seen some movement in the crowd, heard someone yelling. A disturbance. Police. It broke the rhythm of his speech. Made him stop, assess the damage. It was okay. He'd been here before; he knew the drill. Give 'em a gracious smile. A calm voice. Nod at the policemen to step aside.

Then, "Come on up to the platform, young man. Let me finish my speech and

then you can give yours.”

It had always worked before. Rabble rousers liked the comfortable anonymity of a crowd. They backed away from standing up front.

And then he'd seen her. Some cop pulling at her. No time to think. He'd had to rescue her.

But she'd rescued him. She'd looked right at him and started in on that singing. If she had called out to him, called his name, or let the police drag her off, he would have been lost. It would have been on the front page of every morning newspaper: Nolan Sides with Protesters against Farmville Police. Protects His Integrationist Daughter. His campaign would have been over. But she'd started singing, and in that split second he knew she didn't want to be rescued. She wanted to make a statement, poor misguided creature.

So he'd called off the stupid cops, then turned back to the podium and picked up his microphone.

“Looks like we have some folks who don't agree with us,” he said with a smile. “Well they have a right to their point of view. And we have a right to ours.”

The crowd cheered. They were with him.

“They don't have a right to disturb the peace, though.”

More cheers.

That did the trick. Liz and her crowd turned tail. Disappeared. Thank God.

He'd have time afterwards to square it with the police, who'd have questions. The Governor would take care of the press.

Meanwhile, Liz. What in God's name was she doing, running around the country with a bunch of trouble makers? He'd make sure it didn't happen again.

§

SENATOR RUNNING FOR OFFICE DENIES SON'S ACTIVISM

State Senator Roger Nolan put to rest on Thursday rumors that his son Bryce had been involved in the integrationist movement before his tragic death in 1957. A reporter for the Washington Post raised the question during a speech Mr. Nolan was giving in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of his campaign for the U. S. Senate.

“Wasn't your son a member of the “Integrate the Schools” movement while he was at Harvard?” the reporter asked.

“My family is off limits,” Mr. Nolan politely replied.

“Not if your family opposes your views on integration,” the reporter persisted.

“My son Bryce died three years ago in a tragic automobile accident,” the Senator said, “and I refuse to answer any questions about him or any of my family.”

“Senator Nolan, I have right here a document signed by a Bryce Nolan of Harvard University stating his opposition to segregated schools.”

“I don't know what you have, and I don't care,” the Senator replied, his voice rising in anger. “My son Bryce signed no such document. He was just eighteen years old when he was killed. A young boy,

immature. "He didn't know his own mind. He was behind in school and too busy catching up to be involved in politics."

The reporter, however, would not be silenced. "So you deny your son's involvement in the integrationist movement?"

"Yes I do," the Senator stated.

The day before in Farmville, Virginia, out-of-state student agitators raised their fists and booed Senator Nolan, in an attempt to disrupt a campaign speech. As the local police closed in to disperse the students, the Senator waded bravely into the crowd and calmed the students, who departed peacefully. After the disruption, Mr. Nolan returned to the podium to give a rousing speech in support of massive resistance.

§

"You seen the paper?" Jess handed Florene the morning edition of the Maple Hills Dispatch.

"I seen it."

"I told you."

"Told me what?"

"He's a racist."

Florene sat down heavily on the wooden bench and stared out the window, the newspaper in her lap.

"He's lost," she said. "He's a good man. I got evidence for that. But he's lost."



wood duck, Madison, WI