Batter Up

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Abstract

CAROL backed out into right field, her eyes on Arnold, who was up to bat. “He slugs pretty hard,” she thought, “where’s Sue Ellen anyway? We need her out in center field.” The first pitch went in true and straight, but Arnold’s bat fanned the air...
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"Hurry up, Sue," Carol called as the school door banged open. "Here they come. Let's wait for 'em. I get first choice."

Carol ran toward the line of Negro children filing out of the old brick building. "Hi, Miss Horner, you're late today," she called. Miss Horner, the principal and Miss Ross, a teacher, kept the long line moving. Neither of them turned her head to answer Carol. She slowed to a half trot, her eyes wide with wonder. Sue usually raced to meet her but here she was, a part of a long plodding line of dusky-skinned youngsters, shuffling along, head down, like the others, past the Jungle Gym, the sand-pile, and on into a newly-fenced area of the playground. Just yesterday, Carol and Sue had wondered why the fence was being put up. Now Carol watched Sue enter the gate and plod after Miss Ross toward the far side of the playground.

Carol started running toward Miss Horner, who was standing now by the tall iron gate, while the last of the children filed through. Maybe Miss Horner was starting some new type of game. "What are they going in there for?" Carol asked, sliding to a halt by the gate. "I want Sue Ellen on my team." Why on earth was Miss Horner closing and fastening the gate so carefully?

She turned slowly to answer Carol. "Miss Ross is refereeing their volleyball game," she said. And Carol saw that the Negroes
were, indeed, starting a game on the far side of the playground.

"May Sue come over and play with us?" Carol asked politely.

"No, Sue has to stay with the others."

"But I need her. I mean my team needs her. We've got to have her to win the game today!"

"I'm sorry."

"But why—"

"It's one of those fool notions the gas well people are always thinking up," muttered Miss Horner, starting back toward the building. Carol had to run to keep up with the principal's long stride. "Black folks aren't good enough for white kids to play with. You can't study together. Now you can't play together."

Carol stopped and stood quite still, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Looks as though they think black skin will rub off on white. Oh my, what a little excess money can do to folks!" Miss Horner did not look at Carol as she spoke.

Lifting her hard brown hand, Carol stared at it. Later in the summer it would be browner, but she never got as dark as Sue Ellen. Some negroes were light colored, though.

"Run along now and play by yourselves."

The principal pushed through the group of Carol's teammates who had followed her. Carol ran to catch up.

"Miss Horner, Miss Horner," she caught hold of the woman's hand, "why can't I play with Sue Ellen then?"

"You're not a Negro, Carol."

"But in summer I'm almost as dark as Sue—"

"You're not a Negro and that's that." The door slammed shut behind Miss Horner.

"Yah, Yah! Yah! Carol's a nigger, Carol's a nigger, a nigger, a nigger." Arnold jumped up and down like a jack-in-the-box come to life. Carol wanted to hit him but instead her eyes suddenly filled with tears. One grubby finger crept up to brush them away.

"Carol's a cry-baby nigger, a cry-baby nigger" Arnold's team joined him, gleefully chanting, "Cry-baby nigger, cry-baby nigger!"

Sue was standing by the fence. "Don't cry, Carol. White folks just don't understand. We're still friends, ain't we?" A little note of doubt had crept into Sue's voice.

Carol crumpled into a little heap beside the fence, sobbing,
"I want to play with you. I don’t care if you are black—"

The worried look left Sue’s face, but her large dark eyes moistened with unshed tears. “Here, honey, wipe your nose. You’s white and I’s black. No gettin’ round it. I guess just have to be—” Sue almost sobbed but stopped in time.

Arnold moved closer, twirling the catcher’s mitt expertly, “Aint-cha gonna catch all them tears, Carol? Be careful. They’ll drown ya.”

Sue Ellen stamped her foot. “G’won away, you dirty white boy, and leave Carol alone. She’s all torn up, an’ now you git!”

The tears were gone now and her eyes flashed but Arnold stood his ground. “I’m no ninny that’s gonna git,” he shouted. “You’re just an old black nigger. Good for nothin’ nigger. G’wan in your cotton fields.”

“You—you’re a bastard, that’s what you is, a get-rich-quick bastard—”

Arnold reached for a stone—a sharp stone. He fumbled with it; aimed, and the stone hurtled through the air. Carol jumped up—in front of Sue. The stone hit hard and fell at her feet. Blood ran down her cheek. “You—you bad boy,” she screamed, “You leave Sue Ellen alone. If you touch her, I’ll—I’ll kill you.”

Arnold’s face went white, then a fiery red. He took one step backwards; looked at Carol’s clenched fists; at the blood, and suddenly turned and ran toward the ball diamond. Arnold’s team followed in a pellmell race away from Carol’s threatening gaze, but her team still huddled around her.

Carol felt their quiet allegiance, as she watched the other team gather in a group at the edge of the diamond. Some of the children pointed at her. A few seemed to be trying to start the game again. Arnold broke from the circle and ran toward home plate shouting, “Are you playing with me or with that nigger lover?”

Carol turned toward Sue Ellen. “See you after school,” she said out of the corner of her mouth and ran back toward the diamond. Her lips were set in a hard line, as she picked up the bat.

“Batter up?” Arnold challenged.

“Pitch it here,” she answered.

—Elizabeth Nelson, C. D., Jr.