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Doris and the Dolls

In elementary school, the other girls and I were mesmerized by our friend Doris. She was “colored” but looked white. In segregated Little Rock, Arkansas, she was one of us, but not one of us.

Doris was my good friend. She lived down the street from me. Her father, our school principal, was my skin color, but I swear her mother and grandmother looked white. I could not help but stare, comparing the skin colors and facial features of her family when I visited Doris’s home. My mother said the family was Negro and that we came in all shades of color, including mine: light-skinned, sometimes called high yellow. My brother called me red. I was lighter than anyone in my family. But I was not like Doris.

I had dark brown eyes. She had gray-green eyes. My hair was black, long, and painfully straightened by a hot straightening comb. On most days it was braided. Doris’s hair was long, naturally straight, and a light straw color, the same color that I saw on many of the white girls on *American Bandstand*. Her hair moved, flowing naturally, just like the hair of a Barbie doll. In those days, all the dolls were white; there were no pretty dolls of color.

But in the early 1960s in Little Rock, we were just “colored girls” insulated within our Negro community and schools. We had trouble understanding why federal troops entered our city to protect colored children as they tried to attend Central High School. And we were too young, too cocooned, to have heard about the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision.

We were aware that some whites did not want their children going to school with colored children. We knew that they thought they were better than us. We saw the protests on TV. We saw Martin Luther King Jr. and were electrified by his voice and his words. I heard my mother express fear about angry whites and her worry that Dr. King would be hurt. But we were children—we felt safe, separate from this other cruel world. In my home there were three pictures on the wall: Jesus, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr.

Doris and I would walk home together from school with a select group of girlfriends who lived in the neighborhood. Most days we laughed and gossiped as we walked or skipped on our way home. Fridays, we were on guard. That was when a small group of kids would pick one unlucky fellow student to harass and beat up after school. It was like a game of “It” but worse; if you alerted any adult about who would be It, you would suffer the consequences.

On this Friday, according to lunchroom talk, Doris was going to be the target. As we left with Doris from the front of the school, we walked fast; we knew not to run. We did not stop at the corner grocery store to get dill pickles and peppermint sticks, the way we usually did. We were intent on avoiding the group that we knew was following us. But the other group had taken a shortcut. They caught up with us on the next block.

The group called out Doris’s name. We stepped back. Doris looked around and found herself standing alone. She started to cry. A big boy from the other group pushed her to the ground while the other kids taunted her.

You think you're something because your daddy's the principal and you got the white hair!

Other kids, mostly girls, pulled her hair and kicked her. I stood frozen with the other members of my group. We said nothing. We did nothing.

The words felt like daggers.

If it wasn't for your high yellow father . . . If it wasn't for your hair you would be ugly, but you ain't shit . . .

The words “white girl, white hair, green-eyed” reverberated in my ears.

As I watched, I loved Doris, but I hated her. It was the same way I felt about my Barbie doll. Barbie was the epitome of female beauty that every little girl believed she had to possess. I felt as if I was supposed to love this doll, but she did not resemble me. She was almost like a trophy that I could look at and show to my friends but not love.

Even though I admired Barbie, one day I decided to cut off all her hair. I held her in my hands and, as I had done numerous times before, compared our skin tones, studied her small feet and unnaturally long legs. As I looked, I felt resentment and confusion at her long neck, those long eyelashes canvassing lifeless eyes; her white skin, her perfect chin, her cute turned-up nose, and her perfectly shaped pink lips. I wanted to destroy her. I pulled at her long, straight blonde hair. Except for a few strands that laced through my fingers, her hair was still perfect. With my left thumb, I tried to push her face in, but nothing happened. The plastic bounced back. I could not hurt Barbie. She could not feel me. But I could feel what she represented. I grabbed a pair of scissors. In frustration, I cut every lock of hair down to her scalp. Still not satisfied with the results, I took her small head in my small hand and pulled as hard as I could. Her head popped off.

And so it was that, for a few seconds, my friends and I hated Doris. She was not one of us because she had the *it* we could not have. We knew that she represented something but we were too young, too unworldly to identify what *it* was. We just knew *it* was in the air and had something to do with the protests, the violence, and the riots, what we saw on TV but could not understand.

The group finally ended its taunting and ran away. Doris was whimpering. We looked her over to make sure that she was not seriously hurt. We helped her up and wiped away the dirt on her clothes the best we could. She had a few cuts on her arm and forehead. Luckily, we all wore pants under our dresses. She looked like she had fallen off the playground bars, which is what we would say. We were mostly quiet. We felt bad for Doris, but we also had a sense of satisfaction, some feeling that Doris should have to pay for having something that we did not have. Somehow we knew that, just like Barbie, Doris personified what was perceived as pretty by the larger society.

We had no idea the impact those physical and psychic scars would have on Doris and on all of us. We did not know that we had already been scarred. We had many scabs; this recent incident rubbed the scabs raw, turning them into wounds again. We did not know why we had such mixed feelings about Doris; she really was our friend.

We knew nothing about the doll study, nothing about the black children in the study who always chose the white doll over the black doll. This study about learned self-hatred and the psychological impact of segregation was filmed and presented to the Supreme Court for the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case. The film showed black girls in a room with a table full of dolls; the only difference in the dolls was the skin colors. All of the girls attended segregated schools, which was the practice by law. The

researchers asked the girls, individually, to choose the doll that best fit the adjective being described. When the researcher asked the girls to pick the doll that was the prettiest, they always chose the white doll; and the ugliest, always the black doll. Any time a positive descriptor was used, the girls always chose the white doll; every time negative descriptors were used, the black doll was chosen. The findings of the study were so alarming that they became one of the major factors in deciding that separate cannot be equal.

We knew nothing about the politics of skin color and privilege. All we knew was that an undefinable *it* was in the air, invading our once-sheltered lives.

As we started on our way home, one of the kids from the other group circled back our way, laughing as he yelled, "One of you other white girls will be next!"

I looked at each of the girls in my group. Stunned, I realized for the first time, that all of us were light-skinned colored girls.