



Video Story Transcript

Chester Parker: Connecting--or Not--In a Time of Desegregation

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwSrFZzAXj8>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My name is Priscilla Howe and this story is called Chester Parker.

I was bused across town to my first day of first grade, in 1967, in Providence, Rhode Island. I went with my big sister, Deb, and she held my hand as we walked into the brand-new school. We went into the big, white room called the cafeteria. I'd never heard that word before. And it was full of kids. There were white kids and black kids, and kids who spoke Portuguese, the kids were from the Azores. And there were kids everywhere and they were all really excited. And I was scared and I was shy and I felt out of place. The teachers were calling off names from long lists. Deb heard her name called and she went off to her class. And I heard my name called but I was scared, so I didn't answer. I just stood there and I waited 'til they gathered us all up, and took us to our classrooms.

In my classroom, in first grade, there was a boy named Chester Parker. Chester Parker. He was he was a wiry, black boy with big teeth, big teeth. He, he was funny. He was smart. He was curious. He was a bad boy. Not a bad, bad boy, just a clown. He was always talking. We were supposed to be quiet. And oh, but you know, he would do things like they'd give us paste on pieces of, little squares of paper. And well, we all ate that paste, tasted like spearmint, and and, he, he put his on his chin like a beard.

And one day, one day, Chester Parker went around to everyone in the class and said, “Is jackass a swear? Is jackass a swear? Is jackass a swear?”

And when it came to me I said, no. Because I didn't know what a jackass was and I didn't know what a swear was either. He, he noticed me. I wasn't invisible. And that one day, in line on the way to the lavatory, I never heard that word before either, Chester Parker kissed me...on the cheek. And I liked him. I liked him. I talked about him.

At home, I talked about what he'd done the day before, what he did that day, what he might do the next day. Oh, and that was a mistake. Not because he was black, no, because he was a **boy**. It was automatic. My brothers and sisters started in, “Priscilla and Chester Parker sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”

It would make me so mad! How they teased me. They teased me. I walk into a room and my brother, Tommy, would say, “Chester Parker.” Oooo! In fact, Tommy teased me about Chester Parker for a long time. Longer than Chester Parker was even in my life, 'cause he moved to another school.

After quite a while, my brothers and sister stop teasing me about Chester Parker. And I forgot about him until the summer after sixth grade. I went to church camp, the Episcopal Church Camp. And I was still scared. And I was still shy. Still felt out of place, a lot. And I was in the dining hall with a bunch of kids. I was kind of on the edge of this group of kids. And the door opened, and a big, big group of kids came in. They weren't from our camp. They were kids who had been bused in just for the day, for the morning, and then lunch. I guess to give them a, a break from their lives in the projects, in Providence, And I looked up, and in that in that group of kids, there he was. Chester Parker. I recognize those teeth anywhere.

I ate my lunch and I kept kind of looking at him out of the corner of my eye. I wanted to go up and say, “Hey, Chester Parker, how are you? Chester Parker.” But I didn't. I was too scared. I went outside and I waited outside, outside, the door of the dining hall. And after a bit, that group of kids came out. They had to go back home. And they walked right past me. Chester Parker looked at me. He looked me right in the eye. I don't know, maybe he knew me.

They got on, they got on their bus. I watched that bus go down the dusty road. And I wished. I wished I'd said something. I wished I'd said, “Chester Parker.” I wished I had made a connection with him, across that time. A connection across all of those lines of time and race and class and group. And I don't know why I didn't. Wish I had. Because I remembered that curious boy, who helped me feel not quite so shy, not quite so scared, not quite so out of place. Those years ago, that boy, that curious boy who asked that puzzling question, “Is jackass a swear?”