

## LOCKED IN

*August 27, 1960*

The air hugged downtown Jacksonville like hot molasses drizzled on warm cornbread. No breath of wind stirred the trees, and the pigeons on the Confederate soldier statue were still, not wanting to move because of the heat and humidity. I could feel beads of sweat running down my back, settling in the waistband of my skirt, making my white cotton top damp and clinging.

Momma called yesterday wanting to go downtown on Saturday morning to buy a new dress for church. I really didn't want to go, but Momma insisted, as if I didn't have anything else to do. Two babies and all the housework that went along with that, but here I am, downtown, helping Momma pick out a dress.

Usually the babies came shopping with us. I pushed little Timmy in the stroller and Susan followed along, as best she could. Sometimes I needed to pick her up and carry her because she was only four years old and her little legs gave out. But today, Lem's mother agreed to babysit, and Momma and I were shopping alone.

We travelled to all of Jacksonville's department stores, Ivey's, Furchgott's, and May-Cohen's, in search of the perfect church dress. Momma finally found it in May-Cohen's - a navy-blue polka dot

Locked In

shirt dress with a matching fabric belt. At least she didn't need to go shoe shopping because she already had a couple of pairs of navy-blue pumps that would work well.

"Can we go home now?" I said as I used a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from my face. "I'm kinda like that witch in the Wizard of Oz - I feel like I'm meltin'. If we don't go home soon, I'm gonna call my flyin' monkeys on you."

"It's hot as hades today. Let's go get a bite of lunch at Woolworth's. We can sit in the air conditioning and cool-off before going home," Momma said.

"That sounds good to me," I said, suppressing a smile. I loved going to the downtown Woolworth's because they made the best cheeseburgers and fries. The entire back of the five-and-dime was taken-up by a large stainless-steel lunch counter, and Saturday, there was usually no problem finding a place to sit.

The Woolworth's was located on the square across from Hemming Park and happened to be on the way to our car. We usually parked next to Sear's on Water Street because they would validate our parking if we bought a bag of popcorn.

We cut straight through the middle of the park and came upon two men standing in front of a table. One man was older, his trimmed beard liberally salted with silver, and the other man young, ruggedly built, with arms that strained the fabric of his shirt. The table was loaded with ax handles but no ax heads. Momma, being a downright noisy woman, stopped to find out just why these men were selling ax handles in Hemming Park. I could see the gears in her head spinning because she always needed to know other people's business.

"Good day, sirs. What are you selling today?" Momma asked, using the polite voice reserved for the Preacher and other strangers.

Locked In

“We aren’t selling ‘um,” the older man said, “they’re free to anyone who happens to have a need.”

“You must have a hundred ax handles. Do you think that many men will be strolling through Hemming Park who happen to need one of these?” Momma said, as she waved her hand over the table.

“You can never tell when the need for an ax handle may arise,” the older man said with a smile.

“Well, I think you two may be sitting out here all day. I don’t know anyone who would think to come downtown for a free ax handle. How many times have you had a need for an ax handle without an ax head? I don’t think I’ve ever had the need, maybe if my ax handle breaks, but I have never heard of that happening,” Momma scolded. She just couldn’t help herself from telling these two men that they were being foolish.

The men just smiled at her and nodded their heads. “You can never tell what’ll happen,” the older man said, “you two have a nice day.”

We crossed the street to the Woolworth building and went inside; the cool air of the five-and-dime was a welcome respite from the heat. We headed toward the back of the store, for the lunch counter, and noticed more activity than usual for a Saturday. As we came closer, both of us stopped as if an invisible barrier was placed at our feet. There were coloreds at the counter.

Momma and I looked at each other, momentarily speechless, and stood still, not exactly knowing what to do. Coloreds were not supposed to sit and eat with white folk. The Woolworth lunch counter was a white-only eating establishment and these coloreds were breaking the rules. Now Momma and I were not rule-breakers, and we didn’t like the idea of being seen with these coloreds, just being where we were was wrong. Why someone might think we were in support of them and we were

## Locked In

participants in this affront to moral decency. Our society only works when everyone knows their place and abides by the laws of the majority.

There were fifteen or more people sitting at the counter. Young colored men and women, along with a colored minister, and a couple of white civil rights activists. They looked like a colored youth church group that had just lost their way and stumbled into the Woolworth's. One colored woman looked me square in the eye, held my gaze for a good ten seconds, then looked away, her eyes darting back and forth, her leg flipping up and down, her yellow skirt moving with her leg. She was about my age, with her hair up in the back, and I admired her skirt, a bright yellow circle skirt, and wondered where she bought it. She smoothed her skirt with her hands and looked back at me.

*What is she doing at the lunch counter? She was my age, maybe even had babies at home, like me. Why would she want to go and get herself in trouble? She should be home with her babies. She should know her place in the world order of things. Why would she do it?* I just didn't understand.

No one was serving the colored people. The wait staff had moved from behind the counter to the side and were standing with the store manager, talking among themselves.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Momma said, taking control of the situation. I could just imagine what Momma's circle members at the Methodist Church would think if they knew we were at a civil rights sit-in. We would never live that down even if we just happened to be here by accident.

Momma turned on her heel and headed for the front door. I followed behind, trying to keep up, but she was moving at a fast pace. I just wanted to go home where it was safe and hug my babies.

We made it to the front of the store, and Momma pushed on the entry door, but the door didn't budge. Momma looked at me with wide eyes, and for the first time ever, I saw fear in her face.

## Locked In

“The door is locked. The door is locked,” Momma said, her voice a little breathless. She grabbed the door handle and pulled it back and forth in frustration.

My heart was pounding out of my chest and the feeling of being trapped inside of the store was claustrophobic. I couldn’t breathe. I wanted out. I was scared and felt like a fish scooped up in a fishnet, not able to breathe, going to my doom.

I should have known Momma wasn’t going to accept the situation because she has a very forceful manner, especially when she’s riled-up, and she was about as forceful as I had ever seen.

“We need the manager”, she said, as she started toward the rear of the store. I followed, even though I was having trouble catching my breath.

The manager was huddled with the other store employees near the lunch counter. He was a smallish man, with large black glasses, and a bald head. He was standing next to a busty blonde waitress, her brows knitted with a worried expression. They were looking toward the front of the store and the waitress was wringing a handkerchief in knots in her hands.

“What are they going to do to them?” the waitress said. For some reason this made me a little mad. The waitress and the manager were worried about the coloreds, but not worried at all for Momma and me. It was like we didn’t matter, and after all, the coloreds were the rule breakers, and should have known they would find themselves in a lot of trouble. We were the innocents.

“Sir, the front doors are locked and we can’t get out,” Momma said, using her stern voice.

The manager looked at her, then at me, as if he was seeing us for the first time.

“What are you two doing in here?” he said.

## Locked In

“We came for lunch but it doesn’t look like you’re open for business,” Momma said. “We want to leave now. Can you please open the door?”

“I’m not opening that door for anyone. Do you see the men outside with ax handles?”

I looked past the windows and saw a mob of men congregated in Hemming Park. All of the men were holding ax handles that the two men at the center of the park were giving away for free.

“I see them. But you have no right to keep us in here.” Momma said.

“I’m worried for the safety of everyone in this store, and right now, it’s not safe to open the door. You can wait here with the rest of us. I’ve called the police and they should be here anytime now.”

“I’m sure it’s safe for you to open the door for us. You can lock it after we leave,” Momma said.

“Ma’am, I don’t want to risk being overpowered at the door. You’re just going to have to wait. Have a seat at the counter. There’s some room at the end,” the manager said, and then turned his back on Momma.

My mouth fell open because I’d never heard anyone speak like the manager did to Momma, much less turn his back to her. Well, Momma wasn’t used to that treatment either because her face turned crimson, and she must have bit her lip because she usually lets you have it if you cross her. She’s the only churchgoing woman I know who can cuss worse than a sailor.

Momma turned toward me and said in a whisper, “Come on Nancy, I’m not staying with the likes of these folk. We’ll find another way out.”

I followed Momma and we had to go past all the coloreds. The young woman with the yellow skirt was still sitting in the same seat. She looked me in the eye, again, and I could tell she was scared. Maybe as scared as I was being trapped in the store with a bunch of civil rights protesters. But as I

## Locked In

passed her, she tilted her chin up, and sat up straight. Maybe she was trying to appear not to be scared, but I know she was.

When we had made it half way to the front of the store, we saw six men come through a couple of side doors. I had forgotten that the Woolworth's was next door to J.C. Penney's, and both stores were housed in the same building. There were glass doors connecting the stores, and the manager had either forgotten, or was unable, to lock the doors. The men were walking toward us, all holding ax handles as if they were ready to use them. I recognized one man as the young burly man at the table in Hemming Park. He looked straight at me and I could hear my heartbeat, my legs refused to work, and I closed my eyes and waited for the sting of the ax handle. The men walked by Momma and me headed for the lunch counter.

"Hurry, we have to go now," Momma said, her voice terse.

I tried to walk but my legs were still frozen. My gaze went back to the lunch counter and searched for the young woman in the yellow skirt.

"Nancy, now," Momma said.

My attention was still fixed on the coloreds. I heard her voice but couldn't shift my gaze to turn and leave. Momma grabbed my arm and tugged me toward the doors to J.C. Penny's.

"You don't want to see what's going to happen to them," she said.

I finally turned and ran to the open doors. As Momma opened the door, I heard screaming and the thud of ax handles finding flesh. I felt ill.

Momma and I made it to Sears, bought our popcorn, and went home.