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The Bronx. June 22nd, 1960

Joey Hunter, known in the neighborhood as *Hunt*, turned eighteen the day of his senior prom, the most hopeful day of his young life—or so he believed—because it would be his first date with Debby Ann Murphy.

That morning he waited in his *Religion in Society* class as Brother Aloysius James, blond hair ascending in waves from his soft pink forehead, clapped his hands to call them to attention. Forty boys, paired into reluctant couples, glared at Brother from either end of the St. Helena's Boys' Division basketball court, their faces in the gym's unflattering light a mix of curiosity, amusement, resentment and outrage.

“Why we gotta do this?” from Kevin Flanagan, his face dominated by little red volcanoes.

“Why can't we use real girls?” This time the question came from Hunt's assigned partner, Sal Buccarelli, first string varsity linebacker, known on the gridiron as Sal the Butcher and, in the after-school hours, as leader of a local gang of would-be toughs called the Brandos.

Brother Aloysius turned to face Sal of the massive shoulders. “We want you to be ready for them, that’s why. Tonight at the prom we want you all to behave like the gentlemen we know you can be.” *And not the hairy apes you so often are*, his muttered aside so soft only Hunt caught it.

Brother flicked the switch on the turntable, set the needle delicately on the vinyl: the trombone sound of *Moonlight Serenade* filled the gym’s barren spaces. Never mind that the big band era had passed, that the boys before him were now dancing to Bill Haley and the Comets, *this*—Brother believed—was music with elegance and grace. He saw it as his duty to bring civilization to their imprisoned, barbarian hearts. “I need a volunteer,” he called out sharply.

Instinctively he turned to Hunt.

“Oh no, Brother. I’m always the girl. Sal never lets me be the guy.”

With relief, Hunt watched Brother re-direct his attention to Sal. Something about the over-sized, lumbering linebacker and self-proclaimed gang leader—with a face the texture of stucco and eyes the color of an overcast sky—being led around the gym in the feminine role seemed to tickle Brother’s fancy. “Sallie,” he said, using the nickname Sal detested.

“Nah, Brudda. Not me. Not me.”

But Brother Aloysius marched to him, bowed briefly and said in a loud clear voice, “May I have the honor of this dance?” He cupped his hand firmly around Sal’s waist. “Hand on her hip,” he instructed the class, “not where you’d like it to be, ha-ha. Your touch should be firm but gentle. Take her right hand, extend your arm and lead her, *glide* her, into the music. At the prom tonight, apply the moral standards we’ve discussed in class. Treat her with respect. Treat her like she was your sister.”

A collective groan rose around him.

Brother Aloysius, one eye on the less-than-graceful technique of the boys dancing under the back boards and along the foul lines, confided to Hunt later that waltzing with Sal Buccarelli was like pulling a two-ton truck through a muddy ditch.

Hunt could empathize. Being shoved around the dance floor by Sal was like being *rammed* by a two-ton truck. Mid-song, Brother guided Sal back to Hunt, muttering before he turned away because he couldn't help himself, "You big oaf."

Sal directed his response to Hunt, as if *he* were the source of the insult. "I ain't no loaf."

"Oaf," Hunt corrected him. "He called you a big *oaf*."

And for that clarification, Hunt was rewarded with a bloody nose, compliments of Sal during lunch break, as soon as they were out of sight of Brother Aloysius who had cafeteria duty that day.

More bad luck soon followed.

Because seniors were dismissed at noon on Prom day, Hunt decided to work a few hours at the beach. No sooner had he stepped inside the storeroom when Big Tony barked from his glassed-in office: “Hunter, get in uniform. You’re on beach patrol today.”

“*Me?*”

“O’Brien’s not coming in. We need another Rat out there.” In the office doorway, his body appeared like a series of concentric circles: small round head, a larger neck, an even larger gut. “Get in uniform,” he said. “Move it.”

Normally Hunt’s job was *inside* the storeroom, supplying soda and ice cream to the roving vendors, the “Desert Rats” who trudged from one end of the beach to the other, lugging a twenty-two pound container of orangeade on their backs or an equally heavy and even more cumbersome metal freezer case of fudgicles and creamsicles, hawking their wares to the screaming kids and insolent teens who thronged the mile-long crescent beach.

Today there’d be no refuge in the storeroom’s air-cooled

interior. Today it would be sweating in the early summer heat, today it would be humiliation after humiliation and the worst of it would be the nightmare of all humiliations, the possibility of being seen by Debby Ann. What kind of respect would she have for a Desert Rat?

After all, he thought in his defense, he deserved to work *inside*. He'd earned it. He worked harder than his co-workers. He could mix a batch of orangeade faster than any of them. *Twice* as fast. He didn't comb his hair over the open vats shedding dandruff flakes the way *they* did. He didn't sneak off every fifteen minutes to crib an ice pop from the freezer.

Nonetheless, Big Tony had spoken, so he donned the requisite monkey suit. With the song, *This is the Night for Love*, trailing him from the storeroom radio, he stepped out onto the boardwalk dressed like a safari guide—round jungle hat, khaki shirt and pants—a silver tank of orangeade strapped to his back.

The fear of running into Debby Ann stopped him dead in his tracks.

In the bright sun of the rotunda he pulled the hat low on his head, then he tried it tilted back. He didn't like it either way. But at least low on his forehead, eyes hidden behind his new Ray-Bans, he was semi-disguised. Or so he hoped.

Across the rotunda, Augie sat on a wall, reading his pocket dictionary. His usual activity—either that or playing his harmonica—though most often his perch was the stoop of his apartment building where he took up residence when his parents weren't around, which seemed to be much of the time.

His full name was Augustus Lionel Robinson: a small kid, quick on his feet, too smart for the ten years he'd spent on this earth. He was the only black kid in their neighborhood, the only black student in St. Helena's grammar school where he was the brightest star of the fifth grade. Day or night his face bore the same placid expression, beyond disappointment or yearning. Never did he seem to be waiting for something, or expecting anything.

“Hey, Hunt.”

So much for his disguise.

“Hey, Augie. Want to make some money?”

“How?”

“Surveillance.”

“How much?”

“Fifteen an hour. Cents, that is. All the orangeade you want.”

“That your best offer?”

“Ice cream, too. When we finish.”

“What kind?”

“Whatever you want. Ice pop, Dixie cup, or cone.”

“One of each.”

“Deal.”

Hunt hoisted his shoulders, twined his fingers around the straps to keep the tank secured, and started off. The weight of it forced his neck and shoulders forward as he headed in an uneven line to the beach. When they reached the steps, he handed Augie the thin silver life guard’s whistle he’d bartered for. It had cost him two creamsicles and a lemon ice. Not a bad deal, especially in light of the fact the ice cream was on the house. It was the least the Salt Air Concessions Company could spring for, he felt, considering the ordeal he was about to endure.

“Emergency use only,” he told Augie. “In case she pops up out of nowhere and you can’t get to me in time.”

They were heading for the south end first, a trial run. Not many people from their neighborhood hung out there. Mostly folks from the west Bronx. Tougher. Meaner. Or so it seemed. But strangers, at least. No one he knew.

This close to the arcade the beach was crowded: umbrellas, beach blankets, kids running back and forth, radios tuned to WMCA or WINS or WABC with its chime-time bell ringing after every song, the smell of Coppertone heavy as heat in the air. Augie stayed twenty or thirty yards ahead. His head swiveled like a lighthouse beacon guiding ships to a safe passage, or a periscope in search of its target: strawberry blond hair, a body

that hadn't yet lost all of its baby fat. That was Debby Ann.

At least ten times Augie raised his hand as though he'd spotted her. False alarms. There were plenty of girls who looked like her, Hunt had to admit, though in *his* mind she was one of a kind. He walked with his head down, not looking left or right. He didn't care if he sold anything or not.

A desert of relatively uninhabited sand opened around them, only a few umbrellas scattered bright as balloons, each with its small oasis of shade. Hunt had to work harder, toiling under the weight of the tank like a pack animal, traveling long distances to his left or right if someone yelled to him for a drink, the sand difficult to push through, the heat rising through his shoes.

In the striped shade of an abandoned lifeguard stand, he unstrapped the tank and glared at it propped on the sand, the silver dome-shaped top reflecting the sun in a vicious blade of light. Paper cups hung from a cylindrical tube attached to the tank. He pulled out a cup, opened the spigot, filled it, and handed it to Augie. "It's mostly sugar, it's watered-down, the flavor's artificial, and it may have hairs in it. Drink at your own risk."

Augie gulped it down. Hunt filled him another.

"You supposed to give it away like this?"

"I'll take it out of my salary. No big deal." He filled a cup for himself, took one sip, made a face, then spit it out. When he removed his hat his hair stuck wet and shiny to his scalp. He combed it out best he could. "I'd quit this in a minute." What he didn't say was that his parents would kill him if he did. He was saving for college. Every little bit helped, as his father too many times had reminded him. "I would," he said, staring past Augie. "I sure as hell would."

A girl walked by with a radio playing the Everly Brothers. *Crying in the Rain*. One of Debby Ann's favorites. Shoulders slumped, Hunt leaned against the stand as if he might give up. "Just my luck she's out here somewhere listening to it right now."

“What number on the charts?” Augie asked. It was a game they played.

At first, Hunt didn’t respond. He stared with a stony expression at the blue-grey water that drifted toward Long Island. Then he looked at Augie with a hint of defiance. “32.”

“Number 10?”

“Elvis. *Devil in Disguise*. RCA. Up from 26.” He had this habit of memorizing the Top Forty Countdown each week by artist, title, label, and change of position on the chart from the previous week. He’d challenge Augie to try to stump him but so far Augie never had.

“Number 39?”

“Johnnie Mathis. *What will Mary Say*. Columbia. Down from 31.”

“Number 22?”

“Bobby Vinton. *Blue Velvet*. Epic. First time on the charts.” He checked his watch then crouched and slipped his arms through the straps of the tank. When he stepped out of the shade, he groaned.

A white haze lifted from the sand. The thermometer above the arcade read 92 degrees, unusually hot for June. They followed a trail of sound to the north end, radio to radio: *say you’re gonna miss me. . . just say you will, say. . . mama said, mama said. . . hey, hey, tonight’s the . . . don’t leave me, darling. . . for always and ever. . . baby, won’t you please. . .* Beachgoers flagged down Hunt with all kinds of names: mister, boy, sir, you, yo, hey, guy, soda man, buddy, Mac, Charlie, Joe, Jake, fellah, captain, boss, young man, muchacho, dipshit, douchebag.

Three more times Augie thought he spotted Debby Ann. Once he even blew the whistle and Hunt dove to his knees like a wounded camel. False alarms again, all three of them. Hunt plodded on stooped like an old man, his face red and slick, sweat stains darkening his shirt under his arms and down his back.

Heading to the north end just past noon, Augie was sure he spotted Debby Ann for real. Section 3, near the lifeguard stand. He blew the whistle—two short blasts—which meant watch out, near and probable danger ahead. Hunt’s head popped up while he was dispensing orangeade to some kids. He jerked around in search of an escape route.

Augie moved closer to the suspect. It was Debby Ann, all right. She lay on a blue towel, talking to some guy—Augie saw now it was the meanest guy in the neighborhood, the leader of the Brandos who was always giving him dirty looks, telling him *go back to where you came from, wherever the hell that is*.

Debby Ann was fluffing out her hair with her fingers. She wore a blue and white polka dot two-piece which didn’t hide her few extra pounds. But she was cute, Augie had to admit, real cute in that Irish kind of way. Her fair skin had turned blotchy red from the sun, especially across her nose and cheeks.

Augie waved Hunt away but Hunt had already veered off toward the water, making a wide loop around the lifeguard stand. Sales were less likely at the water’s edge where it was cooler and people didn’t have their wallets but some guy in a Yankees cap yelled, “Hey! Hey, bub!” He held out a dollar but Hunt pulled his safari hat lower, his neck tucked in like a turtle, and charged past him.

“Hey, yo! Hey, yo, numbnuts, I’m talkin’ to you.” Waving the dollar bill, the man lurched after Hunt for a few steps, then shot him the finger.

Hunt moved so fast Augie had to run to catch up. He crossed into Section 2, and didn’t even slow down when he reached the north jetty. He climbed the rocks unsteadily but with determination, then thrust himself forward with a lumbering pitch and roll across a muddy stretch of beach nobody used and finally up an embankment into the picnic area.

In the shadow of the trees he slipped the tank from his shoulders and slumped to the ground. From neck to belt, the back of his shirt was one dark sweat-stain. He sat with his head

in his hands, then he stood and scaled his hat at a tree and paced between the picnic tables. “Question is, did she see me or didn’t she? I mean, there was some distance between us, right? Seventy-five, eighty feet at least. I had the hat down, I had shades on, I could have been anybody.” He stopped pacing and stared hard at Augie. “What do you think? She see me or what?”

Augie thought it over. “Probably not.”

“Probably? *Probably?* Probably’s not good enough. I have to know. I have to know *definitely.*”

Augie thought again, considering the fact that he hadn’t yet been paid. “Definitely not.”

“You think so?”

“Definitely.” Augie eyed him carefully. After a moment he ventured to ask, “Can I have my ice cream now?”

Hunt wasn’t listening, staring as he was toward the beach where Debby Ann was no more than a blur at this distance. “So, Augie?”

“Yeah?”

“How do you know? How do you know *definitely?*”

Augie took his time answering. He didn’t want to be blamed for not spotting her soon enough. “I just kinda know, I guess.”