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Julius and Me

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JULIUS AND ME

Julius had the car up to eighty. I had my head against the back of the leather seat and my legs were crossed. The sun came through the window and sat on my lap as I made believe the car was swallowing the white line on the highway. I was warm and safe and the car smelled new.

"What do you think?"

It was the third time Julius had asked me. I said I thought it was beautiful.

"Beautiful? That's all you can say? It's out of sight!" His fingers opened and closed on the steering wheel, and as he touched the dashboard his ring caught fire in the sun. He touched the radio.

"Do you know how long I've waited?" Then he laughed a great booming sound that should have had no room to live in his small body.

I could see the George Washington Bridge like a necklace across the river's throat. The clouds, broad and thick and flat, looked as if a giant had painted them against the washed-out sky. I could hear the song of the tires against the pavement and the wind like a silly whistle where the vent wouldn't close.

"I'll get it fixed tomorrow," Julius said. Julius and I had left our Riverdale apartment about an hour before to take some tickets to his mother in Harlem. He could have left them at the box office, but he had a new car; and although he wouldn't admit it, he wanted his old neighborhood to see it. But when we approached the bridge on the New York side, he said he felt like "running it," so we crossed the bridge and drove up the Palisades about ten miles and then turned around.

For two days he'd kept the car at a garage in the neighborhood and hadn't told me about it. He said a car was like a woman, and he'd wanted to spend a couple days alone with her so she would know he loved her too. I told Julius that was fine with me; he could have all the women he wanted as long as they slept in the garage. He laughed, relieved

that I hadn't said anything about all that money spent.

The bridge attendant, a fat white man with gray eyes, looked at me like he wanted to spit. Julius saw it too. "They can't stand it when one of us gets something," he said. I didn't answer. We curled off the bridge onto the West Side Highway. The cliffs of the Palisades loomed like a pink and purple fortress with towers at its top. When he went past the 125th Street exit, I asked Julius about the tickets for his mother. The little boy in him grinned. We kept going until we got to 72nd Street and turned up Riverside Drive. I looked at the clock on the dashboard. It was 11:15. Julius parked the car and looked at me.

"Why are we stopping?"

"Don't you see where we are? This is the place I told you about," he said, his eyes bright and bugged. "Where I used to play ball."

When Julius was trying to break into show business, he lived on 85th Street and Amsterdam Avenue in a three-room apartment in a broken-down building. He would walk over to 77th Street on the weekends to play basket-ball in this park.

"Julius," I wailed. "You're not going to play ball now. You've got a show tonight and another one tomorrow."

His fingers were soft on my face. "Just a quick run; a quick run never hurt nobody. Besides, let the guys see how old Julius is doing."

He was playing with the ends of my hair. "Just don't expect me to run a bath for you." I said, "or rub you down. Just don't expect me."

He winked. "Anything you say, Princess."

That was Julius, master of the unexpected. We got out of the car, and he looked at it and smiled. Holding hands, we crossed the street and went down to the park. It was early June, and the trees were flushed and men on the court were naked to the waist.

"What's the matter?"

Julius was frowning into the court. "I'm trying to see somebody I know."

"You don't see anybody?"

He shook his head. I could see he was upset, so I tried

to make a joke.

"What's going on, did all of you plan a reunion for today?"

"Yeah," he said. "We did. Bob, Jerry, all of 'em. They said they'd be here."

I felt like a fool. "Maybe you're early," I said.

He just kept looking at the court.

"Julius?"

He looked at me.

"People move, you know? They move, get older, they stop playing basketball."

He kept looking at me in a way that makes me uncomfortable. It's like he's not really seeing me--his mind's someplace else, but if he turns his face to me, I'll think he's paying attention.

"Julius," I said. "They do, you know."

"Princess. I'm thirty-one years old. I don't need you to tell me that.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to impugn your intelligence. I know you don't need me to tell you nothin'."

His eyes retreated. "I don't want to fight with you."

"Then don't."

Now he was holding his head to one side, like he was discovering me. He always does that when I stand up to him.

"OK," he said. He looked at the court. "Well, I'm here now, I might as well play. Maybe they'll show up."

I could tell from his voice he didn't believe it.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'll walk around," I said.

He kissed me on the forehead and turned and walked through the opening in the fence. "Anybody got next?" he called.

I didn't hear the answer. I started walking past the court. A good looking brother with a red scarf around his neck and muscles like cantaloupes was leaning against the fence.

"Hey, miss," he called. "Can I have your telephone number?"

"Don't have a phone," I answered.

He followed me, the fence between us.

"Well, if you don't have a phone, you need a messenger service. Can I be your messenger man?" His smile was perfect.

"I don't send no messages, either," I said.

"You trying to tell me you don't love me?"

"You cute," I said, "but you ain't so fine neither."

"Oh, yes I am." I said. We both laughed and I walked on.

I passed the green benches and the still bodies of old people shrunken in the sun, their feet crossed. I stood and watched the children in the playground, sweeping down slides, balancing on teeter-totters. There were black children and white children and children the color of honey. There were chubby ones and skinny ones, and they wore their childhoods without effort. I watched two mothers break up a fight in the sandbox, separating their struggling charges.

I felt like a little girl in front of a pet-shop window. Julius didn't want any children. He said the world we live in is a miserable place full of miserable people, and he didn't want to bring a child into it. I wanted a child so bad I could feel the hollow its absence left in my stomach. But I understood where Julius was coming from; he grew up on one of the worst blocks in Harlem. He's little and Black and not very good-looking, and he caught hell for all of that. I don't mean to plead a special case for Julius; there are other people who fit that description and who suffered. But the difference is that Julius never wrote off any of the awful dues he'd had to pay-and was still paying. What some people saw as a chip on his shoulder was nothing more than the careful way a person moves when wounds are open and a terrible, silly pride won't let you see. Don't get me wrong, I love Julius, and it is because I love him that I see all this. Sometimes I get a little testy, and I feel his vision of life could use a shot of hope, but he resists it. But then I didn't have to struggle the way he did, and what wounds I have, if not completely healed, are at least closed.

I looked up at the hill. An ambulance sped north, its siren screaming, the red light flashing on the roof. I watched it disappear then walked around the playground and headed back to the basketball court.

When I returned, I saw that Julius had gotten into

a game, so I sat down on the grass close to the fence in the sunlight. The players moved as if in a dance. I watched Julius, arms waving. He took a shot, missed, scowled. Ten bodies turned and started the other way, pulled by the magic of an orange rubber ball.

"Hello," somebody said. He sat down next to me. His right arm was in a cast. He had brown hair that came down to his shoulders and his feet were bare.

"Hello."

"It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

"It is."

"You like basketball?"

I said I liked to watch it. I never played much.

He nodded. He was about nineteen or twenty. A thin leather strip with red and yellow markings was on his left wrist. He kept twisting it, and the hair on his arm was brown and silken where the green shirt stopped.

"What happened to your arm?"

"I broke it playing basketball."

"You ought to be more careful."

"I guess I should," he said. "You live around here?"

"No."

"I wish you did," he said.

He was cute and he knew it, and he was trying very hard. I could feel him waiting on me to say something else, but I was watching the game. The other team had a big white guy who looked twice as big as Julius. The man guarding him was no match, and Julius kept switching off to help. Every time he did, he fouled the guy. Once Julius slapped him across the face, and the big guy yelled at him.

"I'm sorry," Julius said, but he kept on fouling him. I could see it wasn't on purpose; the white guy was just so big.

"I wonder who he is?" broken arm asked.

"Who do you mean?"

"The funny-looking one. He's getting that big white boy pissed off."

"You mean the one with the scarf around his neck?"

"No, the one in the white pants, the little ugly one with the frog eyes."

"That's my husband," I said.

He had the bluest eyes. "That's your husband?"
He shuddered to a stop.

"I'm only half white," I said. "My mother was Black."

"I didn't mean," he said.

"Goddamn it," somebody screamed on the court. I turned and saw the big white boy slam the basketball against the ground. It bounced high and orange and came down. Nobody caught it; it rolled and died against the fence. The big white boy was screaming at Julius.

"I said I was sorry," Julius said. "If you get fouled, take the ball out. Don't be shoutin' at me."

"There are rules," the big boy said.

"There's a book with rules that tells you how to play."

Julius seemed to get smaller. "I know there are rules. I ain't stupid; I don't need you to tell me that."

Everybody else had moved away from them. Some were shaking their heads; some were laughing. One boy lit up a cigarette.

"You get fouled, just call it, take the ball out. It's a contact sport," Julius said. Don't cry to me. If you can't take it, let somebody take your place."

"All I'm asking, little man, all I'm asking," the big boy shouted, bending down thrusting his face toward Julius, "is that you play the game like you're civilized. That's all. Be civilized."

Julius got very still; everybody did. Julius was looking at the white boy, his eyes popping. Julius kept looking at him. Then he looked up at the street and at the white boy again. My hands were sweating like crazy; my mouth tasted funny. Then Julius started laughing his great booming laugh. The boy looked worried. He knew and I knew, and Julius knew that laughter and no place there, that whatever was being laughed at wasn't very funny. "Julius," I whispered, "don't do nothin' stupid, please."

"And what," Julius said, "is that suppose to mean?" He said it quietly and very slowly, each word hard and clear.

"It means," the big boy said, "just what it says. Be civilized."

"Uh oh," somebody said; then I heard someone laugh.

"I'm a man," Julius yelled. He was on his tiptoes. "You got to respect me. Don't come playin' that great white father shit with me. You apologize."

"You're crazy," the white boy said.

"Apologize!"

The white boy shook his head. I could see that he was nervous, that he couldn't understand where Julius was coming from, but still he wasn't going to back down. Something bad was going to happen. I knew it and I stood up. I watched Julius uncoil and swing and punch the white boy in the face. I heard Julius grunt, and I heard the sound the fist made when it struck. That punch had to hurt, but the white boy didn't move, didn't touch his face, nothing.

"Apologize!"

Julius had both fists cocked. The white boy shook his head. "You can't hurt me," he said. He folded his arms across his naked chest. I wanted to scream.

"I can't hurt you?" He kept saying it, like an insane man, his head going from side to side. "I can't hurt you, I can't hurt you?" There was a garbage can in a corner of the court. Julius ran over to it, put his hand in and came out with a soda bottle. He held the bottle by the neck and shattered it against the asphalt. I screamed.

"Julius!"

I don't know why that boy didn't run. I guess he couldn't believe it was happening. I couldn't believe it was happening. Julius was stalking him; he took a step to the side, another, a silent dance, the broken bottle shining like a promise. "Julius, don't you cut that," I whispered.

People walking past had stopped to watch, their hands folded behind them, their faces rapt, expectant.

"Apologize," Julius said again. There was a prayer in his voice. He was pleading with the big white boy, and the white boy was looking at him like he was crazy.

"OK," the white boy yelled. It sounded like it was ripped out of his guts. It sounded like the last thing on earth he wanted to say.

"OK, I apologize!"

Julius' shoulders fell. He stood there a moment, and I felt something go out of the day the way air goes out of a balloon. The fun was like fire on my face; my stomach ached. Julius came through the opening in the fence, his eyes like he had just witnessed a terrible accident. I didn't touch him and I didn't say anything. We walked up the steps, the silence and smell of his sweat between us. Julius and the white boy had been replaced and the game had started up again. Julius stood looking at his new car, no expression on his face. He put his hand in his pocket and handed me the keys. "You drive," he said.

"Me?"

He smiled, tired. I took the keys. We got in the car and put on our seat belts and I started the engine.

"Susan," he said. "I meant for it to be a good day. I'm sorry."

"I know," I said.

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