

Black Thunder



Chapter One – by Kay Hively

Joey pulled the mailbox lid down and reached inside.

Two letters lay in the metal box. Joey stuffed them into one of his school books. Then he started the short walk up the driveway to his house.

Every afternoon, Mrs. Cooper met Joey on the porch. When she asked about things at school, he told her it had been a good day. He said he got 98 on his arithmetic test. That made his mother smile.

Taking the two letters from his book, Joey gave them to Mrs. Cooper. Then together, the boy and his mother sat down in the porch swing.

Joey liked this time of day. He always knew that when he came home from school, his mother would meet him on the porch – usually with a cookie. In nice weather they would sit in the swing and talk. If he brought a letter from the mailbox, his mother would read it to him.

As Joey listened, his mother read the first letter. It was from his grandmother who lived in New Orleans. Grandmother never wrote very much – she just said she was doing fine. Then Mrs. Cooper opened the second letter. It was from Tommy, Joey's big brother. Tommy was in college.

Joey knew it was hard for his big brother to go to college. The Cooper family didn't have much money so everyone had worked hard to help Tommy pay for school. Soon it would be all over. Tommy was going to graduate from college in just three weeks – on June 14, 1942.

Mrs. Cooper opened Tommy's envelope and began reading. But suddenly she dropped the letter into her lap and covered her mouth with her hands.

For a moment Joey was scared. He thought his mother was sick. But quickly, Mrs. Cooper recovered from her surprise. She picked

up the letter and started reading again. In the letter, Tommy said he had been taking some tests and had been accepted to flight school. He said he would graduate from college, then join the Tuskegee Airmen and become a fighter pilot. He said America needed pilots to fight in the war.

Joey knew there was a war going on. People called it World War II. But Joey had never heard of the Tuskegee Airmen. He didn't even know that black men could become fighter pilots. He had never seen a picture of a black man flying an airplane.

Joey tried to imagine Tommy going to flight school. Joey's imagination soared. In his mind's eye, he could see Tommy flying up through the clouds, chasing after one of the bad guys.

Joey had always wanted to be like his brother. But he had never thought about flying an airplane.



Author Kay Hively and Illustrator Billie Gofourth-Stewart are both of Neosho, Missouri. Produced in partnership with this newspaper and the Missouri Press Foundation. Copyright 2004.

Classroom Extensions

Things to Think About and Do –

A. Joey and his mother sat on the porch swing together. Invite an adult to sit with you in a swing or on the porch. Tell the adult about school. Describe your favorite teacher, what subject you like best, or how you get to school each day. Ask the adult about his or her school experience. Write a report about your visit.

B. Find out why black men were not allowed to be fighter pilots before the Tuskegee Airmen. In a dictionary look up the word “segregation,” and learn its definition. Write a short essay about segregation.

STANDARDS: CA2; CA6; CA4; SS:6; G1:5; G2:3; G2:5

Next Week: Chapter Two – Picture This