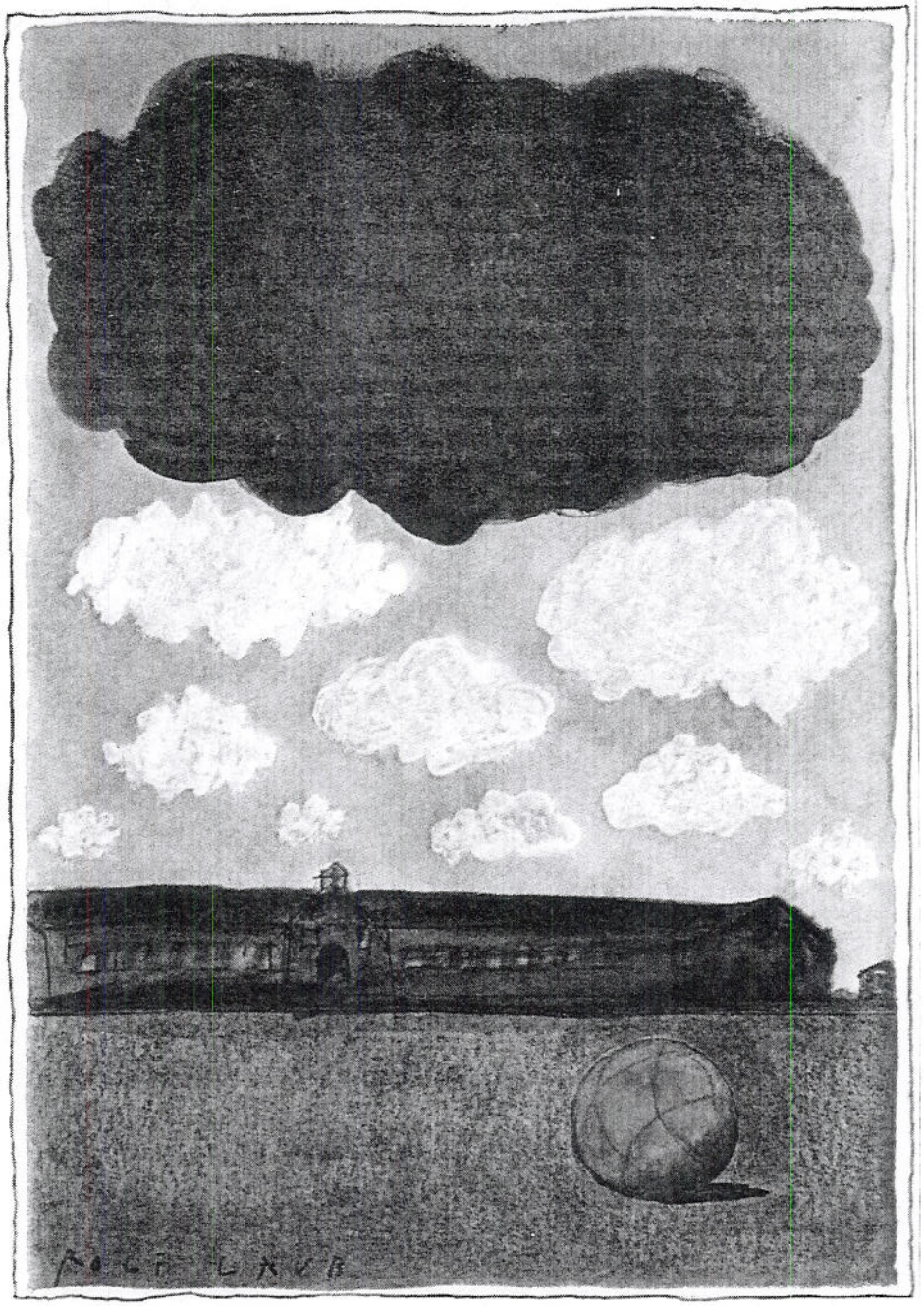
Day of terror, day of heroism

By Carol J. Roberts



On Sept. 15, 1959, the playground of Houston's Edgar Allen Poe Elementary School was littered like a battlefield. Flashing lights, ambulances, sheet-covered bodies, screaming children. The images burned themselves into my mind like a slow-moving newsreel. I was 6 years old.

First grade had started without me because a cute, cuddly stray kitten had shared its ringworm with me. The fungus infected my skin with large round spots. Highly contagious, I was confined to the house until cured.

School was into its second week when I was finally led into the classroom and sat shyly at my first school desk. Later that day, the class lined up for recess. The teachers were nice —they let me hold the big basketball and be first in line. I felt so important, marching along in my ruffly purple plaid dress with the puffy sleeves, holding a huge ball, the other students following behind. I marched them all the way down the hall, to the playground, and across the asphalt slab where we sat down side-by-side in a line.

Paul Orgeron, an ex-convict, and his wife, Betty, had divorced once, remarried and divorced again the previous year. Since then, he and their 7-year-old son, Dusty, had been inseparable companions. "I have found God," he told Betty. Orgeron took Dusty to Poe to enroll him.

A school clerk asked for a health certificate. He had none. The boy couldn't be enrolled without it. The encounter was routine.

Orgeron left with his little boy. He returned to his station wagon on a side street, and a few minutes later walked onto the asphalt slab carrying, not health forms, but an unusually heavy suitcase in one hand, and leading the child with the other.

Miss Johnston stood by her second grade class, monitoring a kickball game.

"Bring the children around me in a circle," he called to her. "I have power in this suitcase. It's the will of God."

He handed her a note, written in a barely legible, childish script. "Please do not get excite (sic) over this order ..." it said. "In this suitcase you see in my hand is fill (sic) to the top with high explosives. I mean high high. And all I want is my wife ... The police, dam (sic) it, will not help me find her. This will make them do the job ... I would like to talk about God while waiting for my wife."

According to one story, Orgeron explained that the trigger was under the suitcase and would go off when it touched the ground. He then placed one edge of the suitcase on the ground and the other on his foot.

Another teacher, Mrs. Kolter, approached. Miss Johnston gave her the note, then quickly began herding youngsters into the building. She summoned the school principal, while Mrs. Kolter kept the man occupied.

I sat crosslegged, waiting, on the asphalt, my classmates sitting in a line to my right. How come we're not starting the game? I wondered. I gazed at the scout house, the one-room building used for the Girl Scouts, where I hoped to be a Brownie soon. The basketball filled my lap. I basked in my new importance, hugging the ball and poking at the little pits in the rubber.

Teachers continued rounding up children quickly and escorting them to the building, as the principal, Mrs. Doty, and the custodian, Mr. Montgomery, marched over to the man on the playground. Mrs. Kolter stood by.

"You must leave," Mrs. Doty said.

"I have to get to the children," he said. "I have to follow the children to the

second grade."

I pushed and poked at the pits some more, my mind consumed with the overwhelming events of this special day. When I looked up, my classmates were gone! Where did all my new friends go so fast? I never had time to find out.

Orgeron slipped his foot out from under the suitcase. Mr. Montgomery lunged for it. The suitcase fell. A gigantic explosion rocked the schoolyard with a force powerful enough to carve a crater in the asphalt, blast limbs from bodies and shatter school windows, which cut children inside with flying glass. And the newsreel began ...

Scene 1: Thick, black smoke fills the world. All I see is smoke. Suddenly standing. Strange silence. Am I deaf? My mind is blank.

Scene 2: I am sitting crosslegged on the grass in front of the scout house. Children sit and lie about me. My lip is bleeding. Old ladies come running from the houses across the street. One woman is very thin with dark hair. She moves about nervously. She hands out peppermint candy. Why does she only have peppermint? I don't like peppermint. I wish she had chocolate. I don't take any. My lip is swollen. My ruffly dress is torn, my face and body peppered with bits of asphalt, like buckshot.

Scene 3: The ambulance attendants want me. I want to walk. They don't let me. Why won't they let me? I am strapped to a stretcher. They are very serious. They are the only calm grownups around.

"What is your name?" they ask as they slide the stretcher into the ambulance. My lip is hurt. Maybe it's catching. Maybe my other lip will catch the hurt. I mustn't let the two lips touch. Which makes my name hard to say.

"Caol Roertsn."

Scene 4: The ambulance moves so slowly through the streets. I keep lifting my head, the only part of me not strapped down. I see a man driving close behind us. He can see me lying on the stretcher. I feel ashamed. We are going too slow. Why can't they speed, like an ambulance? Run away from this man?

My mom raced to school. The first thing she saw was two little bodies under sheets in a fenced-off area. "I saw her," someone told her. "They took her to Hermann Hospital." She rushed to meet me there.

My dad was not so lucky. "Listen, mister," a man told him when he arrived at the school, "we're sorry, but no one knows what's going on. It's complete chaos. The morgue has a real job. They just pulled a hand off a neighbor's roof. That crazy man, they're collecting pieces of him and his little boy ... You a

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parent? Yeah, some children were killed. We don't know who. We don't know what hospitals to try. I'm sorry."

The hospital smelled like alcohol. An old nurse in white lifted me roughly onto a hard hospital bed, rolled me over and gave me a shot, then tucked in the crisp white sheet, pinning me, swaddling me tight. I was glad when Mama came.

Finally, Daddy came. He stood by the bed, staring down at me. He was crying. My daddy was a big man and he was crying. I didn't know he could cry. I never did, not that whole day or that whole week.

Mama brought her overnight case. She wore her pink robe and slept in that hard hospital bed with me. I snuggled close to her, nestled against her soft robe. I needed her there to keep that nurse from sneaking in with needles during the night.

The next day I went home. My grandma gave me a doll that wet, and all the neighbors came to see me.

I never did cry. You don't cry watching a newsreel. Your eyes get big, but you don't cry.

Mrs. Doty and 17 children were hospitalized. Orgeron and his son died in the blast, as well as two little boys; the custodian, James Montgomery; and a teacher, Jennie Kolter. Mr. Montgomery and Mrs. Kolter had tried desperately to stall Orgeron while the children were escorted to safety. Most of the students were safely in the building when the bomb finally ripped through the playground.

I'm 42 now. My forehead has a tiny scar where the doctor dug out the last stubborn bits of asphalt, so many years ago.

Recently, while visiting Houston, I drove by Poe School, parked, and walked onto the school yard. The playground seemed a bit smaller than I remembered. The scout house was still there. The asphalt slab was gone; some new buildings stood in its place.

From the corner of my eye, the ghosts came alive. The newsreel clicked on – sirens moaned, lights flashed, children lay about on the grass – it seemed like yesterday.

I thought about tragedy and heroes and common people – ordinary people, on an ordinary day, facing unexpected challenges. No time to plan, to think, or to ponder theoretical ethics. No time for anything but action.

Perhaps the only reason I am sitting here today, writing these words, is that on a day long ago – an ordinary day with ordinary people – life was full of heroism.

James Arlie Montgomery and Jennie Kolter each had a Houston elementary school named after them. Carol J. Roberts is now a civil engineer working for the state of California.