

Chapter Three

► *What new challenge to walking to school comes in October?*

By the end of October the rain had come, falling heavily upon the six-inch layer of dust which had had its own way for more than two months. At first the rain had merely splotted the dust, which seemed to be rejoicing in its own resiliency and laughing at the heavy drops thudding against it; but eventually the dust was forced to surrender to the mastery of the rain and it churned into a fine red mud that oozed between our toes and slopped against our ankles as we marched miserably to and from school.

To shield us from the rain, Mama issued us dried calfskins which we flung over our heads and shoulders like stiff cloaks. We were not very fond of the skins, for once they were wet they emitted a musty odor which seeped into our clothing and clung to our skins. We preferred to do without them; unfortunately, Mama cared very little about what we preferred.

Since we usually left for school after Mama, we solved this problem by dutifully cloaking ourselves with the skins before leaving home. As soon as we were beyond Big Ma's eagle eyes, we threw off the cloaks and depended upon the overhanging limbs of the forest trees to keep us dry. Once at school, we donned the cloaks again and marched into our respective classrooms properly attired.

► *Why is the bus even more of a hazard in the new conditions?*

If we had been faced only with the prospect of the rain, soaking through our clothing each morning and evening, we could have more easily endured the journey between home and school. But as it was, we also had to worry about the Jefferson Davis school bus zooming from behind and splashing us with the murky waters of the road. Knowing that the bus driver liked to entertain his passengers by sending us slipping along the road to the almost inaccessible forest banks washed to a smooth baldness by the constant rains, we continuously looked over our shoulders when we were between the two crossroads so that we could reach the bank before the bus was upon us. But sometimes the rain pounded so heavily that it was all we could do to stay upright, and we did not look back as often nor listen as carefully as we

Words
For
Everyday
Use

re • sil • ien • cy (ri zil'yən cē) *n.*, ability to recover from misfortune or change
churn (chərn) *vt.*, stir or agitate violently
e • mit (ē mit') *vt.*, give off

in • ac • ces • si • ble (in ik ses'ə bəl)
adj., not reachable or attainable

should; we consequently found ourselves comical objects to cruel eyes that gave no thought to our misery.

No one was more angered by this humiliation than Little Man. Although he had asked Mama after the first day of school why Jefferson Davis had two buses and Great Faith had none, he had never been totally satisfied by her answer. She had explained to him, as she had explained to Christopher-John the year before and to me two years before that, that the county did not provide buses for its black students. In fact, she said, the county provided very little and much of the money which supported the black schools came from the black churches. Great Faith Church just could not afford a bus, so therefore we had to walk.

This information cut deeply into Little Man's brain, and each day when he found his clean clothes splashed red by the school bus, he became more and more embittered until finally one day he stomped angrily into the kitchen and exploded, "They done it again, Big Ma! Just look at my clothes!"

Big Ma clucked her tongue as she surveyed us. "Well, go on and get out of 'em, honey, and wash 'em out. All of y'all, get out of them clothes and dry yo'selves," she said, turning back to the huge iron-bellied stove to stir her stew.

"But, Big Ma, it ain't fair!" wailed Little Man. "It just ain't fair."

Stacey and Christopher-John left to change into their work clothes, but Little Man sat on the side bench looking totally dejected as he gazed at his pale-blue pants crusted with mud from the knees down. Although each night Big Ma prepared a pot of hot soapy water for him to wash out his clothing, each day he arrived home looking as if his pants had not been washed in more than a month.

Big Ma was not one for coddling any of us, but now she turned from the stove and, wiping her hands on her long white apron, sat down on the bench and put her arm around Little Man. "Now, look here, baby, it ain't the end of the world. Lord, child, don't you know one day the sun'll shine again and you won't get muddy no more?"

"But, Big Ma," Little Man protested, "ifn that ole bus driver would slow down, I wouldn't get muddy!" Then he frowned deeply and added, "Or ifn we had a bus like theirs."

◀ *What explanation has Mama given each of her children about the bus?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

em • bit • tered (im bit'ərd) *adj.*, made cynical or distressed

de • ject • ed (di jek'təd) *adj.*, downcast

cod • dle (kă'dəl) *vt.*, pamper, treat with extreme care

► How does Big Ma suggest Little Man deal with the problem of the bus?

“Well, he don’t and you don’t,” Big Ma said, getting up. “So ain’t no use frettin’ ’bout it. One day you’ll have a plenty of clothes and maybe even a car of yo’ own to ride ’round in, so don’t you pay no mind to them ignorant white folks. You jus’ keep on studyin’ and get yo’self a good education and you’ll be all right. Now, go on and wash out yo’ clothes and hang ’em by the fire so’s I can iron ’em ’fore I go to bed.”

Turning, she spied me. “Cassie, what you want, girl? Go change into yo’ pants and hurry on back here so’s you can help me get this supper on the table time yo’ mama get home.”

That night when I was snug in the deep feathery bed beside Big Ma, the tat-tat of the rain against the tin roof changed to a deafening roar that sounded as if thousands of giant rocks were being hurled against the earth. By morning the heavy rain had become a drizzle, but the earth was badly sodden from the night’s downpour. High rivers of muddy water flowed in the deep gullies, and wide lakes shimmered on the roads.

As we set out for school the whiteness of the sun attempted to penetrate the storm clouds, but by the time we had turned north toward the second crossing it had given up, slinking meekly behind the blackening clouds. Soon the thunder rolled across the sky, and the rain fell like hail upon our bent heads.

“Ah, shoot! I sure am gettin’ tired of this mess,” complained T.J.

But no one else said a word. We were listening for the bus. Although we had left home earlier than usual to cover the northern road before the bus came, we were not overly confident that we would miss it, for we had tried this strategy before. Sometimes it worked; most times it didn’t. It was as if the bus were a living thing, plaguing and defeating us at every turn. We could not outwit it.

We plodded along feeling the cold mud against our feet, walking faster and faster to reach the crossroads. Then Christopher-John stopped. “Hey, y’all, I think I hear it,” he warned.

We looked around, but saw nothing.

“Ain’t nothin’ yet,” I said.

We walked on.

Words
For
Everyday
Use

sod • den (sôd’î)n *adj.*, waterlogged
plague (pläg) *vt.*, annoy or disturb persistently

“Wait a minute,” said Christopher-John, stopping a second time. “There it is again.”

We turned but still there was nothing.

“Why don’t you clean out your ears?” T.J. exclaimed.

“Wait,” said Stacey, “I think I hear it too.”

We hastened up the road to where the gully was narrower and we could easily swing up the bank into the forest.

Soon the purr of a motor came closer and Mr. Granger’s sleek silver Packard eased into view. It was a grand car with chrome shining even in the rain, and the only one like it in the county, so it was said.

We groaned. “Jus’ ole Harlan,” said T.J. flippantly as the expensive car rounded a curve and disappeared, then he and Claude started down the bank.

Stacey stopped them. “Long as we’re already up here, why don’t we wait awhile,” he suggested. “The bus oughta be here soon and it’ll be harder to get up on the bank further down the road.”

“Ah, man, that bus ain’t comin’ for a while yet,” said T.J. “We left early this mornin’, remember?”

Stacey looked to the south, thinking. Little Man, Christopher-John and I waited for his decision.

“Come on, man,” T.J. persuaded. “Why stay up here waitin’ for that devilish bus when we could be at school outa this mess?”

“Well . . .”

T.J. and Claude jumped from the bank. Then Stacey, frowning as if he were doing this against his better judgment, jumped down too. Little Man, Christopher-John, and I followed.

Five minutes later we were skidding like frightened puppies toward the bank again as the bus accelerated and barreled down the narrow rain-soaked road; but there was no place to which we could run, for Stacey had been right. Here the gullies were too wide, filled almost to overflowing, and there were no briars or bushes by which we could swing up onto the bank.

Finally, when the bus was less than fifty feet behind us, it veered dangerously close to the right edge of the road where we were running, forcing us to attempt the jump to the bank; but all of us fell short and landed in the slime of the gully.

◀ *What passes instead of the bus?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

flip • pant • ly (flipˈnt lē) *adv.*, without respect or seriousness

► *What do Cassie and the others hear as the bus passes?*

Little Man, chest-deep in water, scooped up a handful of mud and in an uncontrollable rage scrambled up to the road and ran after the retreating bus. As moronic rolls of laughter and cries of “Nigger! Nigger! Mud eater!” wafted from the open windows, Little Man threw his mudball, missing the wheels by several feet. Then, totally dismayed by what had happened, he buried his face in his hands and cried.

T.J. climbed from the gully grinning at Little Man, but Stacey, his face burning red beneath his dark skin, glared so fiercely at T.J. that he fell back. “Just one word outa you, T.J.,” he said tightly. “Just one word.”

Christopher-John and I looked at each other. We had never seen Stacey look like this, and neither had T.J.

“Hey, man, I ain’t said nothin’! I’m jus’ as burnt as you are.”

Stacey glowered at T.J. a moment longer, then walked swiftly to Little Man and put his long arm around his shoulders, saying softly, “Come on, Man. It ain’t gonna happen no more, least not for a long while. I promise you that.”

Again, Christopher-John and I looked questioningly at each other, wondering how Stacey could make such a rash promise. Then, shrugging, we hurried after him.

When Jeremy Simms spied us from his high perch on the forest path, he ran hastily down and joined us.

“Hey,” he said, his face lighting into a friendly grin. But no one spoke to him.

The smile faded and, noticing our mud-covered clothing, he asked, “Hey, St-Stacey, wh-what happened?”

Stacey turned, stared into his blue eyes and said coldly, “Why don’t you leave us alone? How come you always hangin’ ’round us anyway?”

Jeremy grew even more pale. “C-cause I just likes y’all,” he stammered. Then he whispered, “W-was it the bus again?”

No one answered him and he said no more. When we reached the crossroads, he looked hopefully at us as if we might relent and say good-bye. But we did not relent and as I glanced back at him standing alone in the middle of the crossing, he looked as if the world itself was slung around his neck. It was only then that I realized that Jeremy never rode the bus, no matter how bad the weather.

As we crossed the school lawn, Stacey beckoned

► *What promise does Stacey make?*

► *How does Stacey react toward Jeremy?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

mo • ron • ic (mə rən'ik) *adj.*, stupid
re • lent (ri lənt') *vt.*, give in, soften

Christopher-John, Little Man, and me aside. “Look,” he whispered, “meet me at the toolshed right at noon.”

“Why?” we asked.

He eyed us conspiratorily. “I’ll show y’all how we’re gonna stop that bus from splashing us.”

“How?” asked Little Man, eager for revenge.

“Don’t have time to explain now. Just meet me. And be on time. It’s gonna take us all lunch hour.”

“Y-you mean we ain’t gonna eat no lunch!”

Christopher-John cried in dismay.

“You can miss lunch for one day,” said Stacey, moving away. But Christopher-John looked sourly after him as if he greatly questioned the wisdom of a plan so drastic that it could exclude lunch.

“You gonna tell T.J. and Claude?” I asked.

Stacey shook his head. “T.J.’s my best friend, but he’s got no stomach for this kinda thing. He talks too much, and we couldn’t include Claude without T.J.”

“Good,” said Little Man.

At noon, we met as planned and ducked into the unlocked toolshed where all the church and school garden tools were kept. Stacey studied the tools available while the rest of us watched. Then, grabbing the only shovels, he handed one to me, holding on to the other himself, and directed Little Man and Christopher-John to each take two buckets.

Stealthily emerging from the toolshed into the drizzle, we eased along the forest edge behind the class buildings to avoid being seen. Once on the road, Stacey began to run. “Come on, hurry,” he ordered. “We ain’t got much time.”

“Where we going?” asked Christopher-John, still not quite adjusted to the prospect of missing lunch.

“Up to where that bus forced us off the road. Be careful now,” he said to Christopher-John, already puffing to keep up.

When we reached the place where we had fallen into the gully, Stacey halted. “All right,” he said, “start digging.” Without another word, he put his bare foot upon the top edge of the shovel and sank it deep into the soft road. “Come on, come on,” he ordered, glancing up at Christopher-John, Little Man and me, who were wondering whether he had finally gone mad.

◀ Why doesn't Stacey include T.J. and Claude in his plan?

Words
For
Everyday
Use

con • spir • a • tor • i • ly (kən spir'ə tōr ə lē) *adv.*, with a sense of plotting

stealth • i • ly (stelh'th ə lē) *adv.*, slowly and deliberately to avoid being noticed

► What must their work look like?

“Cassie, you start digging over there on that side of the road right across from me. That’s right, don’t get too near the edge. It’s gotta look like it’s been washed out. Christopher-John, you and Little Man start scooping out mud from the middle of the road. Quick now,” he said, still digging as we began to carry out his commands. “We only got ’bout thirty minutes so’s we can get back to school on time.”

We asked no more questions. While Stacey and I shoveled ragged holes almost a yard wide and a foot deep toward each other, dumping the excess mud into the water-filled gullies, Little Man and Christopher-John scooped bucketfuls of the red earth from the road’s center. And for once in his life, Little Man was happily oblivious to the mud spattering upon him.

► What plan does Cassie finally understand?

When Stacey’s and my holes merged into one big hole with Little Man’s and Christopher-John’s, Stacey and I threw down our shovels and grabbed the extra buckets. Then the four of us ran back and forth to the gullies, hastily filling the buckets with the murky water and dumping it into the hole.

Now understanding Stacey’s plan, we worked wordlessly until the water lay at the same level as the road. Then Stacey waded into the gully water and pulled himself up onto the forest bank. Finding three rocks, he stacked them to identify the spot.

“It might look different this afternoon,” he explained, jumping down again.

Christopher-John looked up at the sky. “Looks like it’s gonna rain real hard some more.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Stacey. “The more rain, the better. That’ll make it seem more likely that the road could’ve been washed away like that. It’ll also keep cars and wagons away.” He looked around, surveying the road. “And let’s hope don’t nothin’ come along ’fore that bus. Let’s go.”

Quickly we gathered our buckets and shovels and hurried back to school. After returning the tools to the toolshed, we stopped at the well to wash the mud from our arms and feet, then rushed into our classes, hoping that the mud caked on our clothes would go unnoticed. As I slipped into my seat Miss Crocker looked at me oddly and shook her head, but when she did the same thing as Mary Lou and Alma sat

Words
For
Everyday
Use

ob • liv • i • ous (əb lí'vē əs) *adj.*, lacking awareness
sur • vey (sər vā') *vt.*, examine as to condition, inspect

down, I decided that my mud was no more noticeable than anyone else's.

Soon after I had settled down to the boredom of Miss Crocker, the rain began to pound down again, hammering with great intensity upon the tin roof. After school it was still raining as the boys and I, avoiding T.J. and Claude, rushed along the slippery road recklessly bypassing more cautious students.

"You think we'll get there in time to see, Stacey?" I asked.

"We should. They stay in school fifteen minutes longer than we do and it always takes them a few minutes to load up."

When we reached the crossing, we glanced toward Jefferson Davis. The buses were there but the students had not been dismissed. We hastened on.

Expecting to see the yard-wide ditch we had dug at noon, we were not prepared for the twelve-foot lake which glimmered up at us.

"Holy smokes! What happened?" I exclaimed.

"The rain," said Stacey. "Quick, up on the bank." Eagerly, we settled onto the muddy forest floor and waited.

"Hey, Stacey," I said, "won't that big a puddle make that ole driver cautious?"

Stacey frowned, then said uncertainly, "I don't know. Hope not. There's big puddles down the road that ain't deep, just water heavy."

"If I was to be walking out there when the bus comes, that ole bus driver would be sure to speed up so's he could splash me," I suggested.

"Or maybe me," Little Man volunteered, ready to do anything for his revenge.

Stacey thought a moment, but decided against it. "Naw. It's better none of us be on the road when it happens. It might give 'em ideas."

"Stacey, what if they find out we done it?" asked Christopher-John nervously.

"Don't worry, they won't," assured Stacey.

"Hey, I think it's coming," whispered Little Man.

We flattened ourselves completely and peered through the low bushes.

The bus rattled up the road, though not as quickly as we

◀ *What has happened since lunchtime?*

◀ *What suggestion does Cassie make to increase the chances of success? Why does Stacey reject this idea?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

reck • less • ly (rek'ləs lē) *adv.*, carelessly

► *What happened as the bus started through the puddle?*

had hoped. It rolled cautiously through a wide puddle some twenty feet ahead; then, seeming to grow bolder as it approached our man-made lake, it speeded up, spraying the water in high sheets of backward waterfalls into the forest. We could hear the students squealing with delight. But instead of the graceful glide through the puddle that its occupants were expecting, the bus emitted a tremendous crack and careened drunkenly into our trap. For a moment it swayed and we held our breath, afraid that it would topple over. Then it sputtered a last murmuring protest and died, its left front wheel in our ditch, its right wheel in the gully, like a lopsided billy goat on its knees.

We covered our mouths and shook with silent laughter.

As the dismayed driver opened the rear emergency exit, the rain poured down upon him in sharp-needed darts. He stood in the doorway looking down with disbelief at his sunken charge; then, holding on to the bus, he poked one foot into the water until it was on solid ground before gingerly stepping down. He looked under the bus. He looked at the steaming hood. He looked at the water. Then he scratched his head and cursed.

“How bad is it, Mr. Grimes?” a large, freckle-faced boy asked, pushing up one of the cracked windows and sticking out his head. “Can we push it out and fix it?”

“Push it out? Fix it?” the bus driver echoed angrily. “I got me a broken axle here an’ a water-logged engine no doubt and no tellin’ what-all else and you talkin’ ‘bout fixin’ it! Y’all come on, get outa there! Y’all gonna have to walk home.”

“Mister Grimes,” a girl ventured, stepping hesitantly from the rear of the bus, “you gonna be able to pick us up in the mornin’?”

The bus driver stared at her in total disbelief. “Girl, all y’all gonna be walkin’ for at least two weeks by the time we get this thing hauled outa here and up to Strawberry to get fixed. Now y’all get on home.” He kicked a back tire, and added, “And get y’all’s daddies to come on up here and give me a hand with this thing.”

The students turned dismally from the bus. They didn’t know how wide the hole actually was. Some of them took a wild guess and tried to jump it; but most of them miscalculated and fell in, to our everlasting delight. Others attempted

► *How long with the students be walking?*

► *What adds to the delight of Cassie and her brothers?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

ca • reen (kə rēn´) vt., lurch, sway from side to side

to hop over the gullies to the forest to bypass the hole; however, we knew from much experience that they would not make it.

By the time most of the students managed to get to the other side of the ditch, their clothes were dripping with the weight of the muddy water. No longer laughing, they moved spiritlessly toward their homes while a disgruntled Mr. Grimes leaned moodily against the raised rear end of the bus.

Oh, how sweet was well-manuevered revenge!

With that thought in mind, we quietly eased away and picked our way through the dense forest toward home.

At supper Mama told Big Ma of the Jefferson Davis bus being stuck in the ditch. “It’s funny, you know, such a wide ditch in one day. I didn’t even notice the beginning of it this morning—did you, children?”

“No’m,” we chorused.

“You didn’t fall in, did you?”

“We jumped onto the bank when we thought the bus would be coming,” said Stacey truthfully.

“Well, good for you,” approved Mama. “If that bus hadn’t been there when I came along, I’d probably have fallen in myself.”

The boys and I looked at each other. We hadn’t thought about that.

“How’d you get across, Mama?” Stacey asked.

“Somebody decided to put a board across the washout.”

“They gonna haul that bus outa there tonight?” Big Ma inquired.

“No, ma’am,” said Mama. “I heard Mr. Granger telling Ted Grimes—the bus driver—that they won’t be able to get it out until after the rain stops and it dries up a bit. It’s just too muddy now.”

We put our hands to our mouths to hide happy grins. I even made a secret wish that it would rain until Christmas.

Mama smiled. “You know I’m glad no one was hurt—could’ve been too with such a deep ditch—but I’m also rather glad it happened.”

“Mary!” Big Ma exclaimed.

“Well, I am,” Mama said defiantly, smiling smugly to herself and looking very much like a young girl. “I really am.”

◀ *What information does Stacey share when questioned about the hole?*

◀ *Why does Cassie wish for it to rain until Christmas?*

◀ *How do Mama and Big Ma feel about what happened to the bus?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

dis • grunted (dis grunt’ld) *adj.*, ill-humored or discontented

de • fi • ant • ly (di fi ’ənt lē) *adv.*, boldly, in a challenging manner

smug • ly (smug’lē) *adv.*, in a highly self-satisfied way

Big Ma began to grin. “You know somethin’? I am too.”
Then all of us began to laugh and were deliciously happy.

Later that evening the boys and I sat at the study table in Mama and Papa’s room attempting to concentrate on our lessons; but none of us could succeed for more than a few minutes without letting out a triumphant giggle. More than once Mama scolded us, telling us to get down to business. Each time she did, we set our faces into looks of great seriousness, resolved that we would be adult about the matter and not gloat in our hour of victory. Yet just one glance at each other and we were lost, slumping on the table in helpless, contagious laughter.

“All right,” Mama said finally. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I suppose I’d better do something about it or you’ll never get any work done.”

It occurred to us that Mama might be preparing to whip us and we shot each other warning glances. But even that thought couldn’t dampen our laughter, now uncontrollable, welling up from the pits of our stomachs and forcing streams of laughter tears down our faces. Stacey, holding his sides, turned to the wall in an attempt to bring himself under control. Little Man put his head under the table. But Christopher-John and I just doubled up and fell upon the floor.

Mama took my arm and pulled me up. “Over here, Cassie,” she said, directing me to a chair next to the fireplace and behind Big Ma, who was ironing our clothes for the next day.

I peeped around Big Ma’s long skirts and saw Mama guiding Stacey to her own desk. Then back she went for Little Man and, picking him up bodily, set him in the chair beside her rocker. Christopher-John she left alone at the study table. Then she gathered all our study materials and brought them to us along with a look that said she would tolerate no more of this foolishness.

With Big Ma before me, I could see nothing else and I grew serious enough to complete my arithmetic assignment. When that was finished, I lingered before opening my reader, watching Big Ma as she hung up my ironed dress, then placed her heavy iron on a small pile of embers burn-

Words
For
Everyday
Use

re • solved (ri solvd´) *adv.*, to have reached a firm decision about something

tol • er • ate (tôl´ər āt) *vt.*, endure, put up with

lin • ger (lin´gər) *vt.*, delay; be slow about doing something

ing in a corner of the fireplace and picked up a second iron already warming there. She tested the iron with a tap of her finger and put it back again.

While Big Ma waited for the iron to get hot, I could see Mama bending over outspread newspapers scraping the dried mud off the old field shoes of Papa's which she wore daily, stuffed with wads of newspaper, over her own shoes to protect them from the mud and rain. Little Man beside her was deep into his first-grade reader, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. Ever since Mama had brought the reader home with the offensive inside cover no longer visible, Little Man had accepted the book as a necessary tool for passing the first grade. But he took no pride in it. Looking up, he noticed that Big Ma was now preparing to iron his clothes, and he smiled happily. Then his eyes met mine and silent laughter creased his face. I muffled a giggle and Mama looked up.

"Cassie, you start up again and I'm sending you to the kitchen to study," she warned.

"Yes'm," I said, settling back in my chair and beginning to read. I certainly did not want to go to the kitchen. Now that the fire no longer burned in the stove, it was cold in there.

The room grew quiet again, except for the earthy humming of Big Ma's rich alto voice, the crackle of the hickory fire, and the patter of rain on the roof. Engrossed in a mystery, I was startled when the comfortable sounds were shattered by three rapid knocks on the side door.

Rising quickly, Mama went to the door and called, "Who is it?"

"It's me, ma'am," came a man's gravelly voice. "Joe Avery."

Mama opened the door and Mr. Avery stepped dripping into the room.

"Why, Brother Avery," Mama said, "what are you doing out on a night like this? Come on in. Take off your coat and sit by the fire. Stacey, get Mr. Avery a chair."

"No'm," said Mr. Avery, looking rather nervously over his shoulder into the night. "I ain't got but a minute." He stepped far enough into the room so that he could close the door, then nodded to the rest of us. "Evenin', Miz Caroline, how you t'night?"

◀ How does Little Man feel about his reader now?

Words
For
Everyday
Use

en • **grossed** (ən grōst') *adj.*, occupied completely

► *What does Mama fear Mr. Avery has come to tell her?*

► *Why has Mr. Avery come?*

"Oh, I'll do, I reckon," said Big Ma, still ironing. "How's Miz Fannie?"

"She's fine," he said without dwelling on his wife. "Miz Logan . . . uh, I come to tell you somethin' . . . somethin' important—Mr. Morrison here?"

Mama stiffened. "David. You heard something about David?"

"Oh, no'm," replied Mr. Avery hastily. "Ain't heard nothin' 'bout yo' husband, ma'am."

Mama regarded him quizzically.

"It's . . . it's them again. They's ridin' t'night."

Mama, her face pale and frightened, glanced back at Big Ma; Big Ma held her iron in midair.

"Uh . . . children," Mama said, "I think it's your bedtime."

"But, Mama—" we chorused in protest, wanting to stay and hear who was riding.

"Hush," Mama said sternly. "I said it was time to go to bed. Now go!"

Groaning loudly enough to voice our displeasure, but not loudly enough to arouse Mama's anger, we stacked our books upon the study table and started toward the boys' room.

"Cassie, I said go to bed. That's not your room."

"But, Mama, it's cold in there," I pouted. Usually, we were allowed to build small fires in the other rooms an hour before bedtime to warm them up.

"You'll be warm once you're under the covers. Stacey, take the flashlight with you and light the lantern in your room. Cassie, take the lamp from the desk with you."

I went back and got the kerosene lamp, then entered my bedroom, leaving the door slightly ajar.

"Close that door, Cassie!"

Immediately, the door was closed.

I put the lamp on the dresser, then silently slid the latch off the outside door and slipped onto the wet front porch. I crossed to the boys' room. Tapping lightly, I whispered, "Hey, let me in."

The door creaked open and I darted in. The room was bathed in darkness.

"What they say?" I asked.

"Shhhhh!" came the answer.

I crept to the door leading into Mama's room and huddled beside the boys.

The rain softened upon the roof and we could hear Mama asking, "But why? Why are they riding? What's happened?"

"I don't rightly know," said Mr. Avery. "But y'all knows how they is. Anytime they thinks we steppin' outa our place, they feels like they gotta stop us. You know what some of

'em done to the Berrys." He paused, then went on bitterly, "It don't take but a little of nothin' to set them devilish night men off."

"But somethin' musta happened," Big Ma said. "How you know 'bout it?"

"All's I can tell ya, Miz Caroline, is what Fannie heard when she was leavin' the Grangers' this evenin'. She'd just finished cleanin' up the supper dishes when Mr. Granger come home with Mr. Grimes—ya know, that white school's bus driver—and two other mens. . . ."

A clap of deafening thunder drowned Mr. Avery's words, then the rain quickened and the conversation was lost.

I grabbed Stacey's arm. "Stacey, they're coming after *us!*"

"What!" squeaked Christopher-John.

"Hush," Stacey said harshly. "And Cassie, let go. That hurts."

"Stacey, somebody musta seen and told on us," I persisted.

"No . . ." Stacey replied unconvincingly. "It couldn't be."

"Couldn't be?" cried Christopher-John in a panic. "Whaddaya mean it couldn't be?"

"Stacey," said Little Man excitedly, "whaddaya think they gonna do to us? Burn us up?"

"Nothin'!" Stacey exclaimed, standing up suddenly. "Now why don't y'all go to bed like y'all s'pose to?"

We were stunned by his attitude. He sounded like Mama and I told him so.

He collapsed in silence by the door, breathing hard, and although I could not see him, I knew that his face was drawn and that his eyes had taken on a haggard look. I touched his arm lightly. "Ain't no call to go blaming yourself," I said. "We all done it."

"But I got us into it," he said listlessly.

"But we all wanted to do it," I comforted.

"Not me!" denied Christopher-John. "All I wanted to do was eat my lunch!"

"Shhhhh," hissed Little Man. "I can hear 'em again."

"I'd better go tell Mr. Morrison," Mr. Avery was saying. "He out back?"

"I'll tell him," said Mama.

We could hear the side door open and we scrambled up.

◀ *Why are the night men riding? What does Cassie fear?*

◀ *What does Stacey do that surprises the others?*

◀ *Why does Stacey blame himself?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

hag • gard (hag'ərd) *adj.*, worn appearance, gaunt
list • less • ly (list'ləs lē) *adv.*, without energy or emotion

► *What is Stacey's response when Cassie wants to tell Mama what they have done?*

"Cassie, get back to your room quick," Stacey whispered. "They'll probably come check on us now."

"But what'll we do?"

"Nothin' now, Cassie. Them men probably won't even come near here."

"Ya really believe that?" asked Christopher-John hopefully.

"But shouldn't we tell Mama?" I asked.

"No! We can't ever tell nobody!" declared Stacey adamantly. "Now go on, hurry!"

Footsteps neared the door. I dashed onto the porch and hastened back to my own room, where I jumped under the bedcovers with my clothes still on. Shivering, I pulled the heavy patchwork quilts up to my chin.

A few moments later Big Ma came in, leaving the door to Mama's room open. Knowing that she would be suspicious of such an early surrender to sleep, I sighed softly and, making sleepy little sounds, turned onto my stomach, careful not to expose my shirt sleeves. Obviously satisfied by my performance, Big Ma tucked the covers more closely around me and smoothed my hair gently. Then she stooped and started fishing for something under our bed.

I opened my eyes. Now what the devil was she looking for down there? While she was searching, I heard Mama approaching and I closed my eyes again.

"Mama?"

"Stacey, what're you doing up?"

"Let me help."

"Help with what?"

"With . . . with whatever's the matter."

Mama was silent a moment, then said softly, "Thank you, Stacey, but Big Ma and I can handle it."

"But Papa told me to help you!"

"And you do, more than you know. But right now you could help me most by going back to bed. It's a school day tomorrow, remember?"

"But, Mama—"

"If I need you, I'll call you. I promise."

I heard Stacey walk slowly away, then Mama whispering in the doorway, "Cassie asleep?"

"Yeah, honey," Big Ma said. "Go on and sit back down. I'll be out in a minute."

Words
For
Everyday
Use

ad • a • mant • ly (ad'ə mənt lē) *adv.*, immovably, inflexibly

Then Big Ma stood up and turned down the wick of the kerosene lamp. As she left the room, my eyes popped open again and I saw her outlined in the doorway, a rifle in her hands. Then she closed the door and I was left to the darkness.

◀ *What does Big Ma carry as she leaves the room?*

For long minutes I waited, wide awake, wondering what my next move should be. Finally deciding that I should again consult with the boys, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, but immediately had to swing them back again as Big Ma reentered the room. She passed the bed and pulled a straight-backed chair up to the window. Parting the curtains so that the blackness of the night mixed with the blackness of the room, she sat down without a sound.

I heard the door to the boys' room open and close and I knew that Mama had gone in. I waited for the sound of the door opening again, but it did not come. Soon the chill of the cotton sheets beneath me began to fade and as Big Ma's presence lulled me into a security I did not really feel, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, it was still nightly dark. "Big Ma?" I called. "Big Ma, you there?" But there was no reply from the chair by the window. Thinking that Big Ma had fallen asleep, I climbed from the bed and felt my way to her chair.

She wasn't there.

Outside, an owl hooted into the night, quiet now except for the drip-drap of water falling from the roof. I stood trans-fixed by the chair, afraid to move.

Then I heard a noise on the porch. I could not control my trembling. Again the noise, this time close to the door, and it occurred to me that it was probably the boys coming to confer with me. No doubt Mama had left them alone too.

◀ *What does Cassie assume causes the noise she hears?*

Laughing silently at myself, I hurried onto the porch. "Stacey," I whispered. "Christopher-John?" There was a sudden movement near the end of the porch and I headed toward it, feeling along the wall of the house. "Little Man? Hey, y'all, stop fooling 'round and answer me."

I crept precariously near the edge of the high porch, my eyes attempting to penetrate the blackness of the night. From below, a scratchy bristlyness sprang upon me, and I lost my balance and tumbled with a thud into the muddy flower bed. I lay paralyzed with fear. Then a long wet tongue licked my face.

◀ *What had been making the noise?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

trans • fixed (trans'fikst) *adj.*, held motionless
pre • car • i • ous • ly (pri kār'ē əs lē) *adv.*, dangerously, unstably

► *What does Cassie see as she's about to reenter the house?*

"Jason? Jason, that you?"

Our hound dog whined his reply.

I hugged him, then instantly let him go. "Was that you all the time? Look what you gone and done," I fussed, thinking of the mess I was in with mud all over me.

Jason whined again and I got up.

I started to climb back up onto the porch but froze as a caravan of headlights appeared suddenly in the east, coming fast along the rain-soaked road like cat eyes in the night. Jason whined loudly, growing skittish as the lights approached, and when they slowed and braked before the house he slunk beneath the porch. I wanted to follow, but I couldn't. My legs would not move.

The lead car swung into the muddy driveway and a shadowy figure outlined by the headlights of the car behind him stepped out. The man walked slowly up the drive.

I stopped breathing.

The driver of the next car got out, waiting. The first man stopped and stared at the house for several long moments as if uncertain whether it was the correct destination. Then he shook his head, and without a word returned to his car. With a wave of his hand he sent the other driver back inside, and in less than a minute the lead car had backed into the road, its headlights facing the other cars. Each of the cars used the driveway to turn around, then the caravan sped away as swiftly as it had come, its seven pairs of rear lights glowing like distant red embers until they were swallowed from view by the Granger forest.

Jason began barking now that the danger had passed, but he did not come out. As I reached for the porch to steady myself, there was a sense of quiet movement in the darkness. The moon slid from its dark covers, cloaking the earth in a shadowy white light, and I could see Mr. Morrison clearly, moving silently, like a jungle cat, from the side of the house to the road, a shotgun in his hand. Feeling sick, I crawled onto the porch and crept trembling toward the door.

Once inside the house, I leaned against the latch while waves of sick terror swept over me. Realizing that I must get into bed before Mama or Big Ma came from the other room, I pulled off my muddy clothes, turning them inside out to wipe the mud from my body, and put on my night clothes.

► *Whom does Cassie see move from the side of the house?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

skit • tish (skit'əsh) *adj.*, easily frightened

Then I climbed into the softness of the bed. I lay very still for a while, not allowing myself to think. But soon, against my will, the vision of ghostly headlights soaked into my mind and an uncontrollable trembling racked my body. And it remained until the dawn, when I fell into a restless sleep.

Words
For
Everyday
Use

rack (rak) *vt.*, afflict, torture

Respond to the Selection

How would you react if you had seen what Cassie saw from the porch? How might you explain this sight?

Investigate, Inquire, and Imagine

Recall: GATHERING FACTS

1a. Why does Little Man refuse the first book he is offered? Why does he stomp on his book?

2a. Why does Papa say he has brought Mr. Morrison home? Why had Mr. Morrison been fired?

3a. What seemingly disconnected statement does Papa make during the conversation about the Berrys?

4a. Describe Stacey's plan to stop the bus from splashing them on the way to school. What does Cassie see that night when she should be in bed?

Interpret: FINDING MEANING

→ 1b. How do Miss Crocker and Mama disagree about the books? What does Mama mean when she says about the books, "But that doesn't mean they have to accept them . . . and maybe we don't either"?

→ 2b. Why has Papa really brought Mr. Morrison home?

→ 3b. How is Papa's statement related to the conversation?

→ 4b. Why do the Logan children begin to regret their bus plan?

Analyze: TAKING THINGS APART

5a. Miss Crocker says that the children "must learn how things are sometime." Identify three ways in which the Logans show that they will not be bound by "the way things are."

Synthesize: BRINGING THINGS TOGETHER

→ 5b. Predict what will happen to the Logans based on their actions in chapters 1-3.

Evaluate: MAKING JUDGMENTS

6a. Evaluate the actions of Little Man when he stomps on his book and of all of the Logan children when they stop the bus. Explain whether these actions are justified.

Extend: CONNECTING IDEAS

→ 6b. Identify an example from your own experience, from another book or movie, or from historical or current events that illustrates how somebody fights racism or bigotry.

Understanding Literature

Preface. A **preface** is a statement made at the beginning of a literary work that serves as an introduction. The author's note at the beginning of the novel serves as a preface. What ideas and attitudes does the author present in the preface?

Dialect. A **dialect** is a version of a language spoken by the people of a particular place, time, or social group. Find an example of dialect from each chapter. What does this dialogue indicate about the setting?

Characterization. **Characterization** is the act of creating or describing a character. Writers use three major techniques to create a character: direct description, portraying the character's behavior, and presenting the thoughts and emotions of the character. Direct description allows the reader to learn about such matters as the character's appearance, habits, dress, back-ground, personality, and motivations through the comments of a speaker, a narrator, or another character. The writer might present the actions and speech of the character, allowing the reader to draw his or her own conclusions from what the character says or does. The writer might also reveal the character's private thoughts and emotions. See *character*. For more information on these techniques, see *characterization* in the Handbook of Literary Terms. Choose one of the characters from chapters 1–3. Briefly describe the character in your own words. Then identify examples from chapters 1-3 that show how this character is described.