

The Chili Incident

From *Warriors Don't Cry* by Melba Pattillo Beals

On Tuesday, December 17, when we had one more day to go before vacation, five of us entered the cafeteria. Lunchtime was always a hazard, and recently even more so. I had been avoiding the cafeteria, eating my sandwich alone in any safe place I could find. The cafeteria was such a huge place, with so many of our attackers gathered at one time. There were no official-looking adults or uniformed Arkansas National Guardsmen inside. Without fail, we knew we could expect some form of harassment.

As always on Tuesday the hot lunch was chili, which Minnijean loved. So while I took my seat with the others, she got in line to buy her chili. Ernie emerged from the line ahead of her and sat down at our table. As Minnijean made her way back toward us, her tray loaded down with a big bowl of chili, we saw her hesitate. She had to inch her way through a tight spot where mostly boys sat at tables on either side of her path. She had stopped dead in her tracks. We all froze, realizing she must be in trouble. We could see two boys near her—one directly in her path. Something awful was happening, but there was no way any of us could do anything to rescue her. We had been instructed that, in such instances, we were never to move toward the person in danger for fear of starting a riot.

I was panic-stricken. Minnijean was being hassled by those boys. Snickering among themselves and taunting her, they had pushed a chair directly in front of her. For a long moment, she stood there patiently, holding her tray high above their heads.

It was all I could do to hold on to my chair and not go to help her. Like a broken record, the words played over and over in my head—intervening on her behalf would blur the lines between who was the victim and who was the person at fault. If other white students joined the melee to rescue the other side, we'd have a brawl. They outnumbered us at least two hundred-to-one. Still, I wanted to go to her, move the chair, take her tray, tell her to back up and go another way, do something, anything.

Frantically I looked around to see if there were any adults nearby who could be trusted to help...It was as though she was in a trance, fighting within herself.

—and then her tray went flying, spilling chili all over two of the boys.

Everyone was stunned, silent for a long moment. Her attackers sat with astonished looks on their faces as greasy chili dropped down over their heads. All at once, our people who were serving food behind the counter began to applaud. This was greeted by an ominous silence and then loud voices, all chattering at once, as the chili-covered boys stood up. I wonder whether we'd ever get out of there alive. Suddenly a school official showed up, and Minnijean was whisked away, while we were hustled out of the cafeteria.

Jane Emery Reading

Jane Emery was a white student at Central High. She was the co-editor of *The Tiger*, the school paper. In a 1999 interview, she recalled a choice she made at the end of the school year:

Toward the end of the year, graduation, Mrs. Huckaby [the vice principal of girls at Central High School] called five of us into her room...and she said...[during graduation] one of the five of us would be walking with Ernest Green. And so we could decide what we wanted to do, and Ernest understood if we were uncomfortable...

There were five of us brought in...And I was the middle person, so of the five people, I would be the one, and so since they didn't know who was going to be absent, they would call five of us. And I didn't realize that I was going to be it. And I said, "I have no problem, I'll walk with him," and I really thought that was silly. And I didn't think anything about it.

[Then] we started getting obscene phone calls [at] my home. My mother really got scared. I mean things like..."Are you a [N-Word] lover, are you going to walk with him? You want your daughter to marry a [N-Word]?" And it went on 'til late at night, and my mother took the phone off the hook, but she was absolutely scared to death, you know like the house was going to be blown up...I was angry at the [whites] who did that, who really angered me. So, that just made me more determined that I was going to walk with him. And I walked with him, that was the first I ever talked to him.

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I Had Cracked the Wall

Ernest Green on his graduation

Graduation was the end of May. I had been there nine months and had thought that all I needed to do was graduate, just to get out of there, so that it would be impossible for white people to say that nobody black had ever graduated from Central High School. I was having difficulty with one course, it was a physics course, and almost up to the last minute I didn't know whether I was going to complete it successfully so that I would get out of there. But as things were, I got a fairly decent grade out of it.

The interesting thing about graduation was, being the only senior, I'd given up all the graduation activity that had gone on in the black high school—the school play and the prom and all of those kinds of things. Sometimes because of not having that activity, I would really feel isolated because I wasn't going to be at Central High School's prom, and I wasn't going to be invited to be in the school play at Central. But all of the black students at Horace Mann, which was the school I would have graduated from, invited me to all the activities, included me in all of it, really made me feel a super part of it. So I had the best of both worlds. I had cracked this white institution and still had all of my friends who were super-supportive of what I was trying to do.

At the graduation ceremony, one of the guests was Martin Luther King. He was speaking in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, at the black college there. And he came up to sit with my mother and Mrs. Bates and a couple of other friends in the audience. I figured all I had to do was walk across that big huge stage, which looked the length of a football field. I'm sure it was very small, but that night before I had to walk up and receive my diploma, it looked very imposing. I kept telling myself I just can't trip, with all those cameras watching me. But I knew that once I got as far as that principal and received that diploma, that I had cracked the wall.

There were a lot of claps for the students. They talked about who had received scholarships, who was an honor student, and all that as they called the names off. When they called my name there was nothing, just the name, and there was this eerie silence. Nobody clapped. But I figured they didn't have to. Because after I got that diploma, that was it. I had accomplished what I had come there for.

Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, Voices of Freedom
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