



Simon & Garfunkel
"The Sound of Silence"
Wednesday Morning,
3 A. M.
10/1964
Columbia

White Rabbit

Dorothy Rice

In 1968, I was fourteen, a high school freshman in idyllic Mill Valley, a small town across the bay from San Francisco. The campus featured 1930s-era stucco and towering redwoods. Mount Tamalpais was its backdrop. The lumpy mountain top resembled a reclining maiden, her long hair cascading down the mountainside, the tip of her dainty nose and breasts wreathed in morning fog that rolled in off the Pacific and receded in time for lunch on the front lawn.

Mr. Lawrence was my freshman English teacher; he taught choir and Madrigal singers too. I secretly envied the kids in the school's Madrigal ensemble—the Renaissance Faire gowns the girls got to wear, rich velvet with gold piping, their hair done up in fancy braids laced with ribbons.

We called Mr. Lawrence the White Rabbit, an allusion to the Jefferson Airplane song (*one pill makes you larger, one pill makes you small*). He was soft and white, and his translucent skin turned pink when he was flustered.

In an attempt to seduce us into appreciating poetic language, Mr. Lawrence brought contemporary song lyrics to class, mimeographed in smudgy, purplish ink. He read us the lyrics to Simon & Garfunkel's "The Boxer" and "The Sound of Silence," in his lisping, rabbit voice.

"This is poetry, too," he would say, all bushy-tailed and bright-eyed, as if he was being very clever indeed, tricking us with relevance." Do any of the lines speak to you? What do they say?"

*Fools, said I, You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows*

Those two lines, from the "The Sound of Silence," didn't speak to me; they screamed. I harbored a secret, a big one. But I didn't raise my hand. I was afraid I'd give myself away.

My favorite part of class was when Mr. Lawrence put one of his warped albums on the record player, a contraption that opened out from a mesh suitcase with a brass clasp. As Simon & Garfunkel's ethereal harmonies filled the classroom, it was hard to maintain my mask of indifference, hard to pretend I wasn't moved, that I didn't feel the truth packed into those songs. I kept my head down and plucked at the patches and embroidery on my Levi 501 jeans.

Yet the music, the words, thrummed in my ears. They echoed and lingered. Some got stuck.

The vision that was planted in my brain, still remains

I struggled to hold back tears. Losing it in English class, because of Mr. Lawrence and his records, would not be cool.

Sophomore year, I took choir with the White Rabbit. That was a stretch for me. I wasn't a joiner. Group activities—all those clubs and sports that got your photograph in the yearbook—scared me. But choir was a prerequisite for Madrigals. I believed that could be

my one thing, so I crooned my heart out in beginning choir. The mingling voices, being part of that powerful sound, made my heart swell.

A public recital for friends and family was planned at the end of the term. We would wear matching blue blazers with gold buttons. After that, I could audition for Madrigals. And after *that*, maybe I'd be invited to be the front singer for a rock band or I could even start my own group.

I still had my secret. It had hardened by now, becoming a familiar stone in my belly. My secret had a name: Ron.

Walking home from school one afternoon, he'd pulled onto the shoulder alongside the football field and offered me a ride. I'd seen him before, cruising in his black Mustang. He was going my way that day, he was sort of familiar, he looked like a guy in a band, and there were guitar cases in the back seat. I got in the car.

Ron was older. Old enough that he was on his own. Old enough that his cut cheeks were shaded with dark stubble.

Long story short, he didn't stop the car at my street or the one after that. He drove to the windswept Marin County coast, parked beside a sheer cliff, pressed my face into his lap and held me there, gasping for breath, gagging, until he was done.

I didn't tell anyone. I figured they'd say it was my fault for getting into the car.

I never told anyone about all the other times either.

Before letting me out of the car that first time, Ron asked for my phone number. I thought it was a power trip or a trick, my ticket to safety. For the rest of high school, he'd call, every week or two, then pick me up and drive down some deserted road for a repeat performance. That was it. Half an hour, pick up to drop off.

So, back to Mr. Lawrence and beginning choir. Among my fantasies while singing "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore" and all the rest was that I would blossom into this amazing singer. I'd be discovered, big-time, like my-face-on-the-cover-of-Rolling-Stone famous. Ron would beg me to be his for-real girlfriend, but it would be too late. I'd be with some legit rock star, jetting off to London.

The weekend of the big end-of-semester choir recital arrived. Ron had called the night before. He gave me an address, said it was his house and told me to come see him after school. This was huge. In all the time I'd known him, we'd never been seen in public together, never been anywhere but the front seat of his car. It almost felt like a real date. Maybe I'd tell him about the choir performance. Maybe he'd come. Maybe things would be different between us.

The address Ron gave me was a few streets behind the high school. I walked there, carrying a blue choir jacket over one arm, on its wire hanger, covered in a plastic dry cleaner bag. I wore my favorite dress, a clingy lavender mini, with a psychedelic pattern and a soft ruffle around the neckline. My mother called it "a real butt scraper." She'd picked it out, said it showed off my legs, which, according to her, were my best asset. I'd done my hair up in rags the night before so it was a mass of thick sausage curls, held back from my face with a flowered ribbon, my sexy Little-Bo-Peep look.

Through the overhang of tree branches, sun spots sprinkled the pavement. A light wind fluttered the front of my dress, the short skirt around my bare thighs.

I knocked at the door.

Ron pulled me into a bedroom he said was his. The closet was bare, except for two silk kimonos on hangers. He hung my choir jacket on the rod.

"This one's yours," he said, sliding one of the kimonos off its hanger.

"Mine?"

"Take your clothes off, put it on."

"Mine, mine?"

"Why wouldn't it be."

I didn't want to put the kimono on. It didn't feel right. He was acting funny. Like for some reason it mattered to him that I wear the kimono when I was already wearing my favorite dress in the world. Besides, what we did had never required me taking any clothes off. The pretense of the kimono, that he'd actually thought I would believe he'd bought it for me, made me feel cheap, underestimated. What we had wasn't much, but I'd never felt like he outright lied to me. I'd done that part myself.

"Let's go outside," he said, giving up on the kimonos. He led the way down a hallway, through the kitchen and out the back door.

The yard was narrow, with one big tree at the back and a bare mattress in the middle of a weedy lawn. He pulled me down onto the mattress and leaned back on his elbows. My dress inched up so my fancy, patterned panties showed. I kicked off my shoes.

He undid his pants. I stared up at the house. Dark windows glared down on us.

"It's cool," he said. "We're alone."

He tugged at my dress, lifted it over my head. The breeze grazed my bare nipples. I'd wanted him to see my body, to touch my body. I'd wondered why he never had. But he was acting so weird, self-conscious and shifty. I curled onto my side so my back was to the house. He tugged me back around rearranged my limbs as if I were a mannequin.

I sensed movement in one of the upper story windows.

"Relax," he said, grasping my wrists. "We're alone. I swear."

But I'd seen it. A dark shadow, there then gone. I pulled away, wriggled back into my dress, snatched my leather clogs from the grass and ran for the back door. Ron sprinted in front of me. There was a window in the top half of the back door. Ron tried to block it with his body, but I saw the other guy standing there.

"You freaked her out, man," Ron said, yelling at this stranger. "You fucking blew it."

I pushed past Ron, through the door and through the kitchen. For a moment, the three of us were close in a narrow hallway. The other guy was a head taller than Ron. He leered down at me, blood-shot eyes, long, fright-show blonde hair, low-slung jeans, dog tags on a chain on his bare chest. Maybe Ron had looked that hungry the first time, all the other times too, but I hadn't seen it. His eyes were so black and he'd had more practice. This guy was different, scary different. He lurched towards me.

"Leave her alone," Ron said. "Seriously man, it's over."

I ran to the bedroom for my things. The tall one followed. I felt his breath. Smelt his sour sweat. He laughed, wild-eyed, and snatched at my arms. He didn't follow me out the front door, only watched, cackling, as I stumbled down the street, hugging my pack and shoes, dragging the choir jacket in the dust. At the bottom of the hill, I stopped to pick gravel from the soles of my feet.

It had been a set up. Ron didn't really live there. Maybe he'd been bragging about what a dumb fuck I was, about this high school chick who would do anything he wanted, all he had to do was call. His friend wanted to watch. Maybe he'd planned to join us on the mattress, or film the show. And there I was in my ribbons and curls, my favorite party dress.

The choir performance that night was in a big church with stained glass windows, the church where my older sister would soon be married. Mr. Lawrence arranged us in rows up on the altar. Being one of the tallest, I was in the back row. Before the program started, he came up behind me. I figured he was going to say something about how well I'd done in class that semester, maybe, I hoped, suggest I try out for Madrigals. He cleared his throat. His cheeks and throat were splotchy and pink. Pre-performance jitters, I figured. He leaned close and whispered.

"How about you just mouth the words tonight. You know, lip sync. Can you do that for me?"

Before he said that, I'd thought I had a good voice, no, a great voice. Before that afternoon on the mattress, I'd thought Ron sort of liked me, not that he loved me or anything, but that I was at least a real person, not just some stupid chick.

*Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again*

My future did not include becoming a Madrigal singer or fronting a rock band, but there were plenty of other things. That was all a long time ago. Close to fifty years. I'm fine, more than fine.

Mr. Lawrence was a decent teacher. He tried and seemed to care. Perhaps he believed he was doing me a kindness, sparing me public embarrassment. Back in high school, I was a loner, one of the quiet ones. Ron was a predator. Isolation, loneliness, and fantasies of rock star boyfriends, any boyfriend really, made me vulnerable, easy prey.

*Fools, said I, You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows*

True words, then and now. Secrecy is the perfect growth medium for guilt, fear, and shame. Truth is the antidote. It robs the predators of their most potent tools.

*Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you*