

The Legacy of Strength

“My baby be safe, be safe under their walls, be safe under their rage. Under your tinted glasses and my own glasses, I hope no one can see the fear transcribing our corpses. Walking head high, your white shirt and black skirt tight, I can see the determination on your face. One of the nine teenagers braving the system. One of the nine opening the way for our race. Their spittings landing on your clear ebony skin, their hatred screaming in your ears. Around they look at you with concern or curiosity? I can’t tell. Still, I wonder how they can’t see the beauty within you. One month ago I prayed. Yesterday night I prayed, today I pray.”

“Mom, look what I found! Did you know Grandma wrote this?”

The twelve-year-old Rosa Eckford stands up straight, holding a worn black box in her small hands. The edges are cracked, and faded paint decorates its surface. Inside, a collection of trinkets rests, but the attention is drawn to a photograph carefully placed on top. Time had turned the once-black-and-white image a muted amber contrasting with the black cursive handwriting of her grandmother on the back.

Her mother, Elizabeth, looks up from the couch and the moment her eyes catch the image she freezes and Rosa holds still.

“Where did you get that?” Her voice is sharp, edged with something deeper, something painful. Rosa points to the closet where she found the box.

“I was cleaning up Grandma’s old things like you told me to.” Rosa murmurs, her earlier excitement fading into uncertainty. “Is that you?”

Elizabeth takes the photo with trembling fingers and scans it quickly, her eyes moving left to right. Anger darkens her features.

There she was—fifteen years old, facing her demons and the whole earth, in fact. The earth that didn’t want anyone like her in its midst or even on its land. Sunglasses adorning her face to hide the fear and tears streaming down her cheeks, Elizabeth strides headlong towards the school. Her black skirt, white shirt and hairstyle could have made her seem like any of the others around her, if it weren’t for the color of her skin. A throng of people were shouting at her and she recalls her eardrums exploding with their insult.

On her face anger is replaced by a watery sheen.

“Mom... why were you crying? Where was this taken?” Rosa asks worried.

Elizabeth does not respond right away. Her gaze remains locked on the image, the memories flooding back with brutal clarity.

“Little Rock Central High School,” she says in a whisper.

“That was the white school, right?”

Elizabeth nod.

“Then... why were you there?”

Her mother shut her eyes briefly. Her hands fall to her lap and the photograph rests loosely between her fingers. She looks away as though the memories burned her.

“Enough questions for now, Rosa.”

Rosa hesitates, but the firmness in her mother’s tone leaves no room for protest. Slowly, she grabs the picture, turns away and retreats to her room.

That night, Elizabeth stands in the doorway of Rosa's bedroom. Wrapped up under the blankets, her daughter's small form is outlined by the glow of a light below.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Elizabeth asks gently.

Rosa stands up quickly holding the photograph in her hand. She shakes her head. “I was just thinking... you looked so sad in that picture.”

Elizabeth steps inside, sits down on the edge of the bed, and sighs deeply.

“I was.” She pauses, then continues. “I was fifteen. A little bit older than you but still just a kid. The thing is back then, kids like me were fighting to go to schools that didn’t want us. I was part of something called the Little Rock Nine. We were nine Black students chosen to integrate Little Rock Central High.”

Rosa blinks. “You were one of them?”

Elizabeth nod.

“We went to school that morning, trying to change the world for our people. But what greeted us was hate. The Arkansas National Guard blocked our path—not to protect us, but to keep us out. We weren’t allowed in. People yelled at us, spit at us. I tried to be brave.” Her voice faltered. “But I was scared. I ran from the crowd, tried to get to a bus stop. And when I sat down, I couldn’t stop crying and instead of leaving me, they stood around as if I was an animal.”

Rosa stares at her mother in stunned silence.

“I didn’t know. You never told me.”

Her mother smiles sadly.

“It is not how I wanted you to find out but some stories take time to tell. I spent years trying to bury the pain they caused us but it never went away. Neither did what it represented.” She reaches out and smooths Rosa’s hair back gently. “That pain made me stronger and a fighter. Just like your grandmother before me. That’s why we gave you her name. She stood tall even when the world tried to cut her down.”

Rosa looks at the photo again. “Can I keep it?”

Elizabeth hesitates.

“Only if you promise me something.”

“What?”

“Promise me you’ll tell the story one day. Even the parts that hurt.”

Rosa placed her hand over her mother’s. “I promise.”

Elizabeth kisses her forehead, tucks the blanket around her shoulders and places the photograph face up on the nightstand.

“If we have honestly acknowledged our painful but shared past, then we can have reconciliation.” — Elizabeth Eckford