

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT FROM 1954 TO 1968

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LIZARD PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *CARRY ME HOME* - FOREWORD BY REVEREND FRED SHUTTLESWORTH

To my daughters, Kim and Kaiti - MOM

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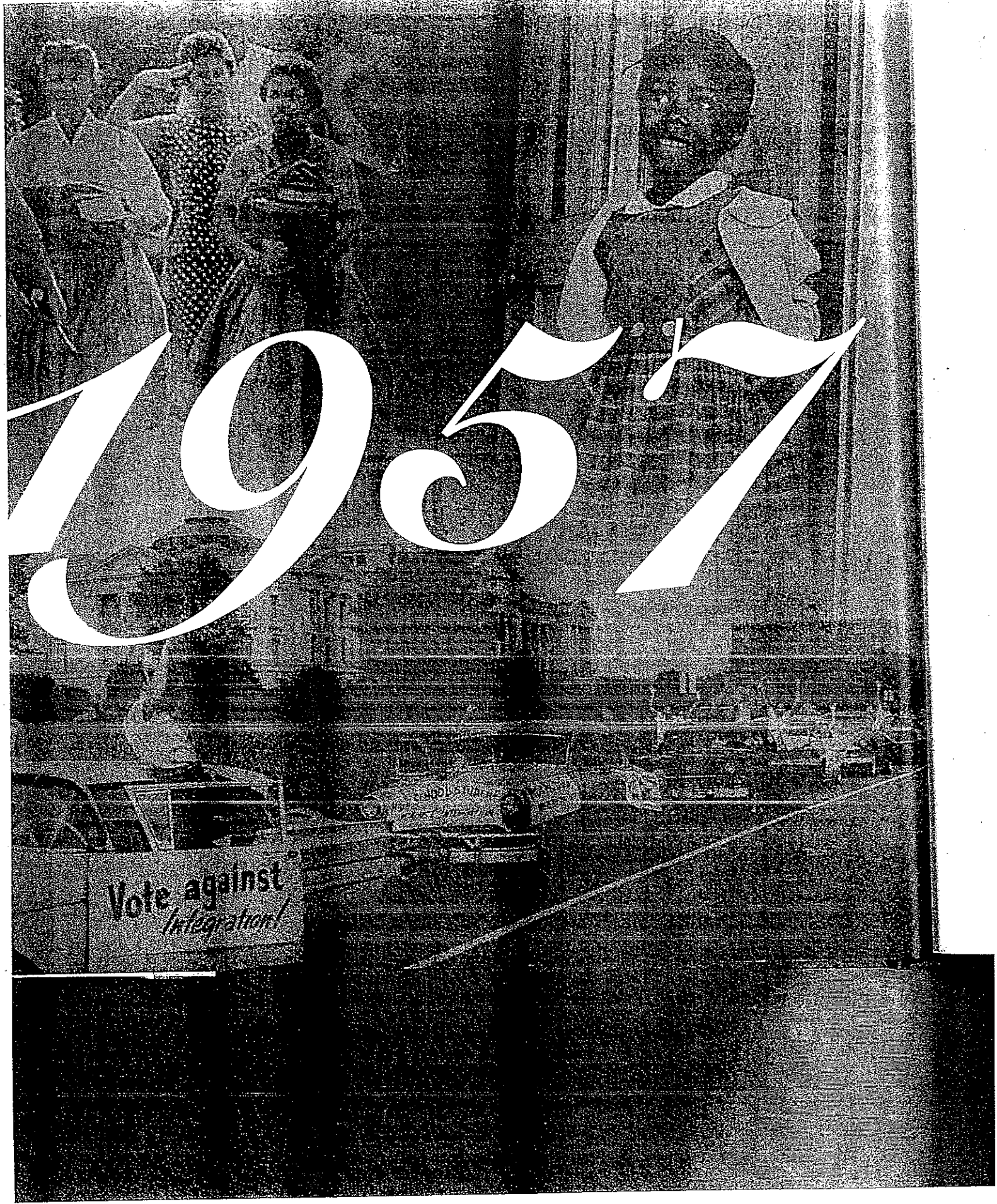
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1957

LITTLE ROCK

"Smile, no matter what. Remember, not everyone approved of what Jesus did, but that didn't stop him."

—Lois Pattillo to her 15-year-old daughter, Melba, September 8, 1957

With her mother's help, Elizabeth Eckford made a beautiful dress for her first day at a new high school in Little Rock, Arkansas. She could not have known when she put it on the morning of September 4, 1957, that she would wear it throughout history in one of the most famous pictures of the civil rights era. The photograph shows the black teenager, whose fear and determination can be read behind her dark glasses, being hounded by a mob of equally well-dressed



Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine

white girls and white mothers, their faces twisted with hatred.

Elizabeth had gotten separated that morning from the rest of the Little Rock Nine, six teenage girls and three boys who were the first black students to attend the Arkansas capital's Central High School. She had not been alerted to the students' group plan

because her family did not have a telephone.

The night before, Elizabeth had read her bible, taking comfort from the 27th Psalm: "The

Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" Still, her knees shook as she made her lonely way past the jeering crowd down "the longest block I ever walked in my whole life." A kind-looking old woman spat in her face.

Elizabeth made it to the school entrance. There, she was blocked by uniformed National Guardsmen with bayonets. (The National Guard is an army under the control of the state that is called up in emergencies.) White spectators screamed, "Lynch her, lynch her!" One white woman, Grace Lorch, the wife of a teacher at a local black college, came to Elizabeth's rescue, accompanying her home on a city bus.

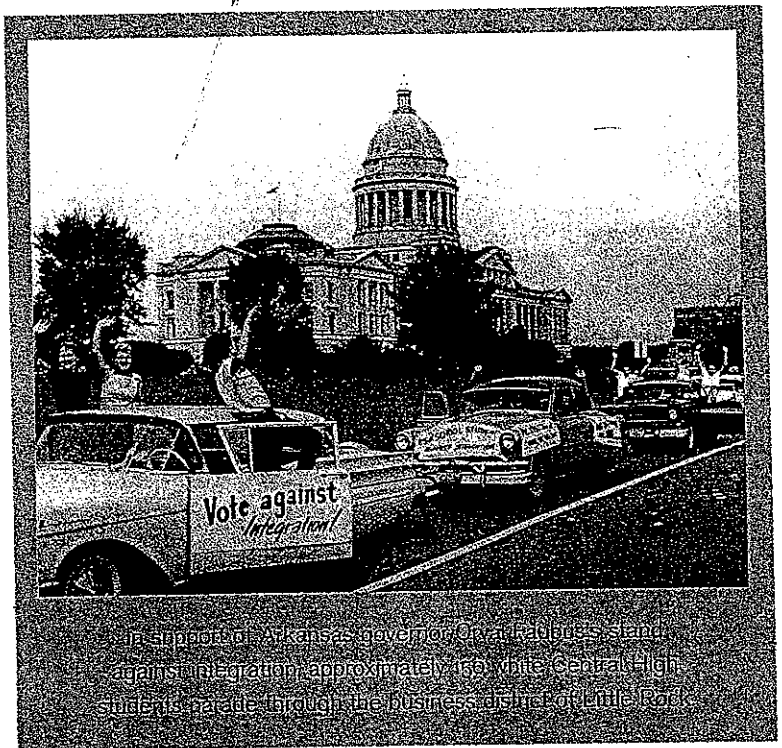
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AUTHERINE LUCY'S REVENGE

This was a remarkable scene from many angles. Little Rock, proud of its reputation for racial harmony, had been the first southern city to announce its willingness to obey the Brown decision. Arkansas's governor, Orval Faubus, had been considered a political friend of blacks. Yet it was he who called out the National Guard against the Little Rock Nine. What may have prompted Faubus's rash racist stand was his concern

that he would not be reelected because of his previous racially progressive positions.

This was said to be the first time since the Civil War that a state had militarily blocked the will of the federal government. Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP lawyers involved in the case made the connection between this crisis and the Autherine Lucy case the previous year. They believed Faubus's defiance had been invited by President Dwight D. Eisenhower's failure to pro-



In support of Arkansas governor Orval Faubus's stand against integration, approximately 400 white Central High students parade through the business district of Little Rock.

tect Lucy at the University of Alabama (as well as his failure to hide his general displeasure with the *Brown* decision).

Neither Elizabeth Eckford nor the eight other black students got past the National Guard and the rabid adults that day, or for the next two and a half weeks. Their second attempt to enter Central High, on September 23, set off a white riot. The next day, President Eisenhower did what he had failed to do for Autherine Lucy: He sent in the riot-equipped 101st Airborne division of the United States Army, soldiers wearing the uniforms of war to take nine kids to school in an American city. Daisy Bates, a local newspaper editor, the head of the state NAACP, and a mother hen to the Little Rock Nine, walked onto her lawn, looked up to the sky, and saw the troops being flown in. "I heard the deep drone of big planes," she said, "and it sounded like music to my ears."

TORTURE CHAMBER

On September 25, the Little Rock Nine were carried to school in Army jeeps equipped with machine guns; helicopters chopped the sky overhead. At first, having paratroopers as their personal guards made the teenagers feel that democ-

racy was working. ("Oh, look at them, they're so—so soldierly!" said Minniejean Brown, one of the students.) But that feeling didn't last.

Central High soon became what another student, Melba Pattillo, called "a hellish torture chamber." For the rest of the school year, the Little Rock Nine were called "nigger," threatened with dynamite or acid (squirted from toy guns), bombarded with firecrackers, slammed into lockers, and pushed down stairs. They occasionally cried, considered quitting, or verged on nervous breakdowns. "I wish I were dead," Melba wrote in her diary. Minniejean Brown, a target of particular meanness because she wanted to sing in the school chorus, finally called a girl who cursed her "white trash." Minniejean was expelled and was welcomed by a high school in New York. Printed cards began to appear around Little Rock: ONE DOWN ... EIGHT TO GO.

All eight black teenagers made it to the end of the year. When Ernest Green, the only senior among them, rose to receive his diploma at a graduation ceremony attended by police officers, soldiers, Daisy Bates, and Martin Luther King Jr. he was greeted with dead silence. It was an improvement, at least, over the slurs Green had heard throughout the school year.



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Melba Pattillo, to the right of the soldier, desegregated Central High not because she was a crusader but because the school had "five floors of opportunities." Later she would say of her ordeal, "The only way I could get up those stairs was to say the Lord's Prayer repeatedly."

AFTERMATH

Civil rights milestones, like the desegregation of Central High School, often have the immediate effect of worsening the conditions they were intended to remedy. The fall after the crisis, the public schools did not open in Little Rock. They remained closed for the entire 1958–1959 school year. Children who could not afford private school or arrange to attend schools outside the city, including the seven remaining teens of the Little Rock Nine, lost a year of education. In the mean-

time, Governor Faubus was reelected by a landslide. A national poll selected him one of the ten most admired men in America.

For the remainder of the 1950s, the civil rights movement born with the Montgomery bus boycott searched in vain for a follow-up to that marvelous beginning. Black advances had only made the segregationists meaner. In Montgomery, the city government closed down all the public parks

in defiance of a court order to desegregate them. Over in Mississippi, the White Citizens Councils practically ran the state government.

But even experiences that seem thankless at the time end up as landmarks of human progress. The Little Rock Nine are remembered as trail-blazing heroes. For all their suffering, before and during the crisis at Central High, they went on to lead remarkably productive and successful lives. Melba Pattillo became a reporter for NBC News.

Ernest Green was an assistant secretary of labor under President Jimmy Carter. Another of the young men, Terrence Roberts, received his Ph.D. and taught at the University of California at Los

Angeles. All are celebrated in Little Rock, though Elizabeth Eckford, a social worker, is the only one who made that city her home.

RUBY BRIDGES: LITTLEST SOLDIER

On November 14, 1960, in New Orleans, Louisiana, Ruby Bridges became one of the first black children to desegregate a white elementary school in the Deep South. Holding her mother's hand, six-year-old Ruby walked past a screaming mob of white people displaying a coffin that held a black doll. One of the four federal marshals escorting her was impressed: "She just marched along like a little soldier." The whites boycotted the school all year, with only a couple of white boys eventually coming back. Ruby did not realize that she was the cause of the commotion until one of the white boys told her, "My mom said not to play with you because you're a nigger."



Ruby Bridges

For months, Ruby walked past angry white crowds on her way to school, praying, "Please God, try to forgive these people." One woman addressed her in a high-pitched voice every day, "We're going to poison you until you choke to death." Ruby stopped eating everything but individually wrapped food items.

Ruby's teacher (a white Bostonian) welcomed her every morning with a hug. The following year, the white kids came back. Bridges's nieces attended the school more than 30 years later: Like many of America's urban schools the one she had so painfully integrated had been re-segregated. The whole student body was now black.