Johnette was Mama’s best friend. She, her husband John, and their children Don and Cornelia, made up a regular flank to our nuclear family of five. It was an odd alliance these two families, with none of the total of seven children the same age, and even the difference in the four adults’ ages spanned many years. John was quiet and reserved and my dad, J. Arthur, anything but. It was J. Arthur who engaged Johnette, many years his junior, in all the heated debates about politics and public affairs. They seemed, to my adolescent mind, to challenge each other to “contests of sacrifice” as to who spent more time being of service to the broadest segment of our black, Charleston, South Carolina, southern, U.S. community. Johnette probably had a longer list of affiliations than did my father—everyone knew his single passion was the NAACP. But devotion to one or many didn’t matter, these two gave unlimited time and energy to addressing racial inequities and social setbacks accorded black folks (respectfully called Negroes in the times described here).

Whenever these two groups converged at one another’s home, John and Mama coconsumed the time in preparing the food. I’m sure my earliest attitudes about marriage were formed in observing there was a quiet one and a talkative one, a brash one and a shy one, gender notwithstanding, and that did a marriage make. In retrospect, my lack of success with the sacred institution may have something to do with these overdrawn conclusions from childhood observations, but there are no filters for deciding which attitudes and practices to absorb, so social consciousness and marital ambiguities both settled into my psyche and those of my sisters Joenelle and Minerva. “Baby” brother Myles came along later and missed these grand times.

Our Labor Day backyard feast in 1963 had all the usual bustle about corn and potato salad and somebody’s new grilling technique. There seemed to always be a “new” grilling technique for the selfsame hot dogs and chicken. But, as long as John and Mama gave directions and nurtured their pots, the younger ones of us took little notice that today was different from any other of our back-to-school, end-of-summer gatherings. I tuned out any of the speculations about what tomorrow might bring. From my perch on Johnette’s porch I could see the top and back of the new school I would be attending as I began tenth grade. Our family lived many blocks away out-of-sight and the school was virtually unknown to me. But sitting there, gazing at its red bricks and seemingly ten stories, made the school and tomorrow THE day, closer than I needed or wanted. It didn’t seem worth worrying or speculating about since there was nothing to compare it to—little black children had never crossed the racial divide in the state’s public schools and the unthinkable was just that. As one of two black students going to the school under the watchful eyes of who knows who; awaiting responses of who knows what, I’d be confronting the unknown, unblack, unfamiliar. I figured most tenth graders were bound to be the same, or at least I certainly hoped so. Besides, for that day, I had only one thinkable to concern myself with.

I had decided what dress to wear, and the shoes were bought two weeks before when Bob Ellis’s “best” were on sale. We had the “socio” part covered with our respectable, many
generation educated background, but Mama had a way of keeping us a little higher on the "economic" scale than we actually were. These were bases covered by those in my family who cared a lot more about appearance than did I. My issue was hoping I had not made a big mistake in that leap of faith I'd given my older sister, Joenelle. Now a college student, she had the most important, traumatic, potentially disastrous part of my tomorrow's fate in her hands—my hair.

Joenelle had washed my hair earlier that morning, and instead of "pressing" the thick, long stuff with a straightening comb (our method of processing hair all our lives) or by applying any of the chemical permanents which found favour among early sixties moderns, she had a new method of taming the tangled web—Dippity Doo. This sky-blue, jelly-like substance would soften and manage my hair into total respectability and beauty for tomorrow's grand entry. I walked the backyard in my three inch rollers pinned with plastic holding rods pushed deeply into my scalp. At some dreadful moment, I think it was during the ambrosia pig-out, I realized Joenelle's hair was a softer grade than mine—maybe she could Dippity Doo her way to freedom, but why had I been so easily convinced that I could as well? It made the corn and potato salad extremely hard to enjoy.

Daddy and the others offered reassurances about the number of policemen bound to be on hand, including FBI agents deemed more reliable than our local protectors. But toward the end of the afternoon there were mainly jokes and light chatter and off-the-wall conversations intended to keep tension levels down. Mama needed the diversion more than I, since outwardly I was showing little to no interest in the political significance of any of this. Inwardly, I envisioned being a mockery to the entire race when my Dippity Doo tresses failed to act affirmatively. At some reasonable time in the early evening, we parted company—the two socially conscious families whose children were all destined to walk in their parents' footsteps as spokespersons for justice and racial integrity throughout their collective lives. Whether Johnette's backyard gatherings instilled such nobility, I'll never know. But something in those meals and meal times cemented all our forthcoming energies in community empowerment and righteous indignation for status quo U.S. hypocrisy. In those pre-Black Power years of my youth, I did not recognize my own hypocrisy and self-loathing.

For that day, that year, all the challenge I could summon was pitted against my fear of a failed revolution of an entirely different sort. You'll have to see the newspaper pictures of the next day to judge the victor for yourself.

Millicent E. Brown