

## SHORT STORY

### *The dust is still there...*

*Beth Rowell McGinnis*

WHEN I MET THUMBELLINA, Mama was scared. We drove up to the yellow stucco building in our yellow Chevy van in the light-colored dust and got out. Mama looked brave, but she clung to me as she said, "Have a good day, baby."

Then Thumbellina danced up to us. She was pitch black except for a wide white smile in the middle of her face and the bright-colored ribbons on her braids, and she grinned at Mama and took my hand.

Years later Mama said leaving me that day was the hardest thing she ever had to do.

Inside the building it seemed just as dusty as it was outside. The dust was the soul of that place. You could smell it and feel it even when they had cleaned, which they did every day.

Thumbellina knew everybody, and it didn't take me long, and their faces weren't all like hers. Laverne had skin as black as her hair and defense in her eyes. Felicia was golden brown and round, and when she sat in the red plastic seat of the desk it would begin to crack down the middle, and people laughed about it but still accepted her. Clarice was tall and shy, and her birthday was the same day

as mine, just a year earlier. Mrs. Jones was there, too, with her black wavy hair knotted gracefully behind her gentle head. Every year after that when we made straight "A's" she used to give us each a silver dollar. I saved all mine.

Mrs. Jones taught us about the multiplication table and the solar system and how to spell Wednesday. (Nobody in the class, not even Kenneth, knew that on the first day.) We had an ant farm that was connected to the window so the ants could go out into the dusty playground and gather food. We watched them and pretended they needed us to take care of them, but they really didn't.

Bryan and Paul and Kenneth were in my reading group, and we sat at the table nearest Mrs. Jones's desk and the ant farm. We finished the *Dinosaurs* book and even went on to *Tigers and Lions*.

One time Mrs. Jones went around the whole class and handed everyone a pair of scissors, then told us that nobody handed them back to her the right way. You had to point the blades towards yourself when you handed scissors to somebody so they wouldn't stab their hands trying to take them. You did a knife the same way.

Bryan and Paul were white, but there wasn't another white girl there, just me. I kissed Paul on the cheek one day because I loved him and that's what we did

---

BETH ROWELL MCGINNIS is a doctoral candidate in musicology at the University of North Carolina.

in our family when we wanted to say we loved each other, but Paul got angry. That's when I learned that there are lots of different kinds of love and that even though you might love somebody, you can't always kiss them if they aren't in your family. It didn't make much sense, but I didn't want to make Paul angry.

That's how we started growing up together. Once Bryan and Paul argued about who got to sit next to me at lunch, and Mrs. Jones came and suggested that I sit in the middle. Of course, I could've told them that was what to do, but it made me feel important when they argued over me. I had a Peanuts lunch box with comic strips on each side and we always read it together before we ate. Bryan had Spiderman and Paul had Star Wars because he liked space. He read books about it and built space stations with Lego, and sometimes Bryan and I would help when we came to his house to play.

We played baseball together, too. Bryan was always the best, and he had a tree house and was very ticklish. Both of them had blue eyes, but Paul's were the color most people think the ocean is with white streaks in them, and Bryan's were darker and squinted sometimes because he needed glasses. Bryan liked to read just like I did, and one time when I spent the night at his house because my parents were out of town I got sick and stayed home from school and read his copy of *A Wrinkle in Time* in one day.

The playground at school was wonderful. Thumbellina and I used to hunt fool's gold in the light-colored dust and swing upside down from the monkey bars. Then all the girls would make a circle under the only shade tree and we would clap hands and sing "Rockin' Robin" (tweet, tweet) and "Sophisticated Lady," and the dust would be all over our feet.

We had a secret hideout where the far end of the playground met the bushes. Mrs. Jones didn't like us to go there and

neither did any of the other teachers, but we always did. I was the queen and Kenneth was the king and Clarice was the beautiful princess, and sometimes I gave too many orders. Bryan and Paul would attack the castle using secret weapons and codes that only they understood.

One day Paul and I were swinging and he asked me what heaven was like, and I said it was probably whatever you wanted it to be. Paul wanted it to be space. His parents never let him go to church, though, not even with me. Every night when Mama gathered me and my sister and brother on our bed for prayers, I remembered to say "and please let Paul come to church." Later on I added "and please help his parents to let him."

We played together outside school, too. Felicia and Laverne and Thumbellina and I were in Brownies and Girl Scouts, and we had a baking contest and all their cakes were better than mine, but I didn't mind because theirs were beautiful and all I did was use baking soda instead of baking powder. It made my cake the color of a paper bag and made it fall. Felicia thought that was funny but I didn't really.

The only time we weren't friends was the day Cynthia called me a honky for no reason. I was surprised, and asked her if I had ever called her a nigger. She just looked at me. When I told Mama about it, Mama said that of course it was natural when somebody does something mean to you to wonder what you did to deserve it, but that I should love Cynthia anyway because she was a person God made and God loved her and I could never understand why she called me that, at least not then.

I got to where I could understand it better, though. I remember one morning before school when my parents told me that Bryan and Paul and I would most likely be the only ones there. We had a blast; it was fun having the school almost to ourselves. We had some class time, but we played a lot of checkers, too.

Our black friends were absent from school for a long time. The boycott happened because the man who was principal of the school when I first came there had to be fired because he was doing a bad job. While the school board was looking for a permanent replacement, they hired Mr. Steve Friday, who went to our church, as a temporary principal until they could find a new one. The only problem was that Mr. Friday was white. Felicia's daddy got everybody all worked up about it, and they boycotted school.

There were marches downtown with signs that said "Never on Friday" and signs that made sure everybody knew what percentage of the school was black (99-point-something) and that it was ridiculous not to have a black principal. Daddy always held my hand very strong when we went downtown.

I didn't know it then, but Daddy and Mama and Bryan's parents were taking turns staying outside the school just in case anything happened. Daddy told me later how bad he felt about putting me in such danger. Mama and Daddy told me what was going on, but I never knew how dangerous the situation really was. They knew that I could have been killed or hurt badly, but they didn't tell me because they also knew that I would be able to feel their fear without really understanding it and I would be terrified.

The deacons and the other members of the church kept offering to pay my way and my brother's and sister's to the private school, but Mama and Daddy said no. Most people didn't understand, and said things like "Any preacher who puts his children in that kind of school..." and "How can he leave them in that dangerous situation?" The church people had always wanted me to go to the private school, and had always made it hard for Mama and Daddy to keep me in the public one. I got a better education in the public school than my private school friends did, though; Mama and Daddy

would have sent me out of the county if it weren't so. They knew what was right and they showed me how to stand up for what I believed.

Daddy ate lunch with Mr. Friday most days, and Mr. Friday said one time that Daddy was the only person who always stuck with him through it. Daddy and Bryan's daddy went to a meeting at the black Baptist church and spoke to them, and they found out later that the police had had the church surrounded with a plainclothesman inside with a radio. Bryan's daddy was more scared than mine, but they were both brave.

The first few days of the boycott, Thumbellina came to school because her parents thought it was the right thing to do. I always liked her parents; her mama called her daddy Mr. Little, never anything else. We never knew his first name unless it was Sam. On Thumbellina's birthday one year we all ate cake and played with her dogs and danced in the front yard. We had to quit dancing before Mr. Little came home, though, because Mrs. Little wasn't sure if he would like it. Thumbellina's name was Hermania, after her grandfather. Anyway, she came to school until Felicia's daddy and his group started driving around the Little's house all night blowing their horns and making violent threats. Then she had to stay home to be safe.

Finally the school board found a black principal, and everyone came back. His name was Eddie Dawson and he always wore black suits with pink shirts, and visited the classrooms every day. On Christmas he would dress up as Santa Claus and give every child a toothbrush. His teeth were white when he laughed, which I thought was one reason he gave us toothbrushes, because he wanted our teeth to be white too.

Felicia and Laverne were still my friends, but sometimes I could see coldness in their eyes that hadn't been there before. The coldness isn't what I remem-

ber about them now, though. I remember braiding Thumbellina's thick black hair and her playing with mine; making a hardbound book about Jupiter with color pictures we did ourselves with Felicia; Darlene with her shiny curls and light skin; riding the hot dusty yellow school bus home; and playing checkers with Kenneth. Kenneth's name meant "handsome," and I always thought he was.

By the time we all graduated from high school, Bryan's family and mine had both moved and Mrs. Mason from fifth grade sent me a program from their graduation. They were all still there—Kenneth, Clarice, Felicia, Laverne, Thumbellina, and Darlene. Felicia and Laverne were valedictorian and salutatorian. I was proud of them, and I made a copy of the program and sent it to Bryan. It was still so easy to remember things that had happened ten years before, and I noticed in Mrs. Mason's letter her still-careful penmanship with the dots on all her commas.

I still have things they gave me on my birthdays—a hair brush, jewelry box,

and pizza cutter from Thumbellina, and some bracelets from Clarice. I never did figure out why Thumbellina gave me a pizza cutter, but it didn't matter because she gave me so much else that I do understand.

Thumbellina was my friend, and I was living in another town before my heart really knew that some people would not see her that way because her beautiful black skin would come between them. But the times Thumbellina's skin touched mine and the times we sang "Rockin' Robin" under the shade tree and the times we hung upside down on the monkey bars which was o.k. because we both had shorts on under our skirts—those are part of my life and part of who I am.

And Mama still says "Have a good day, baby" and Daddy still holds my hand very strong. And the yellow stucco building is still there with the dust, that dust you won't find anywhere else in the world except there, and the deacons in the church still send their children to the private school.