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Accelerated Biology

AFTER I ALTERED MY AQUAMARINE formal so the ruffles in front covered more of my cleavage and made my shoulders look smaller, a few of the esteemed administrators at Sam Houston High told me I could not be a Homecoming Queen Second Attendant if my escort was a “Negro.” The Negro in question was Thomas Llewellyn Rosebush, Jr. He had been selected as my escort by the school’s surprisingly enlightened ROTC Commander, Mr. Conway James, who also happened to be my Accelerated Biology teacher. Later, a small group of ancient faculty and PTA biddies, including my mother and my PE teacher, put their hypocritical, bigoted, hairsprayed heads together and decided the Negro in question should be replaced by “one of our Caucasian boys.”

For one thing, it was 1966 and you were not supposed to pull that crap any more. For another, I had a barely-concealed crush on Thomas Llewellyn Rosebush, Jr., and I was thrilled Mr. James had selected him. At the time, the closest I had ever been to Thomas was in Accelerated Biology, where we shared a dead cat.

We nicknamed her Fraidy-Cat and spent three lab periods with her formaldehyde-shriveled body stretched between us, the rubbery skin thumbtacked to a cork-lined dissection tray. Thomas and I took turns making bloodless incisions in Fraidy-Cat’s shaved underside and identifying her organs. I pointed my scalpel at her liver, kidneys, renal arteries. We sketched and took notes. Thomas’s tapered fingers probed the tiny pelvic cavity, uncovering the lumpy gray valentines of Fraidy-Cat’s ovaries and the swollen tubes called the uterine horns. The swelling meant Fraidy-Cat was pregnant when she died. I snipped through the uterine wall, and we found three curled cat-fetuses, each the size of your little fingernail.

Representatives of the staff, faculty, and PTA of Sam Houston High, not caring that Thomas Llewellyn Rosebush, Jr. possessed, as did I, the hands and soul of a surgeon, dispatched on a Friday morning one week before homecoming the diminutive yet indestructible Miss Fiona McFadden, girls' P.E. coach, bearing the bad news.

She cornered me on the bench during the fourth quarter of a semi-final intramural basketball game I had recently fouled out of and said, "You cannot be an Attendant if your escort is a Negro." She was so tense, the burnt-brown curls of her bad home permanent seemed to screw up tighter as she spoke.

I stood up. I was at least four inches taller than Miss McFadden. "Why not?"

"We're finding you someone else."

"Like who?"

The gym got quiet and twenty-five girls in blue gymsuits watched us. Susan Hephlethwaite, who was about to take a free throw although she hadn't made a basket in the eight years I had known her, clutched the ball to her stomach and waited.

"Well, you know." Miss McFadden glanced over her shoulder, as if there might be spies from the NAACP lurking in the bleachers. "Someone more appropriate. Maybe Robbie Lehander."

aka "All-Hands" Lehander.

I took a deep breath. "Miss McFadden," I began. My voice quavered out of control like my little brother's violin. "If you take Thomas away, I'm *resigning* from the Homecoming Court. People voted for me. There are laws now, and civil rights. People have died for this and been tear-gassed and my father owns a newspaper."

To my everlasting amazement, this potpourri of shaky declarations intimidated Miss McFadden. Though she made a brief attempt at a staring contest, her little moon face tilted up at me, she didn't have a chance because I had practiced my haughty look in the mirror for anyone who didn't want to see a dark guardian in a white ROTC uniform hovering at the honey shoulders of their homecoming royalty.

Miss McFadden lowered her eyes, inserted her silver whistle into her chapped lips and blew a blast that ripped the stale gym air like a low-flying jet. Susan Hephlethwaite heaved the ball in the general direction of the basket, but missed.

"I heard about what you did," said Thomas Llewellyn Rosebush, Jr., behind me at my locker.

Unlike most boys I knew, who reminded me of golden retriever puppies in both IQ and inability to stand still, Thomas rooted himself in one spot and radiated wisdom. He was almost six feet tall, with an all-encompassing gaze that liquefied my spine.

I slammed my locker door. "Everyone in this place is so stupid," I blurted, fumbling with my books and sweater.

Thomas caught one sweater sleeve in his long, delicate fingers and held it while I put my arm through. "They might take you off homecoming," he said.

"They wouldn't dare."

"You don't have to do this for me."

"I'm not," I said. "It's just not fair."

His eyes were two hot grottoes of pain, sculpted out of cheekbones you could've built a religion on. "Want to walk home?" he asked.

"Your father and I think it would be best all around if you let them assign you another boy," Mother said over a shriveled pork shoulder that evening. What made it hilarious was the way she said "your father and I," as if at some point Daddy had stopped freaking out about his precious newspaper long enough to have a conversation with her.

"Who gives a shit?" my little brother Colin piped in.

"Mother. I'm going to go with Thomas," I said.

Mother didn't know Thomas had walked me home. She didn't know we had stopped at the U-Do-It laundry and kissed each other on the turquoise vinyl loveseat wedged between the last row of dryers and the back door. She didn't know that only an hour ago Thomas spidered his long, surgeon's fingers under my blouse and along the rim of my bra while I traced my tongue across the damp pores and swollen veins of his neck. When we finally pulled apart, sweaty and self-conscious in the hot, linty air, he bought me a bag of Cheddar Stix and we talked about the recruiting pressure on ROTC cadets. "I just joined for a scholarship," Thomas said. "Now I'm a bum if I don't go."

Mother forked a prim morsel of meat and waved it my way for emphasis. "I'm sure he'd rather go with a Negro girl."

Daddy nodded. He was in silently-agree-with-Mother mode. How could somebody who wrote brilliant editorials against poverty and war and segregation be such a limp rag around a five-foot woman in a shirtwaist? How could he stand up to governors and state senators and not stand up to Mother? Did he leave his brain and his will power on his messy editor's desk every day before he came home?

"Actually," I smiled, "Thomas wants to go with me."

"How do you know *that*?" Mother snapped.

"Who gives a shit?" Colin asked.

"Mother, did you know that what you are upset about is called melanin?"

"Melanin?"

"Melanin. A pigment. In skin cells?"

"Is that what they're teaching you?"

"It's a simple monomer molecule in the stratum basale of the epidermis."

"It is not simple, young lady, it is not about molecules, and you are not going to homecoming with someone named Rosebush."

"His name is Thomas," I said, "and he is my escort and he will remain my escort and you can leave us alone."

"Who gives a shit?" Colin said.

On Monday, Mr. Conway James, the Accelerated Biology teacher and ROTC Commander who started the whole thing, was drawing a fertilized rat egg on the board to explain cell division in developing embryos when I was summoned to the principal's office by a mouth-breathing sophomore girl who led me down the hall like a warden with a death-row inmate. The principal, Mr. Lucius Crawford, who forever endeared himself to the entire student body by once visibly nodding off in assembly during a policewoman's lecture on marijuana, poured himself milky coffee from a silver thermos while I took my place across from him in a straight-backed chair.

Mr. Crawford had an oversized head with very close-cut, peppery hair that was receding along either side of a stippled isthmus in the middle of his forehead. His office was stuffy and so quiet that I swear when he slurped some coffee I heard it slosh down his esophagus and chug through his cardiac sphincter to be met with a hiss of hydrochloric acid in his stomach. He looked at me and frowned.

"Homecoming," he said.

"Thomas," I added.

"Problem."

"Why?"

"Prejudice." He shrugged.

"Bigotry," I corrected.

He sighed so forcefully I smelled the Folger's and cream on his breath from where I sat. A file folder with my name on the tab lay before him. He opened it and looked at something for a long time. His eyelids got heavy. He might have gone to sleep. My thoughts circled back to the U-Do-It and the texture of Thomas's neck and the way it disappeared forever into the secret of his white shirt.

Lifting his huge head, Mr. Crawford suddenly asked, "Plans?"

"College."

"Here?"

"California."

"Major?"

"Biology."

"Good." He closed the file.

"Mr. Crawford, can I ask you a question?"

“Shoot.”

“Does ROTC pressure black kids more than white to enlist?”

For a few seconds he drifted off again, his thicket of salt-and-pepper nose hairs whistling as he breathed. The bell rang, and his whole body jerked like a pithed frog. “Of course not,” he said.

Homecoming Day weather hit the autumn-gold jackpot, with the requisite reds and yellows smudged against an unfurled flag of blue sky. The Jimbo Higgins Cadillac Showroom loaned vehicles for the homecoming parade. Thomas and I rode in a metallic sea-green convertible that went surprisingly well with my altered formal. Despite Mother’s final, tearful injunction, “Please just don’t touch him,” I secretly squeezed two of Thomas’s fingers where they were hidden under the folds of my dress. Along the short parade route to the stadium, I saw Mother in the crowd, holding a handkerchief to her cheek and trying to wave. A block later, Thomas pointed out his own mother, reed-thin and tall in a smart red hat. I waved in her direction, but the stare she aimed at me was a cold bullet frozen mid-air.

We lost the game. Big surprise, given the Sam Houston Hurricanes hadn’t won a football game since I was a freshman, and our so-called star quarterback had the IQ of beef brisket. Up in the stands, where I sat thigh-to-thigh with Thomas, we paid no attention to the debacle on the field. Susan Hepplethwaite, also a Second Attendant, was on my other side and kept whispering to me, “I am so jealous.” She meant jealous of Thomas, because her escort was Robbie Lehander, who poured an airline bottle of Scotch into their cokes while Susan told me, “What you did was so courageous.” When my top-heavy corsage of white chrysanthemums drooped in the autumn sun, Thomas re-pinned it for me, his shell-tipped fingers grazing my clavicle.

That evening, during the ceremonies at the dance, Thomas stood next to my chair on the stage, looking so devastatingly handsome in the military uniform I would grow to hate, that I prayed I wasn’t splurging my lifetime supply of good fortune on those few hours.

When my name was called, I took Thomas’s arm and we walked down the ramp to the dance floor. I put my hand on his biceps and he squashed my fingers tight against his side. Even through the thick weave of his white uniform, I felt his heart pound. At the bottom of the ramp, he closed his arms around me and we melted into the slow-dance sea of bodies on the dark gym floor. The top of my head fit under his chin. My lips grazed the highest gold button on his tunic. He smelled like popcorn and men’s deodorant. I felt his throat vibrate against my cheek when he said, “Remember Fraidy-Cat?”

I nodded into the mystery of his neck. He gripped me tighter. We swayed to the music.

“Remember when we found the babies?” he asked.

“Yes.” My aquamarine ruffles smashed against his chest.

“That’s how I feel right now,” he said.

“You feel like a cat fetus?”

He laughed, his ribcage hard against mine.

“No, I mean new,” he said. “Barely formed.”



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