

Sweet sixteen ? How could I be turning sweet sixteen in just a few days and be a student at Central High, I thought as I entered the side door of the school. Looking around, I wanted to take care that no one would bang me on my head or trip me up. I had relished so many dreams of how sweet my sixteenth year would be, and now it had arrived, but I was here in this place.

Sixteen had always seemed the magic age that signaled the beginning of freedom, when Mama and Grandma might **let loose** their hold and let me go out with my friends on pre-dates. But with the integration, I was nowhere near being free. And in the midst of everything else, I'd almost forgotten my own birthday. I hadn't even begun preparations.

« Hey, nigger. You here again ? » A boy's voice pulled me from my thoughts. A strong hand grabbed my **wrist** and put my arm up behind my back, like a policeman arresting a criminal. Frantically I looked for a teacher or a guard. There was none.

« Hey, we got us a nigger to play with. » He was **shouting** to his friends. Soon I'd have several of them on me. I struggled against him, but it was no use. Then I remembered I'd

a woman, it's up to that woman **to relieve** him of what few morsels of his masculinity **remain**. » I bent my knee and **jammed** my foot backward, up his **crotch**.

« Damn you, bitch, » he shouted, « You'll be a dead nigger before this day is over. »

Grabbing my purse, I raced down the hall, leaving my textbooks behind. I felt the power of having defended myself. I walked up the stairs to homeroom, only to be **greeted** by the same two boys who had been **taunting** me every day. I **squared** my shoulders and **glared** at them as I **whispered**, « I will be here tomorrow and the next day and the next. »

Warriors don't cry (1994), Melba Patillo Beals – extract from chapter 12

