



Building Stories

A creative writing contest
for students (grades 3-12)

A black and white close-up photograph of a young man with glasses, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a decorative headpiece made of lace and fabric. The background is dark.

After the
Storm
Comes the
Rainbow

By Yani Li, Cranbrook Kingswood School (Bloomfield Hills, Michigan)

First Prize High School Category and Grand Prize Winner of
The Henry Ford's 2016 Building Stories Creative Writing Contest



Mattox Family Home, showing life in 1930s. Rosa Parks grew up on a farm much like this one. This is the Mattox Home, which is now in Greenfield Village at The Henry Ford. The Mattox family, like Rosa's grandparents, were one of the only African-American families in their community to own their own land.

After the Storm Comes the Rainbow

by Yani Li

Rosa leaned over the windowsill and gazed at the sunset. As the 10-year-old observed each delicate swirl of coral merge with the soft orange sky, and every golden thread of sunshine sink into the depths of green land, she wondered why anyone would choose to separate colors.

"Rosa! Come help with dinner!" Rosa tore away from the windowsill and rushed to the kitchen. At the dinner table, Rosa helped her younger brother up onto his chair. She stared sadly at her plateful of rabbit and squash.¹ She thought about the black families who couldn't even afford half of what was on her plate, and the white families who would rather throw their fresh biscuits and pies to the stray dogs on the street than share them with the less fortunate.

In the midst of their chatter, a curt knock surprised the family. Rosa's grandfather went to the door and came back with their neighbor, Mr. Lewis. He motioned for the adults to follow him out. Rosa's mother nodded, signifying for her to stay seated with her brother. However, Rosa, as headstrong as she was, set out to determine what had happened. As she crept across the hallway, she saw their silhouettes outside and carefully pressed her ear against the door.

Rosa heard Mr. Lewis' voice fill with sorrow. "They found his body yesterday. Poor boy ... he didn't do any harm."² Her mother sighed, "He's the fifth one this month." "Unbelievable. Howell's boy, right? He was only 21," Rosa's grandfather murmured. Rosa inched away from the door and gasped. George Howell! Her grandfather took her to his store sometimes, and George would always be whistling "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree."³ Once, she giggled when he missed a few notes. He simply grinned at her before going back to work. She often heard about lynching cases, but this was the first time it was someone she knew.

Rosa shuffled back and wondered why someone would hang an innocent man like George. Her 10-year-old mind was overwhelmed with sadness, but there was a thread of resilience in her that kept her from feeling defeated. The adults silently sat down to resume dinner. Her mother, who always kept a pristine appearance⁴ for her job as a teacher⁵, sat rigidly in her seat. It was as if a storm cloud had settled upon the house.

"Rosa, how was school?" Rosa's grandfather peered from above his glasses. "Fine, grandpa," Rosa responded politely. That day was far from fine. On the scorching Alabama morning, as she trudged to her one-room-only schoolhouse⁶ with her brother (since the black children apparently didn't deserve a bus like the white children did),⁷ a group of golden-haired girls sneered at Rosa's cotton skirt. They asked why she didn't wash the dirt off her face. As Rosa raised her fingers consciously to touch her face, a girl spat on her and claimed that it would clean off the grime. How could she tell her grandpa about how many times she scrubbed her face, hoping that the white kids wouldn't compare her beautiful skin to dirt?



Students and Teacher in a One-Room School near Richmond Hill, Georgia, circa 1940 When Rosa Parks was growing up, life in the South was mostly segregated by race. White people and black people could not be in the same places or use the same items. Rosa Parks attended a segregated one-room school in Pine Level, Alabama, much like the one above. Rosa was in a class with 50 students and one teacher.

Rosa raised her eyes to find her grandfather's face sketched with worry. "What's wrong, grandpa?" Rosa had never seen her grandfather so crestfallen before. Before he even opened his mouth, Rosa's grandmother whispered, "They're coming." Rosa's mother warned, "No one is coming." Her curtness signaled the abrupt stop to their conversation.

After dinner, Rosa noticed her grandfather duck into his room. She waited curiously, and when he returned, he was carrying his shotgun. He jumped when he noticed Rosa's petite frame in front of him. "My child, why are you here?" Rosa was dumbstruck. What was her grandfather doing with his gun? He hated guns; they contradicted everything he stood for. He only touched one when he needed to protect himself. Suddenly, everything was clear. Rosa now understood her family's fear. "Grandpa, will they hurt us?" Her grandfather forced a weary smile, "No one is hurting us." "Grandpa, I know. You don't have to hide anything. It's them, right? The people who burned down that school in Chesterfield?"⁸

He remained silent for a while and sighed. "You poor children, having to know about these things. OK, since you're a big girl now, I won't lie. Mr. Lewis said that the bad men would be coming to our street tonight." Rosa gasped in shock, "Tonight?" Her grandfather patted her head, "Don't worry. I'll protect you.⁹ We're good people. They won't hurt us." Rosa wanted to argue that George was a good person too, but she clamped her mouth shut. "The Ku Kluxers¹⁰ don't scare me an inch."

He laughed at the sight of her puffing her chest. "See? There's nothing to fret about." Suddenly, Rosa had a brilliant idea. "I'll stay with you!" "No, Rosa. You're safer in your room." His voice was thick with concern. "Please, grandpa! You can't be alone. Besides, you said that they wouldn't harm us!" Her grandfather sighed. "I see that you won't give up. All right, fine, you may stay."¹¹ Rosa felt the excitement bubbling through her veins.¹² After they laid out blankets near the front door and sat waiting, Rosa was overflowing with courage.¹³ At around 9:30, a gunshot broke the silence. Rosa froze and gripped onto her grandfather's arm. "It's their warning call. They just want to scare us," he explained

In the distance, there were marching sounds. As the footsteps neared, every bit of courage seeped from her like sweat. Rosa could feel her grandfather's body tense up. He gripped his gun with all force. A myriad of growing shadows gained on them. The pointed shadows reminded Rosa of the sharp-tipped pencils the white kids received every year. The crunch of feet against gravel kept Rosa alert. She watched, petrified, as the group's shadow edged closer to her door. She bit into her lip, trying to hide her screams. She'd heard what these people were capable of. However, the shadows only stopped before her front porch. Rosa heard a voice call: "THE KLAN IS WATCHING YOU!" They then continued their march,¹⁴ and Rosa's small body fell limp. Suddenly, a crash of thunder shredded the sky.



Ku Klux Klan Robe and Hood, circa 1925

When Rosa was growing up, a group called the Ku Klux Klan, or the KKK, terrorized African-Americans, especially in the South. KKK members would dress in robes and hoods that covered their faces, like the ones pictured here.

The shouting ceased, and silence lingered in the air before rain deluged onto the ground. Time dragged by and the shadows retreated. Focusing on the rapid pitter-patter, Rosa remembered a quote from one of her favorite books: "Rain comes during one's darkest times." As she reveled in the rain's peaceful melody, her eyelids drooped, and she drifted into a slumber filled with dreams of every child playing together.

The next morning, Rosa woke up to an abnormal silence in the house. She peeled off her blanket, which was moist from sweat, and trudged to the windowsill. As she gazed out, she noticed that the rain had ceased. She stepped outside and sank into the porch stool. Her gaze followed the arch of a brilliant rainbow stretched across the sky. She smiled, with hope¹⁵ radiating from every pore on her body. Rosa knew that colors always united after a storm to form a rainbow.¹⁶ Now, she just had to end the storm to welcome the rainbow.

- 1 Ashby, Ruth. *Rosa Parks: Freedom Rider*. Sterling Publishing, New York, 2008, p. 6. "Rosa and her family ate off the land ... food such as possum, rabbit, squash and black-eyed peas ..."
- 2 Kyvig, David. *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1939: Decades of Promise and Pain*. The Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 2002, p. 145. "African Americans carried the knowledge that, despite their every effort to be law-abiding, cautious and polite, they could be the target of a lynch mob incited by false charges."
- 3 Wright, A.J. *Some Alabama Songs from the Early 20th Century*. alabamayesterday.blogspot.com/2015/06/some-alabama-songs-from-early-20th.html, June 8, 2015.
- 4 Parks, Rosa. *Early Childhood Incidents and Experiences*. loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/rosa-parks-gallery/pdf/childhood.pdf. "My mother was a beautiful woman ..."
- 5 History.com Staff. *Rosa Parks*, history.com/topics/black-history/rosa-parks, 2009.
- 6 Ashby, *Rosa Parks: Freedom Rider*, p. 7. "One-room schoolhouse."
- 7 *Ibid.* p. 8. "Black students had to walk to their school, while white children took school buses to theirs."
- 8 Theoharis, Jeanne. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2013, p. 8. "Black schools often came under the attack of white vigilantes."
- 9 Parks. *Early Childhood Incidents and Experiences*. "Grandfather stayed up to wait for them to come to our house."
- 10 Theoharis. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, p. 4. "She stayed awake with him some nights ..."
- 11 Theoharis. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, p. 4. "Ku Kluxers."
- 12 Parks. *Early Childhood Incidents and Experiences*. "I wanted to see him kill a Ku Kluxer."
- 13 Adams, Anne. *Rosa Parks: The Lady Said "No."* historyswomen.com/social-reformers/rosa-parks. "... I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt."
- 14 Ashby. *Rosa Parks: Freedom Rider*, p. 10. "The masked terrorists never did come to Rosa's house."
- 15 Johnson, George. *Profiles in Hue*, Light of the Savior Ministries, Pennsylvania, 2011, p. 149. "I do the very best I can to look upon life with optimism and hope and looking forward to a better day ..."
- 16 Ashby. *Rosa Parks: Freedom Rider*, p. 10. "Rosa remained open-minded. She knew that all white people weren't bad."

2016 WINNERS



Yani Li

**"After the Storm Comes the Rainbow"
First Prize High School Category and
Overall Grand Prize; Teacher: Megan Getz**

Yani has just completed her sophomore year at Cranbrook Kingswood School. Her favorite subjects include English and biology. She is involved in many school activities, including Horizons Upward Bound, tutoring, rowing and basketball. In her free time, she enjoys reading, painting with oil, writing poems and short stories, and working out. Her peers and family members describe her as compassionate and hardworking. Yani plans on pursuing an economic or finance major in college while writing in her free time. This summer, she is taking a summer immersion course at the University of Chicago.



2016 Building Stories contest winners

From left: Teacher Dr. Melissa Collins, Elementary First Prize Winner Isaiah Watkins, Middle School First Prize Winner Sarah Ellis, High School First Prize and Overall Grand Prize Winner Yani Li, and teacher Julie Ellis.



Building Stories

A creative writing contest

Building Stories is a creative writing contest that is designed to inspire students in grades 3-12 to write original stories utilizing primary sources from The Henry Ford's collections along with independent research. The contest provides a unique opportunity for students to apply and meet Common Core State Standards and other interdisciplinary curricular goals. See official rules, contest details and prize information at www.thehenryford.org/BuildingStories.