

Sally Bellerose
from *Ave Maria?*

1967

DeeDee and I stand in the four-foot wide meridian of weeds that separates the county hospital's parking lot from the parking lot of the factory where our mothers work. We shield our eyes and squint across the blacktop.

"Looking for your man?" DeeDee smirks.

"Shut up. It's hot. We should have made extra lemonade."

"It's hard enough to haul what we've got." She squeezes her bare biceps. "I'm starting to get man-arms. Good thing we're back in school next week."

There's a bench behind us with all but two of the wooden slats ripped out. Our jug and cooler balance on the slats. The bench is our service counter. We are boloney sandwich vendors. We had a better spot, close to factory, where our customers didn't have to walk through parked cars to get to us, but we got booted out by one of the factory's foreman.

"Mr. Harold Jones." DeeDee flattens her hand on my collarbone, right below my throat, where she thinks my heart is. She wants to be a nurse but the only body parts she's got a grasp on are legs, tits, and ass. DeeDee is my best friend by default. There are two other girls our age on our block and they're each other's best friends. In a couple of weeks, in high school, when I'm not a boloney vendor anymore, maybe I'll meet new friends. If I don't, DeeDee will.

"Get your stinky lunchmeat hand off me." I grimace. "He's old enough to be my father."

The sun is straight up in the sky. The lunch bell shrills and the workers file slowly out of the big brick factory. You'd think they'd rush out. The men are stuck behind machines all morning. The women, who stand on the line doing piecework, have to get permission to pee. But they march out in perfect order, a row of ants heading toward a crumb on the linoleum. Hundreds of them and only one time clock to punch. Hot and sweaty, and hungry enough, if they've forgotten their lunch or are ready to break the diet they started at breakfast, to pay seventy-five cents for boloney and cheese on white bread.

Mom and Aunt Delia trudge out at the front of the line as usual. It's a relief to DeeDee and me that our mothers never come to our bench at lunchtime. They head for the big metal picnic tables that sit on slabs of concrete right near the factory. They face us from afar, without embarrassing us by waving.

Aunt Delia whips off her hairnet, makes a production of shaking her hair free, then hoists a leg onto the bench of the picnic table. Laughing, she examines a run in her stocking, advertising her best feature.

"God, why doesn't she just spread her legs and snare the first guy that walks by?" DeeDee groans in disgust. "Shoot me if I ever act like that."

"Bang." I point a finger. "You're dead."

If Aunt Delia is a bear trap, my mother, with her head hung forward, is day old bait on a fishing line. "Sit up." I hiss. My mother *could* be so pretty. "Why do you hunch over like that?" I pull my shoulders back.

"Your mother really does make a bad job of the tragic look." DeeDee is a font of knowledge about ways to improve your look. "She should take off the hairnet. Shit, she could get

a man with her hair alone if she'd loosen up." She snaps her fingers. "Make her read *Gone with the Wind*."

My Aunt Delia is now running her hands up her other leg. "There are so many ways to be pathetic."

"No shit." DeeDee sneers. "That's enough with the legs, Ma. Oh, forget *Gone with the Wind*." She erases the air. "Scratch Scarlet O'Hara. She didn't do such a good job managing her men, did she?"

I look straight ahead and think about our mother's bad job of managing men. My father, who I know is an extremely good looking man from the picture tucked under my mother's mattress, was married to someone other than my mother. My mother, who hides a nice figure under a baggy sweater no matter how hot the day, had sex with a married man? DeeDee's father married Aunt Delia. DeeDee got a Christmas card from him one year.

She cups her hands and whispers in my ear, "Mr. Jones is married."

I take a couple side steps to get away. "Old and married." I cross my arms over my chest. "So shut up."

"Old and married, *and*?" She widens her eyes. When I ignore her she knocks the top of my head with her knuckles. "Anybody home? He's *black*. So shut up yourself Miss Holier Than Thou."

I turn away from DeeDee, our mothers, and the factory. Like I don't know Mr. Jones is black. No way DeeDee's actually read *Gone with the Wind*. She saw the movie. Slaves and hoop skirts. I look at the Franklin County Hospital while I strap on my change apron. I love the feel of the apron against my thighs, especially when it's full of quarters. I love the sound of dollar bills scratching against each other in the pocket when I move. Most of all I love the way my mother hugs the bags of groceries we buy with the money that comes out of the apron's pockets when we carry them up the stairs.

A woman dressed in white comes out of the glass door below the neon Emergency sign of the hospital. She moves briskly, with purpose. Her hips sway, just a whisper, none of Aunt Delia's screaming movement. She won't come over to buy a sandwich, the nurses rarely do. Maybe they think we're not hygienic. A doctor once bought three cups of lemonade, but he hasn't come back. The nurse gets in her Camaro. It's shiny and red. It's new. There are a lot of new cars parked on the hospital side of the parking lot.

"Heads up," DeeDee says. Four women, hairnets in place, make their way through the grid of parked cars. You can't be sure if they're coming to buy or pile into a car. "Peggy Lee wouldn't wear a hair net." DeeDee starts to hum "The Man I Love". She sticks the "Sandwich" flag she made in home ec into the dirt. I fold a checkered oilcloth over the bench slats and line cups and waxed papered sandwiches on it.

When we first set out to make our fortunes selling sandwiches, it was DeeDee's idea to sing. She said people would give us tips for singing. They don't. We sing anyway. DeeDee starts out soft, just purring the melody, like always. Within a few seconds, I join her. Since we were toddlers our mothers have told us we have beautiful voices. It doesn't occur to us that other people might not agree. After a couple of stanzas we put words to the music. When the hairnet ladies are fifty feet from us, we stop singing.

"Hello." DeeDee smiles as if handing them sandwiches is her biggest thrill.

Tony G. sprints across the lot, putting on the brakes when he's two feet from DeeDee. Young and flirty, he grins at her. "Three." He sticks his puppy dog paw and three dollar bills in front of me without breaking eye contact with DeeDee. I snatch the money.

"Mustard?" DeeDee turns the name of a condiment you put on boloney into a dirty word. He says, "No thanks," to the tiny packets she nabbed from the corner diner. Why the pouty stare she gives him doesn't make him bust out laughing is a mystery to me. I hand him his seventy-five cents worth of change. He peels his eyes away from her to turn and shout, "Hey, Mr. Jones, we on for tonight?"

Mr. Harold Jones is part of the small group trickling toward us. I am proud of myself for going about the sandwich selling business and not realizing his approach until it's yelled across the parking lot. Mr. Harold Jones does not shout back to Tony G. Mr. Jones smiles and waits until he's close enough to answer in a normal speaking volume, "Looking forward to it." He seems amused. He often seems amused. I'll think about this later. For now, I put all my energy into staying calm and ready for when the machine oil and old spice scent of Mr. Harold Jones hits me. I don't want to make a fool of myself like my cousin just did. I separate the change from the dollar bills in my apron slowly.

I look up and there he is standing right in front of me.

"Hello, Mr. Jones. Would you like a sandwich?" My delivery is perfect. I smile, friendly, but not school-girl silly. I do not forget to add, "A sandwich, Mrs. Jones?" This bit is crucial. Mrs. Harold Jones is at his side, with her maroon lipstick and Dianna Ross flip. I give her the identical smile I gave Mr. Jones. If I don't, she gives me a look that turns my legs to jelly. If I let my eyes linger too long on Mr. Jones she gives me an even more deadly grin.

Mrs. Jones steps off the meridian to help an elderly black woman, who is wearing the blue stripes of a cleaning lady, into her car. I like Mrs. Jones' style even though she doesn't like mine. DeeDee calls her The Fat Jones. Mrs. Jones holds the car door for the old woman like it's the most important job in the world. Mrs. Jones holds herself more like a trim nurse than a fat factory worker. She slams the door shut and her body ripples. Mrs. Jones straightens up from slamming the door. Her head is high, like the world should ripple right along with her. I watch Mr. Harold Jones watch her step back onto the meridian. Her breasts bounce a couple times before coming to rest. "I should have thought to help." He smiles at her appreciatively.

Mr. Jones is the only man I know who acts like this in public, like he's in love with his wife. This is why, in my fantasies, Mrs. Jones has got to go. Her death is quick and I'm the first on the scene to help Mr. Harold Jones through his loss.

"Baby," Mr. Jones says. "You want a sandwich today?"

She hooks her arm through his. "I got a taste for beans and rice. Let's try the diner."

"Alright." He drags the word out like a caress. He nods at DeeDee, then me. "You ladies sound like Nina Simone." He often tells us we sound like Nina Simone. "You have a pleasant afternoon, now." He smiles, a big, split the world open smile. I'm pretty sure his glance lingers on me longer than it does on DeeDee.

I fold my hands against my apron to stop the shake. If I speak it won't come out right.

"Thank you, Mr. Jones. You have a pleasant afternoon, too." DeeDee gives them a prom queen smile and pours a cup of lemonade for a tall man carrying a lunch pail. I'm still mute and motionless. She nudges my ankle with the toe of her pink sneaker. "This man needs fifty- cents change?"

"Thank you, Mr. Jones. Thank you, Mrs. Jones," I say, after the time for saying it has passed. They are six parking spaces away.

"A mystery why she's thanking me." Mrs. Jones turns her head to look at me and leans a bit closer into Mr. Jones. He shakes his head and smiles a little smile, like there's nothing he can

do about this funny world *but* smile. They walk a few more spaces to their green Chevy. He opens the door for her. As she climbs in they exchange a few words that I strain to hear but can't.

"Jealous." DeeDee's says as they drive off.

"I am not." I snap.

"Yes, you are." DeeDee shimmies her shoulders in delight that she's on to me. "But I meant The Fat Jones."

I get busy restacking cups that don't need restacking so my head is down and DeeDee can't read my expression. Could Mrs. Jones be jealous of me? No, that's DeeDee stupidity. But what a thrill to think of myself as a threat. For the moment I forget to be mortified for acting like a spaz in front of Mr. Jones.

DeeDee says, "You need flirting lessons."

"From you?"

DeeDee smooths her hands over her skirt. "I got a date with Tony G. You got a date with Mr. Jones?"

"Shut up. I'm not flirting with him. Quit touching your ass. It's unseemly. Tony G's a jerk, anyway."

"Unseemly?" She tries out the word again. "Unseemly." She nods in approval. "That's a good word."

I remember why, besides the fact that she's my cousin, we live in the same tenement, and she's the only girl available, I hang around with DeeDee. How many people are so easy going that they can appreciate a word used to criticize them?

"Six customers. This is the worse day we've ever had." She starts singing "Fever." I join her.