

## Maisy

By Nikhita Claerhaout

Dear diary,

My name's Maisy, I'm six years old and this is about my life in Atlanta, Georgia.

1

I hadn't thought of them much before that day. By them I mean the coloured people or as my parents call 'em "negroes". But last Saturday was the time I found out more 'bout 'em. Ya see me and my father were walkin' down the streets, the red dust billowin' beneath our feet every time we took a step. That's when the coloured boy came. He was 'bout my age, shufflin' along the street, focusin' on his feet and walkin' with an older girl, I reckoned it was his sister. That's when he bumped into my pa who swivelled 'round and grabbed his shoulder tightly. The girl ran. The boy's vivid brown eyes were filled with fear and his hands were tremblin' violently. "S ... sorry s ... s ... sir" he whispered.

"Ya better be!" bellowed my dad and with that he took the boy's chin and slapped him 'cross the cheek. The boy fell to the ground and his eyes were brimmin' with tears. I looked back but my pa pulled my arm and dragged me away. That image of the boy on the street is still carved into my mind and I have not stopped thinkin' 'bout it since.

2

"Okay Maisy, ready for your first day of school?" My ma stroked my hair and walked me out the door. "Have a great time" she called after me. I got to the bus where the children were already sittin', chattin', pointin' and laughin'. I stepped on and walked along the aisle, finally deciding to sit on a seat near the back next to a boy 'round my age. As the last girl stepped on to the bus, the engine came to life and the bus lurched forward. I stared at the boy next to me; he was starin' out the window and I followed his gaze. There were several coloured people walking on the street. Maybe they missed the bus? But then surely the bus driver could have stopped for them? Suddenly the bus accelerated and I was pushed back into my seat. The coloured people on the street ran, but they weren't fast enough to avoid the blanket of red dust that covered them. I was shocked into silence but around me the boys and girls were burstin' with laughter. I looked at the boy next to me and he returned my look with bewilderment and shock of his own.

The school was massive, looming over me, millions of children waiting outside it. But as I looked 'round I realised somethin'. All those children were white. Every single one of them, white. I looked behind me; there was another building opposite in the distance. It was much smaller, which meant I could hardly see it. But it was there, a tiny dot in the distance. At that moment a teacher walked past. I tapped her on the shoulder, nervous. "What?" She looked irritated and tired but when she saw me she forced a smile.

"What's that building opposite?" I asked.

"Oh, that's the negro school"

The word echoed in my head, "negro". The same word my parents used for the coloured people.

3

As I walked in to the classroom, I saw the same boy I sat next to on the bus and decided to sit next to him again.

"Hello" I said, lookin' at him hopefully. He stared at me for a whole minute and then almost as if he decided I was friendly, he held out his hand and muttered a quiet "Hello" back. Now pleased with myself, I told him my name and he told me his name was Harry.

Then the teacher came in and we all stood up. She had a kind face and she smiled at us, not like the teacher outside, but a nicer smile, a real one. She told us to sit down and told us 'bout herself. Her name was Ms Harrison, she was thirty two and she had just moved from Washington where she had left her husband.

"Any questions? She asked, lookin' around the classroom.

"Why didn't your husband come?" a girl in the corner asked.

"Well ya see, my husband's black and while in Washington interracial marriage has been allowed before 1887, here there is still a law against it."

I nervously raised my hand after she had finished and almost immediately she turned to me and chose me.

"What's a negro school 'cause that's what the teacher outside said 'bout the school opposite?"

Ms Harrison looked quite taken aback at this question but then replied.

"Well this school and that other one are both segregated."

"What's segregation?" I piped up again.

"Well that's when you split people up just because they're different" she stared into space for a while as if she was recollectin' painful memories. Then suddenly rememberin' we were there she turned back to us and smiled. "Um ... sorry. You see some people believe that they are better than others because of the way they look. Years ago, white people made black people their slaves. Slavery in America was banned in 1865, but people still treat black people as inferior in this age of 1935 and I don't think that's right". She seemed almost lost in her words as she said this speech but as soon as the bell rang she snapped back and dismissed us for break. The rest of the day we did math and English but all I could think about was the words Ms Harrison had said to us at the beginnin' of the day.

4

When I got home I was exhausted. The same thing happened on the bus and again I did not laugh, partly because I was still slightly confused but also I remembered Ms Harrison's words and I felt sorry for the coloured people on the streets gettin' covered in red. Over supper, my ma and pa asked

me 'bout my day and I told them about everythin': math, English, the bus and what Ms Harrison had said. As I told them about her, my ma and pa looked shocked and confused.

"Go up to your room" my father said in a voice of anger.

"B ... but ... " I started.

"No Maisy, do as your father says, we need to have a private chat about this teacher of yours"

I ran upstairs frustrated and confused and jumped into my bed. I put my head on my pillow which was soon damp with my tears. I could hear my ma's and pa's angry shouts coming from downstairs and the slam of a door. I couldn't get to sleep and after about half an hour I heard my ma's footsteps comin' up the stairs and the door openin' to my room.

"You asleep?" she whispered into the darkness "sorry 'bout earlier, we got a bit carried away".

I turned towards her, "What's going to happen?"

"Well ya' father has gone to speak to ya' teacher about what she said" she replied.

And that was the last day I saw Ms Harrison at school. Over the next few weeks, I saw her a couple of times on the street but the second time she just looked at me, gave me her kind smile and walked away.

## 5

The next mornin' felt unusual. My ma and pa weren't themselves, all kind and smiling but a forced look like the one that the first teacher I met gave me. I'm sure it had somethin' to do with last night and Ms Harrison. My ma ushered me out the door and I went to the bus like yesterday but it wasn't there. I went back to my ma and told her and she put her head in her hands.

"Oh, I forgot, yesterday the school said the bus got damaged and broke down. Some people believe it was those negroes". Again that word but I decided not to mention it, "You're probably going to have to walk, sorry Maisy".

I nodded my head to show I understood and started for the door.

"Wait" my ma said, "I'll come with you".

You see my ma was a teacher at my school but only taught the big children. We walked out the door together. There were several white children around us walkin' to school as well, all moanin' and complainin' about having to walk. It didn't take long to get to the school but I was still quite tired after the walk. When we got there I looked back at that other school behind me. It was a long way away and the coloured people must have taken ages walkin' there. We had a new teacher, Ms Carter. She was nice but was nothin' compared to Ms Harrison. She ran around the classroom and spoke in a quickened voice like she was scared or in a rush. I walked home with my ma and the next morning walked back to school with her. This continued until Thursday, my ma's day off. I roughly knew the route by now and was quite confident walkin' by myself so that morning I set off in the direction of the school.

Everythin' was fine until I saw him. That little boy with the vivid brown eyes my father and I had seen On the street the week before. This time he was delivering papers.

"Hello" I said, unsure of what he would do.

"H ... hello" he replied, suddenly recognisin' me but lookin' uneasy.

"My name's Maisy, what's yours?" I tried to smile and look friendly. He seemed to relax and replied, "My name's Martin Luther- King Junior and I'm six years old" then, after thinking for a while, he said with a touch of anxiety in his voice "W ... what do you want to be when you grow up?"

I looked at him strangely; no one had ever asked me that. I thought for a while and finally deciding on followin' in my ma's footsteps, I replied "I want to be a teacher". Then figuring I should be polite I asked him the question back. He smiled as if this was what I was supposed to do and he immediately said "I want to be a fireman and I want to change the world" and looked up at the sky proudly. I laughed; this seemed a really strange choice.

"What do you want to change the world for?" I asked.

"For black people 'cause my ma says they're as good as anyone else but they're not treated the same. We're not allowed in the same schools and we're not allowed on the school bus. I want to change that".

I thought about this a while and nodded "I need to get to school now but I'll see you later Fireman Martin" and I waved goodbye. "Goodbye, Teacher Maisy", he called after me. I was about three-quarters down my route when I saw Ms Harrison.

"Hello, Ms Harrison".

"Hello, I'm sorry, Maisy, I don't know if I'm allowed to speak to you".

"Please, Ms Harrison".

"Okay, but just quickly."

I paused, thinking of a good question.

"What do you do now?"

"I'm still a teacher I just work at a school a bit further away. So what have you been up to today?" she said with a bright smile.

Eager to tell my story about Martin, I immediately replied, "I just saw a coloured person on the street and his name is Martin and he wanted to change the world so that black people would have the same rights as white people and ... "

"Maisy!" shouted Ms Harrison. "Slow down!" She sat down on the street and put her head in her hands. "Your pa made me realise somethin'. No matter what I believe in, I'm going to have to keep quiet. If this friend of yours wants to change the world and he's black I wish him luck

'cause I'm telling you it's not easy and he is goin' to have to go through a lot". With that she sG>od up, brushed Ole dusGof her skirGand walked away. I was goin' to be late for school now so I ran as fast as I could to the massive building where I had another day of boring lessons.

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I didn't see Martin for nearly thirty years but when I did, I realised Ms Harrison was wrong. He was makin' a speech 'bout his dreams, the same dreams he had told me years ago. He hadn't become a fireman but he had changed the world.