

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Neighbors

DIANE OLIVER

Integration of previously segregated public schools was an early and important goal of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Although required and supported by the Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), integration encountered fierce opposition in many places in the South, and black children and their families who attempted to enroll in white schools met with harassment, threats, and overt violence. A poignant story of one such family is presented in this selection by author Diane Alene Oliver (1943–66), who grew up in the black southern middle class of the 1940s and 1950s and who was herself educated in segregated public schools. Oliver was a friend of the first black student to attend Harding High School in Charlotte, North Carolina. This story, published in the year of her untimely death at age 22, is based on that historical event. It allows modern readers to re-experience what it was like for a black family to break the color line in public education.

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What are the arguments, given by Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, about whether or not to allow their son Tommy to enroll in the white school the next morning? Whose argument do you find more persuasive? Imagining yourself as one of Tommy’s parents, what do you think you would have decided to do, and why? Imagining yourself as Tommy, what do you think you would have said or done? Of what significance is Ellie Mitchell, Tommy’s older sister, in the story? What is the meaning of the story’s title? What connections can you make between this story and King’s “Dream”?

The bus turning the corner of Patterson and Talford Avenue was dull this time of evening. Of the four passengers standing in the rear, she did not recognize any of her friends. Most of the people tucked neatly in the double seats were women, maids and cooks on their way from work or secretaries who had worked late and were riding from the office building at the mill. The cotton mill was out from town, near the house where she worked. She noticed that a few men were riding too. They were obviously just working men, except for one gentleman dressed very neatly in a dark grey suit and carrying what she imagined was a push-button umbrella.

He looked to her as though he usually drove a car to work. She immediately decided that the car probably wouldn’t start this morning so he had to catch the bus to and from work. She was standing in the rear of the bus, peering at the passengers, her arms barely

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reaching the overhead railing, trying not to wobble with every lurch. But every corner the bus turned pushed her head toward a window. And her hair was coming down too, wisps of black curls swung between her eyes. She looked at the people around her. Some of them were white, but most of them were her color. Looking at the passengers at least kept her from thinking of tomorrow. But really she would be glad when it came, then everything would be over.

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She took a firmer grip on the green leather seat and wished she had on her glasses. The man with the umbrella was two people ahead of her on the other side of the bus, so she could see him between other people very clearly. She watched as he unfolded the evening newspaper, craning her neck to see what was on the front page. She stood, impatiently trying to read the headlines, when she realized he was staring up at her rather curiously. Biting her lips she turned her head and stared out the window until the downtown section was in sight.

She would have to wait until she was home to see if they were in the newspaper again. Sometimes she felt that if another person snapped a picture of them she would burst out screaming. Last Monday reporters were already inside the pre-school clinic when she took Tommy for his last polio shot. She didn't understand how anybody could be so heartless to a child. The flashbulb went off right when the needle went in and all the picture showed was Tommy's open mouth.

The bus pulling up to the curb jerked to a stop, startling her and confusing her thoughts. Clutching in her hand the paper bag that contained her uniform, she pushed her way toward the door. By standing in the back of the bus, she was one of the first people to step to the ground. Outside the bus, the evening air felt humid and uncomfortable and her dress kept sticking to her. She looked up and remembered that the weatherman had forecast rain. Just their luck—why, she wondered, would it have to rain on top of everything else?

As she walked along, the main street seemed unnaturally quiet but she decided her imagination was merely playing tricks. Besides, most of the stores had been closed since five o'clock.

She stopped to look at a reversible raincoat in Ivey's window, but although she had a full time job now, she couldn't keep her mind on clothes. She was about to continue walking when she heard a horn blowing. Looking around, half-scared but also curious,

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she saw a man beckoning to her in a grey car. He was nobody she knew but since a nicely dressed woman was with him in the front seat, she walked to the car.

“You’re Jim Mitchell’s girl, aren’t you?” he questioned. “You Ellie or the other one?”

She nodded yes, wondering who he was and how much he had been drinking.

“Now honey,” he said leaning over the woman, “you don’t know me but your father does and you tell him that if anything happens to that boy of his tomorrow we’re ready to set things straight.” He looked her straight in the eye and she promised to take home the message.

Just as the man was about to step on the gas, the woman reached out and touched her arm. “You hurry up home, honey, it’s about dark out here.”

Before she could find out their names, the Chevrolet had disappeared around a corner. Ellie wished someone would magically appear and tell her everything that had happened since August. Then maybe she could figure out what was real and what she had been imagining for the past couple of days.

She walked past the main shopping district up to Tanner’s where Saraline was standing in the window peeling oranges. Everything in the shop was painted orange and green and Ellie couldn’t help thinking that poor Saraline looked out of place. She stopped to wave to her friend who pointed the knife to her watch and then to her boyfriend standing in the rear of the shop. Ellie nodded that she understood. She knew Sara wanted her to tell her grandfather that she had to work late again. Neither one of them could figure out why he didn’t like Charlie. Saraline had finished high school three years ahead of her and it was time for her to be getting married. Ellie watched as her friend stopped peeling the orange long enough to cross her fingers. She nodded again but she was afraid all the crossed fingers in the world wouldn’t stop the trouble tomorrow.

She stopped at the traffic light and spoke to a shriveled woman hunched against the side of a building. Scuffing the bottom of her sneakers on the curb she waited for the woman to open her mouth and grin as she usually did. The kids used to bait her to talk, and since she didn’t have but one tooth in her whole head they called her Doughnut Puncher. But the woman was still, the way everything else had been all week.

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From where Ellie stood, across the street from the Sears and Roebuck parking lot, she could see their house, all of the houses on the single street white people called Welfare Row. Those newspaper men always made her angry. All of their articles showed how rough the people were on their street. And the reporters never said her family wasn't on welfare, the papers always said the family lived on that street. She paused to look across the street at a group of kids pouncing on one rubber ball. There were always white kids around their neighborhood mixed up in the games, but playing with them was almost an unwritten rule. When everybody started going to school, nobody played together any more.

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She crossed at the corner ignoring the cars at the stop light and the closer she got to her street the more she realized that the newspaper was right. The houses were ugly, there were not even any trees, just patches of scraggly bushes and grasses. As she cut across the sticky asphalt pavement covered with cars she was conscious of the parking lot floodlights casting a strange glow on her street. She stared from habit at the house on the end of the block and except for the way the paint was peeling they all looked alike to her. Now at twilight the flaking grey paint had a luminous glow and as she walked down the dirt sidewalk she noticed Mr. Paul's pipe smoke added to the hazy atmosphere. Mr. Paul would be sitting in that same spot waiting until Saraline came home. Ellie slowed her pace to speak to the elderly man sitting on the porch.

"Evening, Mr. Paul," she said. Her voice sounded clear and out of place on the vacant street.

"Eh, who's that?" Mr. Paul leaved over the rail, "What you say, girl?"

"How are you?" she hollered louder. "Sara said she'd be late tonight, she has to work." She waited for the words to sink in.

His head had dropped and his eyes were facing his lap. She could see that he was disappointed. "Couldn't help it," he said finally. "Reckon they needed her again." Then as if he suddenly remembered he turned toward her.

"You people be ready down there? Still gonna let him go tomorrow?"

She looked at Mr. Paul between the missing rails on his porch, seeing how his rolled up trousers seemed to fit exactly in the vacant banister space.

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“Last I heard this morning we’re still letting him go,” she said.

Mr. Paul had shifted his weight back to the chair. “Don’t reckon they’ll hurt him,” he mumbled, scratching the side of his face. “Hope he don’t mind being spit on though. Spitting ain’t like cutting. They can spit on him and nobody’ll ever know who did it,” he said, ending his words with a quiet chuckle.

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Ellie stood on the sidewalk grinding her heel in the dirt waiting for the old man to finish talking. She was glad somebody found something funny to laugh at. Finally he shut up.

“Goodbye, Mr. Paul,” she waved. Her voice sounded loud to her own ears. But she knew the way her head ached intensified noises. She walked home faster, hoping they had some aspirin in the house and that those men would leave earlier tonight.

From the front of her house she could tell that the men were still there. The living room light shone behind the yellow shades, coming through brighter in the patched places. She thought about moving the geranium pot from the porch to catch the rain but changed her mind. She kicked a beer can under a car parked in the street and stopped to look at her reflection on the car door. The tiny flowers of her printed dress made her look as if she had a strange tropical disease. She spotted another can and kicked it out of the way of the car, thinking that one of these days some kid was going to fall and hurt himself. What she wanted to do she knew was kick the car out of the way. Both the station wagon and the Ford had been parked in front of her house all week, waiting. Everybody was just sitting around waiting.

Suddenly she laughed aloud. Reverend Davis’ car was big and black and shiny just like, but no, the smile disappeared from her face, her mother didn’t like for them to say things about other people’s color. She looked around to see who else came, and saw Mr. Moore’s old beat up blue car. Somebody had torn away half of his NAACP sign. Sometimes she really felt sorry for the man. No matter how hard he glued on his stickers somebody always yanked them off again.

Ellie didn’t recognize the third car but it had an Alabama license plate. She turned around and looked up and down the street, hating to go inside. There were no lights on their street, but in the distance she could see the bright lights of the parking lot. Slowly she did an about face and climbed the steps.

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She wondered when her mama was going to remember to get a yellow bulb for the porch. Although the lights hadn't been turned on, usually June bugs and mosquitoes swarmed all around the porch. By the time she was inside the house she always felt like they were crawling in her hair. She pulled on the screen and saw that Mama finally had made Hezekiah patch up the holes. The globs of white adhesive tape scattered over the screen door looked just like misshapen butterflies.

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She listened to her father's voice and could tell by the tone that the men were discussing something important again. She rattled the door once more but nobody came.

"Will somebody please let me in?" Her voice carried through the screen to the knot of men sitting in the corner.

"The door's open," her father yelled. "Come on in."

"The door is not open," she said evenly. "You know we stopped leaving it open." She was feeling tired again and her voice had fallen an octave lower.

"Yeah, I forgot, I forgot," he mumbled walking to the door.

She watched her father almost stumble across a chair to let her in. He was shorter than the light bulb and the light seemed to beam down on him, emphasizing the wrinkles around his eyes. She could tell from the way he pushed open the screen that he hadn't had much sleep either. She'd overheard him telling Mama that the people down at the shop seemed to be piling on the work harder just because of this thing. And he couldn't do anything or say anything to his boss because they probably wanted to fire him.

"Where's Mama?" she whispered. He nodded toward the back.

"Good evening, everybody," she said looking at the three men who had not looked up since she had entered the room. One of the men half stood, but his attention was geared back to something another man was saying. They were sitting on the sofa in their shirt sleeves and there was a pitcher of ice water on the window sill.

"Your mother probably needs some help," her father said. She looked past him trying to figure out who the white man was sitting on the end. His face looked familiar and she tried to remember where she had seen him before. The men were paying no attention to

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her. She bent to see what they were studying and saw a large sheet of white drawing paper. She could see blocks and lines and the man sitting in the middle was marking a trail with the eraser edge of the pencil.

The quiet stillness of the room was making her head ache more. She pushed her way through the red embroidered curtains that led to the kitchen. Page | 7

“I’m home, Mama,” she said, standing in front of the back door facing the big yellow sun Hezekiah and Tommy had painted on the wall above the iron stove. Immediately she felt a warmth permeating her skin. “Where is everybody?” she asked, sitting at the table where her mother was peeling potatoes.

“Mrs. McAllister is keeping Helen and Teenie,” her mother said. “Your brother is staying over with Harry tonight.” With each name she uttered, a slice of potato peeling tumbled to the newspaper on the table. “Tommy’s in the bedroom reading that Uncle Wiggily book.”

Ellie looked up at her mother but her eyes were straight ahead. She knew that Tommy only read the Uncle Wiggily book by himself when he was unhappy. She got up and walked to the kitchen cabinet.

“The other knives dirty?” she asked.

“No,” her mother said, “look in the next drawer.”

Ellie pulled open the drawer, flicking scraps of white paint with her fingernail. She reached for the knife and at the same time a pile of envelopes caught her eye.

“Any more come today?” she asked, pulling out the knife and slipping the envelopes under the dish towels.

“Yes, seven more came today,” her mother accentuated each word carefully. “Your father has them with him in the other room.”

“Same thing?” she asked picking up a potato and wishing she could think of some way to change the subject.

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The white people had been threatening them for the past three weeks. Some of the letters were aimed at the family, but most of them were directed to Tommy himself. About once a week in the same handwriting somebody wrote that he'd better not eat lunch at school because they were going to poison him.

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They had been getting those letters ever since the school board made Tommy's name public. She sliced the potato and dropped the pieces in the pan of cold water. Out of all those people he had been the only one the board had accepted for transfer to the elementary school. The other children, the members said, didn't live in the district. As she cut the eyes out of another potato she thought about the first letter they had received and how her father just set fire to it in the ashtray. But then Mr. Bell said they'd better save the rest, in case anything happened, they might need the evidence for court.

She peeped up again at her mother, "Who's that white man in there with Daddy?"

"One of Lawyer Belk's friends," she answered. "He's pastor of the church that's always on television Sunday morning. Mr. Belk seems to think that having him around will do some good." Ellie saw that her voice was shaking just like her hand as she reached for the last potato. Both of them could hear Tommy in the next room mumbling to himself. She was afraid to look at her mother.

Suddenly Ellie was aware that her mother's hands were trembling violently. "He's so little," she whispered and suddenly the knife slipped out of her hands and she was crying and breathing at the same time.

Ellie didn't know what to do but after a few seconds she cleared away the peelings and put the knives in the sink. "Why don't you lie down?" she suggested. "I'll clean up and get Tommy in bed." Without saying anything her mother rose and walked to her bedroom.

Ellie wiped off the table and draped the dishcloth over the sink. She stood back and looked at the rusting pipes powdered with a whitish film. One of these days they would have to paint the place. She tiptoed past her mother who looked as if she had fallen asleep from exhaustion.

"Tommy," she called softly, "come on and get ready for bed."

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Tommy sitting in the middle of the floor did not answer. He was sitting the way she imagined he would be, cross-legged, pulling his ear lobe as he turned the ragged pages of *Uncle Wiggily at the Zoo*.

“What you doing, Tommy?” she said, squatting on the floor beside him. He smiled and pointed at the picture of the ducks. Page | 9

“School starts tomorrow,” she said, turning a page with him. “Don’t you think it’s time to go to bed?”

“Oh Ellie, do I have to go now?” She looked down at the serious brown eyes and the closely cropped hair. For a minute she wondered if he questioned having to go to bed now or to school tomorrow.

“Well,” she said, “aren’t you about through with the book?” He shook his head. “Come on,” she pulled him up, “you’re a sleepy head.” Still he shook his head.

“When Helen and Teenie coming home?”

“Tomorrow after you come home from school they’ll be here.”

She lifted him from the floor, thinking how small he looked to be facing all those people tomorrow.

“Look,” he said, breaking away from her hand and pointing to a blue shirt and a pair of cotton twill pants, “Mama got them for me to wear tomorrow.”

While she ran water in the tub, she heard him crawl on top of the bed. He was quiet and she knew he was untying his sneakers.

“Put your shoes out,” she called through the door, “and maybe Daddy will polish them.”

“Is Daddy still in there with those men? Mama made me be quiet so I wouldn’t bother them.”

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He padded into the bathroom with bare feet and crawled into the water. As she scrubbed him they played Ask Me A Question, their own version of Twenty Questions. She had just dried him and was about to have him step into his pajamas when he asked: “Are they gonna get me tomorrow?”

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“Who’s going to get you?” She looked into his eyes and began rubbing him furiously with the towel.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “Somebody I guess.”

“Nobody’s going to get you,” she said, “who wants a little boy who gets bubblegum in his hair anyway—but us?” He grinned but as she hugged him she thought how much he looked like his father. They walked to the bed to say his prayers and while they were kneeling she heard the first drops of rain. By the time she covered him up and tucked the spread off the floor the rain had changed to a steady downpour.

When Tommy had gone to bed her mother got up again and began ironing clothes in the kitchen. Something, she said, to keep her thoughts busy. While her mother folded and sorted the clothes Ellie drew up a chair from the kitchen table. They sat in the kitchen for a while listening to the voices of the men in the next room. Her mother’s quiet speech broke the stillness in the room.

“I’d rather,” she said, making sweeping motions with the iron, “that you stayed home from work tomorrow and went with your father to take Tommy. I don’t think I’ll be up to those people.”

Ellie nodded, “I don’t mind,” she said, tracing circles on the oilcloth covered table.

“Your father’s going,” her mother continued. “Belk and Reverend Davis are too. I think that white man in there will probably go.”

“They may not need me,” Ellie answered.

“Tommy will,” her mother said, folding the last dish towel and storing it in the cabinet.

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“Mama, I think he’s scared,” the girl turned toward the woman. “He was so quiet while I was washing him.”

“I know,” she answered, sitting down heavily. “He’s been that way all day.” Her brown wavy hair glowed in the dim lighting of the kitchen. “I told him he wasn’t going to school with Jakie and Bob anymore but I said he was going to meet some other children just as nice.”

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Ellie saw that her mother was twisting her wedding band around and around on her finger.

“I’ve already told Mrs. Ingraham that I wouldn’t be able to come out tomorrow.” Ellie paused, “She didn’t say very much. She didn’t even say anything about his pictures in the newspaper. Mr. Ingraham said we were getting right crazy but even he didn’t say anything else.”

She stopped to look at the clock sitting near the sink. “It’s almost time for the cruise cars to begin,” she said. Her mother followed Ellie’s eyes to the sink. The policemen circling their block every twenty minutes was supposed to make them feel safe, but hearing the cars come so regularly and that light flashing through the shade above her bed only made her nervous.

She stopped talking to push a wrinkle out of the shiny red cloth, dragging her finger along the table edges. “How long before those men going to leave?” she asked her mother. Just as she spoke she heard one of the men say something about getting some sleep. “I didn’t mean to run them away,” she said, smiling. Her mother half-smiled too. They listened for the sound of motors and tires and waited for her father to shut the front door.

In a few seconds her father’s head pushed through the curtain. “Want me to turn down your bed now, Ellie?” She felt uncomfortable staring up at him, the whole family looked drained of all energy.

“That’s all right,” she answered. “I’ll sleep in Helen and Teenie’s bed tonight.”

“How’s Tommy?” he asked looking toward the bedroom. He came in and sat down at the table with them.

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They were silent before he spoke. “I keep wondering if we should send him.” He lit a match and watched the flame disappear into the ashtray, then he looked into his wife’s eyes. “There’s no telling what these fool white folks will do.”

Her mother reached over and patted his hand. “We’re doing what we have to do, I guess,” she said. “Sometimes though I wish the others weren’t so much older than him.” Page | 12

“But it seems so unfair,” Ellie broke in, “sending him there all by himself like that. Everybody keeps asking me why the MacAdams didn’t apply for their children.”

“Eloise.” Her father’s voice sounded curt. “We aren’t answering for the MacAdams, we’re trying to do what’s right for your brother. He’s not old enough to have his own say. You and the others could decide for yourselves, but we’re the ones that have to do for him.”

She didn’t say anything but watched him pull a handful of envelopes out of his pocket and tuck them in the cabinet drawer. She knew that if anyone had told him in August that Tommy would be the only one going to Jefferson Davis¹ they would not have let him go.

“Those the new ones?” she asked. “What they say?”

“Let’s not talk about the letters,” her father said. “Let’s go to bed.”

Outside they heard the rain become heavier. Since early evening she had become accustomed to the sound. Now it blended in with the rest of the noises that had accumulated in the back of her mind since the whole thing began.

As her mother folded the ironing board they heard the quiet wheels of the police car. Ellie noticed that the clock said twelve-ten and she wondered why they were early. Her mother pulled the iron cord from the switch and they stood silently waiting for the police car to turn around and pass the house again, as if the car’s passing were a final blessing for the night.

Suddenly she was aware of a noise that sounded as if everything had broken loose in her head at once, a loudness that almost shook the foundation of the house. At the same

¹ *Jefferson Davis (1808–89) was the president of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Many elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the South have been named after him.*

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time the lights went out and instinctively her father knocked them to the floor. They could hear the tinkling of glass near the front of the house and Tommy began screaming.

“Tommy, get down,” her father yelled.

She hoped he would remember to roll under the bed the way they had practiced. She was aware of objects falling and breaking as she lay perfectly still. Her breath was coming in jerks and then there was a second noise, a smaller explosion but still drowning out Tommy’s cries.

“Stay still,” her father commanded. “I’m going to check on Tommy. They may throw another one.”

She watched him crawl across the floor, pushing a broken flower vase and an iron skillet out of his way. All of the sounds, Tommy’s crying, the breaking glass, everything was echoing in her ears. She felt as if they had been crouching on the floor for hours but when she heard the police car door slam, the luminous hands of the clock said only twelve-fifteen.

She heard other cars drive up and pairs of heavy feet trample on the porch. “You folks all right in there?”

She could visualize the hands pulling open the door, because she knew the voice. Sergeant Kearns had been responsible for patrolling the house during the past three weeks. She heard him click the light switch in the living room but the darkness remained intense.

Her father deposited Tommy in his wife’s lap and went to what was left of the door. In the next fifteen minutes policemen were everywhere. While she rummaged around underneath the cabinet for a candle, her mother tried to hush up Tommy. His cheek was cut where he had scratched himself on the springs of the bed. Her mother motioned for her to dampen a cloth and put some petroleum jelly on it to keep him quiet. She tried to put him to bed again but he would not go, even when she promised to stay with him for the rest of the night. And so she sat in the kitchen rocking the little boy back and forth on her lap.

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Ellie wandered around the kitchen but the light from the single candle put an eerie glow on the walls making her nervous. She began picking up pans, stepping over pieces of broken crockery and glassware. She did not want to go into the living room yet, but if she listened closely, snatches of the policemen's conversation came through the curtain.

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She heard one man say that the bomb landed near the edge of the yard, that was why it had only gotten the front porch. She knew from their talk that the living room window was shattered completely. Suddenly Ellie sat down. The picture of the living room window kept flashing in her mind and a wave of feeling invaded her body making her shake as if she had lost all muscular control. She slept on the couch, right under that window.

She looked at her mother to see if she too had realized, but her mother was looking down at Tommy and trying to get him to close his eyes. Ellie stood up and crept toward the living room trying to prepare herself for what she would see. Even that minute of determination could not make her control the horror that she felt. There were jagged holes all along the front of the house and the sofa was covered with glass and paint. She started to pick up the picture that had toppled from the book shelf, then she just stepped over the broken frame.

Outside her father was talking and, curious to see who else was with him, she walked across the splinters to the yard. She could see pieces of the geranium pot and the red blossoms turned face down. There were no lights in the other houses on the street. Across from their house she could see forms standing in the door and shadows being pushed back and forth. "I guess the MacAdams are glad they just didn't get involved." No one heard her speak, and no one came over to see if they could help; she knew why and did not really blame them. They were afraid their house could be next.

Most of the policemen had gone now and only one car was left to flash the revolving red light in the rain. She heard the tall skinny man tell her father they would be parked outside for the rest of the night. As she watched the reflection of the police cars returning to the station, feeling sick on her stomach, she wondered now why they bothered.

Ellie went back inside the house and closed the curtain behind her. There was nothing anyone could do now, not even to the house. Everything was scattered all over the floor and poor Tommy still would not go to sleep. She wondered what would happen when the

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news spread through their section of town, and at once remembered the man in the grey Chevrolet. It would serve them right if her father's friends got one of them.

Ellie pulled up an overturned chair and sat down across from her mother who was crooning to Tommy. What Mr. Paul said was right, white people just couldn't be trusted. Her family had expected anything but even though they had practiced ducking, they didn't really expect anybody to try tearing down the house. But the funny thing was the house belonged to one of them. Maybe it was a good thing her family were just renters.

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Exhausted, Ellie put her head down on the table. She didn't know what they were going to do about tomorrow, in the day time they didn't need electricity. She was too tired to think any more about Tommy, yet she could not go to sleep. So, she sat at the table trying to sit still, but every few minutes she would involuntarily twitch. She tried to steady her hands, all the time listening to her mother's sing-songy voice and waiting for her father to come back inside the house.

She didn't know how long she lay hunched against the kitchen table, but when she looked up, her wrists bore the imprints of her hair. She unfolded her arms gingerly, feeling the blood rush to her fingertips. Her father sat in the chair opposite her, staring at the vacant space between them. She heard her mother creep away from the table, taking Tommy to his room.

Ellie looked out the window. The darkness was turning to grey and the hurt feeling was disappearing. As she sat there she could begin to look at the kitchen matter-of-factly. Although the hands of the clock were just a little past five-thirty, she knew somebody was going to have to start clearing up and cook breakfast.

She stood and tipped across the kitchen to her parents' bedroom. "Mama," she whispered, standing near the door of Tommy's room. At the sound of her voice, Tommy made a funny throaty noise in his sleep. Her mother motioned for her to go out and be quiet. Ellie knew then that Tommy had just fallen asleep. She crept back to the kitchen and began picking up the dishes that could be salvaged, being careful not to go into the living room.

She walked around her father, leaving the broken glass underneath the kitchen table. "You want some coffee?" she asked.

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He nodded silently, in strange contrast she thought to the water faucet that turned with a loud gurgling noise. While she let the water run to get hot she measured out the instant coffee in one of the plastic cups. Next door she could hear people moving around in the Williams' kitchen, but they too seemed much quieter than usual.

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“You reckon everybody knows by now?” she asked, stirring the coffee and putting the saucer in front of him.

“Everybody will know by the time the city paper comes out,” he said. “Somebody was here last night from the *Observer*. Guess it'll make front page.”

She leaned against the cabinet for support watching him trace endless circles in the brown liquid with the spoon. “Sergeant Kearns says they'll have almost the whole force out there tomorrow,” he said.

“Today,” she whispered.

Her father looked at the clock and then turned his head.

“When's your mother coming back in here?” he asked, finally picking up the cup and drinking the coffee.

“Tommy's just off to sleep,” she answered. “I guess she'll be in here when he's asleep for good.”

She looked out the window of the back door at the row of tall hedges that had separated their neighborhood from the white people for as long as she remembered. While she stood there she heard her mother walk into the room. To her ears the steps seemed much slower than usual. She heard her mother stop in front of her father's chair.

“Jim,” she said, sounding very timid, “what we going to do?” Yet as Ellie turned toward her she noticed her mother's face was strangely calm as she looked down on her husband.

Ellie continued standing by the door, listening to them talk. Nobody asked the question to which they all wanted an answer.

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“I keep thinking,” her father said finally, “that the policemen will be with him all day. They couldn’t hurt him inside the school building without getting some of their own kind.”

“But he’ll be in there all by himself,” her mother said softly. “A hundred policemen can’t be a little boy’s only friends.”

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She watched her father wrap his calloused hands, still splotted with machine oil, around the salt shaker on the table.

“I keep trying,” he said to her, “to tell myself that somebody’s got to be the first one and then I just think how quiet he’s been all week.”

Ellie listened to the quiet voices that seemed to be a room apart from her. In the back of her mind she could hear phrases of a hymn her grandmother used to sing, something about trouble, her being born for trouble.

“Jim, I cannot let my baby go.” Her mother’s words, although quiet, were carefully pronounced.

“Maybe,” her father answered, “it’s not in our hands. Reverend Davis and I were talking day before yesterday how God tested the Israelites, maybe he’s just trying us.”

“God expects you to take care of your own,” his wife interrupted. Ellie sensed a trace of bitterness in her mother’s voice.

“Tommy’s not going to understand why he can’t go to school,” her father replied. “He’s going to wonder why, and how are we going to tell him we’re afraid of them?” Her father’s hand clutched the coffee cup. “He’s going to be fighting them the rest of his life. He’s got to start sometime.”

“But he’s not on their level. Tommy’s too little to go around hating people. One of the others, they’re bigger, they understand about things.”

Ellie still leaning against the door saw that the sun covered part of the sky behind the hedges, and the light slipping through the kitchen window seemed to reflect the shiny red of the table cloth.

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“He’s our child,” she heard her mother say. “Whatever we do, we’re going to be the cause.” Her father had pushed the cup away from him and sat with his hands covering part of his face. Outside Ellie could hear a horn blowing.

“God knows we tried but I guess there’s just no use.” Her father’s voice forced her attention back to the two people sitting in front of her. “Maybe when things come back to normal, we’ll try again.”

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He covered his wife’s chunky fingers with the palm of his hand and her mother seemed to be enveloped in silence. The three of them remained quiet, each involved in his own thoughts, but related, Ellie knew, to the same thing. She was the first to break the silence.

“Mama,” she called after a long pause, “do you want me to start setting the table for breakfast?”

Her mother nodded.

Ellie turned the clock so she could see it from the sink while she washed the dishes that had been scattered over the floor.

“You going to wake up Tommy or you want me to?”

“No,” her mother said, still holding her father’s hand, “let him sleep. When you wash your face, you go up the street and call Hezekiah. Tell him to keep up with the children after school, I want to do something to this house before they come home.”

She stopped talking and looked around the kitchen, finally turning to her husband. “He’s probably kicked the spread off by now,” she said. Ellie watched her father, who without saying anything walked toward the bedroom.

She watched her mother lift herself from the chair and automatically push in the stuffing underneath the cracked plastic cover. Her face looked set, as it always did when she was trying hard to keep her composure.

“He’ll need something hot when he wakes up. Hand me the oatmeal,” she commanded, reaching on top of the icebox for matches to light the kitchen stove.

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