Remember

Introduction and Part I
Toni Morrison
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The Journey to School Integration
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This book is about you. Even though the main event in the story took place many years ago, what happened before it and after it is now part of all our lives. Because remembering is the mind's first step toward understanding, this book is designed to take you on a journey through a time in American life when there was as much hate as there was love; as much anger as there was hope; as many heroes as cowards. A time when people were overwhelmed with emotion and children discovered new kinds of friendships and a new kind of fear. As with any journey, there is often a narrow path to walk before you can see the wide road ahead. And sometimes there is a closed gate between the path and the road.

To enliven the trip, I have imagined the thoughts and feelings of some of the people in the photographs chosen to help tell this story. They are children, teenagers, adults; ordinary people leading ordinary lives all swept up in events that would mark all of our lives.

The first people to step onto the long path were children and their parents. The laws in many states, called Jim Crow laws, demanded separation of the races in all public places and especially the public schools. These laws were based on the idea of "separate but equal." That meant black people could enter public areas, use public facilities such as drinking fountains and waiting rooms in train stations, be seated on public transportation, go to parks and movie theaters, and attend schools, but not with white people.

Sitting apart on a bus or not being served through the front window of a takeout restaurant was humiliating, but nothing was more painful than being refused a decent education. No matter how much they argued or how long they complained, black families had to send their children to all-black schools, no matter how far away. Many buildings were dilapidated, even dangerous. Textbooks were few, worn, and out of date; there
were no supplies, no after-school programs, school lunches, sports equipment. Underpaid teachers were overburdened trying to make do. Then one day, some parents from Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., stepped onto the path. These African American parents formed a group represented by lawyers for the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to sue school boards that required their children to travel to schools miles away from white ones closer to their homes. Their case was named for one of the parents, Oliver Brown, who was part of the Kansas group.

The closed gates were opened by the Supreme Court after many lawyers and thousands of people pushed against them. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court justices announced a decision in the case of Brown v. Board of Education. The decision, which said separate schools were not equal, threw many states, cities, towns, neighborhoods, principals, teachers, parents, and students into confusion. Battles were fought to honor, ignore, or overturn the decision. Many battles were won, some quietly, some not.

The demand to integrate public schools grew into a nationwide civil rights movement to eliminate all racist law: to have the right to vote, the right to choose the neighborhood you wanted to live in, to sit in any vacant seat in a public place. Marches, protests, countermarches, and counterprotests erupted almost everywhere. It was an extraordinary time, when people of all races and all walks of life came together. When children had to be braver than their parents, when pastors, priests, and rabbis left their altars to walk the streets with strangers, when soldiers with guns were assigned to keep the peace or to protect a young girl. Days full of loud, angry, determined crowds, and days deep in loneliness. Peaceful marches were met with applause in some places, violence in others. People were hurt and people died. Students and civil rights workers were hosed, beaten, jailed. Strong leaders were shot and killed. And one day a bomb was thrown into a church, killing four little girls attending Sunday school.
None of that happened to you. Why offer memories you do not have? Remembering can be painful, even frightening. But it can also swell your heart and open your mind.

Whenever I see sheets drying on the line or smell gumbo simmering on the stove, a flood of memories comes back to me. In 1953 when I traveled in the rural South with a group of students, we received the generosity of strangers—African Americans who took us in when there were no places for nonwhites to eat or sleep. They were strangers who gave up their own beds, dressed them in brilliant white linen smelling of mulberry and pine. They fed us from their gardens and were so insistent on not being paid, we had to hide money in the pillow slips so they would find it long after we were gone. These were country people, or city people denied adequate education, relegated to a tiny balcony area in a movie theater, backs of buses and separate water fountains, menial jobs or none. Like me, they were ordinary people. Yet, although their lives were driven by laws that said, “No, not here,” “No, not there,” “No, not you,” racial segregation had not marked their souls.

The joy I felt in 1954, when the Supreme Court decided the Brown v. Board of Education case, was connected to those generous strangers, and even now wind-dried sheets can summon up my memory of what that decision did and what it meant for all our futures. This book is a celebration of the power and justice of that decision.

So remember. Because you are a part of it. The path was not entered, the gate was not opened, the road was not taken only for those brave enough to walk it. It was for you as well. In every way, this is your story.
The Narrow Path
Years ago, children of different races could not go to school together in many places in the United States. School districts could legally segregate students into different schools according to the color of their skin. The law said these separate schools had to be equal. However, many schools for children of color were inferior to the schools for white students.
The law says I can’t go to school with white children. Are they afraid of my socks, my braids? I am seven years old. Why are they afraid of me?
Her name was Betty when she belonged to my cousin. Then her name was Alice when my sister got her. Now she’s mine and I call her Jasmine. I think her dress was red with white dots and I remember she had a white underslip with lace, and panties too. They got torn and thrown away. She can’t cry Mama anymore. All she has now is yellow hair and green eyes. I like playing with her. She doesn’t stick out her tongue or call me names. And she doesn’t hide behind her mother’s dress, pointing at me, when I go into town. She’s a good friend, my Jasmine.
Outside the grass is tall and full of bees and butterflies. The peaches that fall off the trees split sometimes and the juice is sweeter than cake. In here I am supposed to learn important things. I bet I could be good at learning them if I had a real desk and lots of books and things. I want to. But it's dark in here. Outside the sky is blue and the peaches are sweeter than cake.
Our parents sued the Board of Education not because they hate them, but because they love us. They are full of hope but they are determined, too. No matter how narrow the path or how long the journey, all of us are on it together.