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Lies We Tell Ourselves

Written by Robin Talley

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LIES WE TELL OURSELVES

ROBIN TALLEY



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May your courage resonate with every generation

part 1

Rock of Ages

Sarah

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.

What if one of them starts crying? If the white people see

us in tears, they'll laugh. They'll think they've beaten us before we've begun. We have to look strong.

I close my eyes, take a long breath and recite in my clearest voice. *"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want."*

Ruth joins in. *"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters."*

Then, all ten of us, in the same breath. *"He restoreth my soul."*

Some of them have spotted us from across the street. The white boys at the front of the crowd are pushing past each other to get the first look at us.

Police officers line the school's sidewalks in front of the boys. They're watching us, too.

I don't bother looking back at them. The police aren't here to help us. Their shiny badges are all that's stopping them from yelling with the other white people. For all we know they trade in those badges for white sheets at night.

Then reporters are running toward us. A flashbulb goes off in my face. The heat singes my eyes. All I see is bright white pain.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

I want to reach for Ruth, but my hands are shaking. It's all I can do to hold on to my books.

"Are you afraid?" a reporter shouts, shoving a microphone at my chin. "If you succeed, you'll be the first Negroes to set foot in a white school in this state. What do you think will happen once you get inside?"

I step around him. Ruth is holding her head high. I lift mine, too.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

We're almost at the parking lot now. We can hear the shouts.

"Here come the niggers!" yells a boy on the steps. "The niggers are coming!"

The rest of the crowd takes up his chant, as if they rehearsed it. "The niggers! The niggers! The niggers!"

I try to take Ruth's hand. She shakes me away, but her shoulders are quivering.

I wish she wasn't here with us. I wish she didn't have to do this.

I wish I didn't have to do this.

I think about what the white reporter said. *If you succeed...*

And if we don't?

"It will be all right," I tell Ruth.

But my words are drowned out in the shouting.

"Mau maus!"

"Tar babies!"

"Coons!"

And "nigger." Over and over.

"Nigger! Nigger! Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!"

I've never been called a nigger in my life. Not until today.

We step over the curb. The white people jostle us, bumping up against us, trying to shove us back. We keep pushing forward, slowly, but it's hard. The crowd isn't moving, so we have to slide between them. Ennis and Chuck go in front, clearing a path, ignoring the elbows to their sides and shoves at their chests.

I want to put Ruth behind me, but then I couldn't see her, and what if we got separated? What would I tell Mama and Daddy?

I grab her arm too tight, my fingers digging in. Ruth doesn't complain. She leans in closer to me.

"Go back to Africa!" someone shouts by my ear. "We don't want niggers in our school!"

Just walk. Get inside. Get Ruth inside. When the reporters go away everyone will calm down. If we can get through this part it will be all right.

My cup runneth over.

Ruth's arm jerks away from me. I almost fall, my legs swaying dangerously under me, but I catch myself before I collapse.

I turn toward Ruth, or where she should be. Three older boys, their backs to me, are standing around my little sister, towering over her. One of them steps close to her. Too close. He knocks the books out of her arms, into the dirt.

I lunge toward them, but Ennis is faster. He dodges through a gap between the boys—he doesn't shove them; we're not allowed to touch any of them, no matter what they do to us—and pulls Ruth back toward me, leaving her books where they fell. He nods at me in a way that almost makes me believe he's got everything under control.

He doesn't. He can't. If the boys do anything to him, Ennis doesn't stand a chance, not with three against one. But they let him go, snarling, "We're gonna make your life Hell, black boy."

Ruth's still holding her chin high, but she's shaking harder than ever. I wrap my hand back around her arm. My knuckles go pale. I swallow. Once, twice, three times. Enough to keep my eyes steady and my cheeks dry.

"What about my books?" Ruth asks me.

"We'll get you new books." The blood is rushing in my ears. I remember I should've thanked Ennis. I look for him, but he's surrounded by another group of white boys.

I can't help him. I can't stop walking.

Two girls, their faces all twisted up, start a new chant. *"Two, four, six, eight! We don't want to integrate!"*

Others join in. The whole world is a sea of angry white faces and bright white flashbulbs. *"Two, four, six, eight! We don't want to—"*

"Is the NAACP paying you to go to school here?" a reporter shouts. "Why are you doing this?"

A girl pushes past the reporter to yell in my ear. Her voice is so shrill I'm sure my eardrum will burst. "Niggers go home! Dirty niggers go home!"

Ennis is back in front, pushing through the crowd with Chuck. Ennis is very tall, so he's easy to spot. People always ask if he

plays basketball. He hates it because he's terrible at basketball. He's the best player on the football and baseball teams, though.

He was at our old school, anyway. That's all done now that he's coming to Jefferson. No sports for the boys, no choir for me, no cheerleading for Ruth. No dances or plays for any of us. No extracurriculars, that's what Mrs. Mullins said, not this year.

Something flies through the air toward Ennis. I shout for him to duck, but I'm too late. Whatever it is bounces off his head. Ennis keeps moving like he didn't even feel it.

I look for the police. They're standing on the curb, watching us. One sees me looking and points toward the main entrance. Telling me to keep moving.

He's looking right at us. He must have seen Ennis get hit.

He doesn't care. None of them do.

I bet they'd care if we threw things back.

"Nigger!" The girl is still shrieking at me. "Nigger! Nigger! You're nothing but a filthy, stinking nigger!"

We're almost there. The door is only a few yards away, but the crowd of white people in front of it is too thick. And the shouts are getting louder.

We'll never make it. We were stupid to think this could ever work.

I wonder if they knew that. The police. The judge. Mrs. Mullins. Daddy. Mama. Did they think we'd even get this far? Did they think this was enough?

Maybe next year. Maybe the year after that. Someday, they'll let us through, but not today.

Please, God, let this be over.

Someone shrieks behind me. I glance back.

Yvonne is clutching her neck. I can't tell if she's bleeding.

"Yvonne!" Ruth tries to turn back, but I hold her arm. We can worry about Yvonne later.

"Nigger!" The white girl at my shoulder is so close I can feel her hot breath on my face. "Coon digger! Stinking nigger!"

"Oh!" Ruth stumbles. I reach to catch her before she falls, but she finds her footing quickly. She's wiping something off her face.

The boy who spat on her is grinning. I want to hit him, hard, shove him back into the group of boys behind him. See how he likes it when he's not the one with the power.

Instead I keep walking, propelling my sister forward. We're inching closer to the doors.

We're not so far now. Maybe we can get inside. Inside, it will be better.

"You know you ain't going in there, nigger!" the girl screeches in my ear. "You turn around and go home if you know what's good for you! We don't want no niggers in our school!"

Ennis and Chuck are on the steps, almost at the front entrance. The doors are propped open. Behind them more white students are yelling and jostling. Two boys in letterman's sweaters have their fists raised.

We just have to get past them. Inside the school, the teachers will keep everyone under control. The people who are shouting will start acting like regular people again. The entire school can't be made up of monsters.

Chuck and Ennis have stopped to wait for the others to catch up. Ruth and I are right behind them, so we stop, too.

Now that we're not moving, the crowd around us gets even thicker. The shouts get louder. The girl who's been following me has been joined by two of her friends.

"Who's that other nigger girl, huh?" she yells. "Is that your baby sister? Your tar baby sister?"

The girls screech in laughter. Ruth looks straight ahead, but her chin isn't quite as high anymore.

I want to take Daddy's pocketknife and slice the white girl's tongue in two.

"Keep the niggers out!" A group of boys chants in the doorway. "Stop the niggers! Don't let the niggers in!"

But they have to let us in. This is Virginia, not Mississippi. They'll let us in, and they'll see that having us here doesn't make any difference. Then things will settle down.

That's what Daddy said. And Mama. And Mrs. Mullins, and Mr. Stern, and everyone else at the NAACP. It'll be hard at first, but then things will go back to normal. We'll just be going to school. A better school, with solid windows and real lab equipment and a choir that travels all over the state.

Everything will be easier when we get inside that big brick building.

I turn toward the police. They'll make sure we get inside. That's their job, isn't it? To enforce the court ruling?

But the police are so far away, and the crowd is so thick. I can't see them anymore.

We're together now, all ten of us, surrounded by hundreds of white people who are shouting louder than ever. Chuck and Ennis press forward, and the rest of us follow. We're so tightly packed I can smell the detergent Ennis's mother used on his pressed white shirt. It's the same kind my mother uses. I try to imagine I'm back at home on laundry day, helping Mama hang sheets on the line. My little brother playing by the porch steps. Ruth turning cartwheels in the yard while Mama calls for her to go inside and finish her homework.

"It's gonna be open season on coons when y'all get inside," a boy shouts behind me. "Just you wait."

Ennis pushes past the boys blocking the doors. Ruth and I stumble after him.

We're inside.

It's done. We did it. We're in the school.

But the white people are still staring at us. Shouting at us.

They're all around me. And they still look hungry.

Someone shoves into my right side. From behind, someone else's elbow juts into my lower back. Another tall boy with blond

hair is right in front of me. All I can see is the thick white wool of his letterman's sweater.

Someone pushes into me from behind. My face is crushed against the blond boy's sweater, but he doesn't move. I can't breathe.

"Hey!" I hear Ennis shout, but he sounds far away. I don't know where Ruth is. My chest feels too tight.

Someone is ramming me hard from the left, but I can't move. There are too many white people. There's nowhere to go.

I can't do this. I can't stay here. I can't breathe.

A tight grip closes around my right arm above the elbow, cutting off my circulation. Fingers dig into my flesh. They're going to drag me out of here.

I've just made it through, and already it's all going to be over. But I don't care, because all I want is to breathe again.

The hand on my arm tugs harder, pulling me through the thick knot of people. This is it. They're going to take me away. I don't know what they'll do to me, and I don't care, because I just want to breathe. I just want this to be over.

That's when the screaming starts.