

Emily Douglas

Silence

It's March 13, 1965, a Saturday night. My sister and I are "doing hair" for friends who lounge on the soft comforters of our twin beds or sit cross-legged on the floor in slippers and flip-flops as we get ready for a party at the VFW club, our party clothes hanging from the closet doors. Tonight, there are only five of us, Jean rolling Linda's dark shoulder-length hair on orange juice cans while Joan sits under the beauty-style "hood" dryer my mother bought for us last year. Judy calls out "talk *louder*" from the bathroom where she's shaving her legs. Because it's Saturday night, we're giddy with anticipation as if we might slip through the world of contradictions, escape the ordinary and be touched by divinity. We breathe in the coming night's happiness as if inside a dream: we know the Elberta boys will be there, tall, lanky boys, already tan and beautiful with unforgivably long lashes framing pale green eyes. They're farmers' sons. They drive their daddy's chicken trucks to and from dances, getting out in a feverish pack as if they have so much energy they absolutely *must* jostle and smack each other before ambling into those damp, crowded rooms. Already I can see them standing together by the refreshment table at the VFW Club sipping Pepsi and 7-Up from paper cups, then squeezing those cups into tight-wadded shards to torpedo each other.

As we flip through the pages of *Mademoiselle* or stare at the glitter of our newly painted nails, we believe that everything lies ahead of us. *Everything*. Not just tonight's party but awards, books, proms, concerts, recitals, and college followed by what we call "the rest of our lives."

Our lives. As we stand before the mirror primping, smoothing "Pretty-As-Pink" lipstick on our lips and sweeping a tiny brush of dark mascara through our eyelashes, we never think of our lives as a cloister of whiteness, a code of conformity. But it's exactly that: we're white girls with white girlfriends, boyfriends, teachers, mentors, preachers, doctors, coaches, neighbors, ballgames, and parties. The only black people we know are the maids who come into our houses once a week to mop the kitchen floor and iron our fathers' shirts and the black men who mow our lawns or work as janitors at the public school. And yet, even as we curl and spray our hair, the Civil Rights Movement is

blazing through the once slumbering cities and towns of Alabama, marchers and activists demanding racial justice, planning sit-ins, teach-ins, giving speeches, registering voters, and even going to jail. Though the violence against them is brutal and televised, its reality doesn't penetrate our lives as if we're enveloped in a fog of whiteness, a hush of silence, a cocoon of ignorance.

Tonight, as we gossip about the Elberta boys, wondering who'll be first to break from the pack and ask one of us to dance, no one mentions the 600 peaceful marchers who crossed the Edmund Petus Bridge in Selma last Sunday only to be met by a wall of state troopers, mounted deputies, and white spectators waving Confederate flags. No one mutters, "My god, did you see how horrible it was . . ." how the troopers, their faces disguised by gas masks, rushed the crowd, striking men, women, and children with "sticks, clubs, whips and rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire" to the riotous cheering of bystanders. In truth, no one has said a word all week about "Bloody Sunday," not at the dinner table, in the classroom, or from the pulpit as if we aren't living in Alabama, but in a place where goodness and mercy shine down and all we need worry about is who we'll become, never once questioning how that becoming might restrict or violate others' lives.

"Com'on." My sister nudges me as Joan waits patiently before the full-length mirror. "You do the back while I do the front and sides."

When I glance at Joan, her subtle beauty takes me by surprise: the soft curve of her cheek, the arched brows, the tumble of her chestnut hair as I unwind the rollers and stack them on the dresser. Not once do I think of her as white, privileged, and part of our silence. Not once do I think, *she can go to the public library and read anything she wants*. Instead, I begin combing out her hair, the strands luscious and thick, the ends loosely curled, smooth and lovely, their golden hue shimmering in the evening light. She will be chosen. I know it.