

Mama Ridley had fallen and broken her hip, and she never got out of bed again. She couldn't turn herself over, Grandpa had to do it, and she was in pain much of the time. But Mama told me that Mama Ridley loved her great-grandchildren. Whenever we got dressed up to go out, she'd say, "Let the children come in here before you go, so I can see what they got on." But nothing of her voice comes back to me. I can only see her lying there.

I was eight years old when Mama Ridley died. I wish so much that I had known her better. Hearing Mama and Grandma talk about her makes me know how much I missed.

World War II

In the beginning, I thought war was exciting. At twelve, I hadn't been paying much attention to all the news on the radio and in the movie newsreels about the fighting in

Europe, Africa, and Asia. Then, all of a sudden, the United States was at war with Japan. President Franklin D. Roosevelt came on the radio to say so. Mama and Daddy had known war before, and they were worried, but I wasn't.

The war changed our lives in a lot of ways. At school, they changed the way we saluted the flag so that it wouldn't look even slightly like the Nazi salute to Hitler, Germany's dictator. We sold savings stamps for ten cents apiece, or bought them and pasted them in little books, lending money to the government to help buy guns and ships and bullets. We learned new patriotic songs that we sang at all the assemblies. One song was written especially for black children to sing. We sang, "We Are Americans, Too."

At home, we watched the young men being drafted into the army. In a few weeks they'd come home on leave, looking older in their khaki uniforms than their friends who had been left behind and were still wearing pegged

pants, ankle-tight at the bottom and baggy at the knee. Mothers were getting the jobs that had been held by men who were now soldiers, and their children had their own door keys dangling on chains around their necks.

We had air-raid drills, practicing for the time when an enemy plane might fly across the city looking for a place to drop its bombs. The sirens would blow and the air-raid wardens would come outside and patrol the streets, wearing hard white hats and armbands, and making sure that everybody else went inside and closed their heavy blackout window curtains if they had them, or turned off every single light. People sat talking in the dark, waiting for the all-clear sirens to sound.

Some things were rationed, which meant we couldn't buy them unless we had a special ticket to go with the money. Meat, sugar, butter, shoes, gas. Every few months the government gave out ration tickets, and when they were used up, we had to do without things until we got the next supply of tickets. Some summers

we couldn't get enough gas to take our vacation, but I didn't mind. It was for the soldiers and sailors and marines, so that they could have what they needed to fight the war.

War was exciting. Uniforms and blackouts and singing and sacrifice. There was always something going on. Something to talk about, something to think about, something to do.

And then, some of our Langston neighbors had to go to jail. They had joined a new group that we called "The Muslims." The men wore suits and ties every day, and the women wore long dresses and matching turban-style head wraps. We heard that they had meetings where they talked about a ship that was coming to take black people to freedom. When some of the men received orders to report to the army, they refused to go. They wouldn't go to the army. They had to go to jail.

And then, one night a woman received a telegram and screamed, screamed into the night and into my fading

excitement. Her husband had been killed in the war.

War became real for me that night. I knew, then, what my parents had known all along.

High School

A few weeks before graduation from Browne Junior High School, all the graduates were given a sheet of paper to fill out. Written on that sheet of paper was the question we had been waiting three years for—what high school will you attend?

For days afterward, that was all we talked about. It meant we were really growing up. Leaving ninth grade, going on to high school. We went around asking each other, "What school did you pick, what school did you pick?" Finding out which of our friends would be going with us, and which we had to say good-bye to, as if we