

# HEAT

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The heat that summer was a living thing that tangled around you, tripping you, slowing you to a crawl. New York City was draped in an impressionist haze. It was 1957. I was thirteen and had my first job, stapling tags onto winter clothes in the warehouse of a department store. Previous summers, my brother and I had roamed the streets, drenching ourselves in open fire hydrants, reveling in the water like puppies. We'd sneaked into the air-conditioned movie theater. We'd sucked ice cubes till our lips were blue and trembling. Our mother worked as a file clerk in Manhattan for fifty dollars a week. Our father had deserted us, and the summer days were ours to fill as we chose. But that summer I wanted an independent income. I was tired of doing without the things my mother couldn't buy and I couldn't steal.

It was easier for a minor to get a job back then, though I still needed working papers. One Thursday I hopped a train to lower Manhattan to be examined by a state physician who'd sign off that I was healthy enough to hire. The cavernous waiting room, with its tall, dust-coated windows, was mobbed and steamy with the sweat of too many kids. Under the rumble of voices, a nervous energy crackled. Everything was blurry in the heat, like a mirage. A few ancient floor fans whirred halfheartedly. The only effective one sat on the desk of the receptionist, who ushered us into the doctor's office, first come, first served. Everyone fidgeted restlessly on the hard wooden benches while she edged dangerously close to the fan and drank endless glasses of iced tea. Her voice was high-pitched and whiny, and each name she called sounded like a personal complaint. She glared at us through heavily made-up eyes as though we were responsible for the heat.

The boys horsed around, and someone was shoved off a bench, thudding to the floor amid riotous laughter. "Stop that," the receptionist snapped, briefly abandoning her stale, fanned breeze to point like a spaniel fingering a bird. Looking at her flushed face, I realized she was only eighteen or nineteen herself and probably nervous about being in charge of people so close to her in age.

I focused on my shoes or read my book, my fingers leaving moist prints on the pages. Damp yellow circles stained the underarms of the boys' shirts, and perspiration glistened on cheeks irritated by the unfamiliar practice of shaving. I crossed my arms to conceal my bra and nipples, which were outlined by my damp, clinging blouse. Around the room, sweat etched trails through makeup, and faint lines of mascara bled into hairlines. I tried to read but was nauseous from the heat and had a frightening fantasy of throwing up on the doctor.

When the receptionist finally called my name, she ran the syllables together so that I didn't recognize it at first. She repeated it sharply. When I stood up, she scowled as though I'd been hiding, and pointed. "In there." Then she checked my name off the list.

The doctor's office was dank, and every available surface pearly with tiny drops of moisture. A bored elderly man with a stethoscope around his neck sat on a stool, his glasses flecked with dust or cigarette ash, his shirt collar darkened by perspiration. Barely glancing at me, he took my working papers, rested

his cigarette in an overflowing ashtray, then placed the stethoscope on my chest. "Cough," he said. I offered an exaggerated imitation of a bronchial cough I'd had six months earlier. He nodded, performed a cursory examination of my throat and ears, scribbled his signature on the papers, and gestured me out. The cigarette was back in his mouth before I had left the room. It took maybe two minutes in all. I closed the door behind me, smiling foolishly, as though I'd accomplished some great feat. The receptionist threw me a dirty look as I passed, and then she massacred the next name on the list.

In what would become our ritual, my mother and I left for work together on my first day. She gave my seven-year-old brother a quarter and told him that the upstairs neighbor had promised to keep an eye on him. He looked at me sorrowfully, as though I was abandoning him, and I felt a brief moment of emotion: not guilt but envy. He was still free to roam the neighborhood, but I'd passed over some pinnacle into adulthood and would never be that wild again. My mother looked at him doubtfully, despite his promise to remain on the block, keep his key around his neck, and not get into trouble. She was self-educated, having completed only fifth grade before going to work, but extremely savvy. Compulsive reading had given her an immense vocabulary, and she would finish the *New York Times* crossword puzzle each Sunday. She warned my brother, "Don't underestimate the dangers of the street, no matter how smart you think you are. Stay close to home and don't hang out with the boys on the corner." She kissed him goodbye, tucked *Crime and Punishment* into her purse, and motioned me out ahead of her, tossing a final "Remember what I told you" over her shoulder.

A few neighbors yelled, "Good luck!" to me as we passed. I flushed with pride, though I knew that my accomplishment was a mere consequence of growing older. My mother waved back, also proud. The brisk clicking of her high heels was drowned out by rumbling trucks and car horns. She expertly navigated the cracked sidewalks, never once catching a heel. After a block, my dress and crinolines were sweat-soaked and heavy, while her shirtwaist remained crisp, her short auburn hair unruffled. Though only seven in the morning, it was hot as noon. A few people were still pulling in their mattresses from the fire escapes, where they'd slept to take the edge off the deadening heat.

"You think I can trust him?" my mother asked, referring to my brother.

Certain she couldn't, I answered, "Sure." Then, to take her mind off him, I added, "It's hot as hell."

She smiled at my nonchalant use of the word *hell* and said, "Summer is always a scorcher in New York."

Halfway down the next block was the Italian deli. Like perspiration under heavy perfume, the smell of garbage put out for the trucks was partially hidden beneath the aroma of garlic, oregano, and tomatoes. My mother stopped and smiled conspiratorially at me. "In here, just for today." Five minutes later we emerged with scrambled-egg-and-hot-pepper sandwiches in two brown paper bags rapidly darkening with

grease: a treat to honor my entry into the labor force.

"Thanks, Ma," I said, and she nodded. A block farther was the movie theater, where a man in jeans and a white undershirt was up on a ladder changing the marquee. I had a momentary fantasy that I'd go home and get my brother and the two of us would sneak in through the back door when the first matinee let out. My mother looked at me sternly, as though she knew what I was thinking, and I quickly faced forward. She examined her watch and sped up, marching silently until we reached the train station.

As we waited on the platform, I looked at my wrinkled dress and asked, "Do I look OK?"

My mother tossed a venomous look at a man who'd shoved her, then casually mashed her high heel on the toe of his polished shoe. He stomped away, mumbling something under his breath. "You look very nice, very businesslike," she assured me.

The train blasted steamy heat as it clanged to a stop in front of us. Everyone pushed in. The car was so mobbed we didn't even sway as the train started moving. Overhead fans served only to disperse the acrid scent of perspiration throughout the subway car. Sweat dripped from my neck and armpits, and I was sure I'd stink by the time I got to work.

My mother left her book in her purse and talked about everyone's favorite topic: "I don't remember heat like this," she said solemnly. "Even here."

Those crammed against us nodded, and one man added, "Amen."

She smiled at him and said to me, "See, everyone agrees."

"I agree too, Ma," I told her.

My stop came first, and she nudged me toward the door. "Have a good day. Work hard." She pulled out her book as the door closed behind me.

**N**ew York was always being torn down or built up, and I was nearly deafened by the pounding of heavy equipment on the street. The fine white dust of destruction drifted over my face and hair and caught on the tips of my lashes. I passed by, eyes down, afraid of catcalls from the workmen, though I was too small and undeveloped to inspire any. I skirted rubble and broken glass and swung my lunch bag as though holding my mother's hand, something I hadn't done in years.

The office building had three floors, the lowest one the warehouse. The secretary announced my name over the loudspeaker. Her hair, blown gracefully around her face by a fan, was reminiscent of a television commercial. I experienced resentment at my own tight curls. A moment later an attractive, middle-aged black woman with conked hair, brown-rimmed glasses, and mauve lipstick opened a side door and beckoned to me. Dressed in jeans and a blouse, she smiled in amusement at my dress. "I'm Alice." She held out a calloused hand and shook mine with authority. "Come upstairs and meet the boss. Then we'll go to the Floor."

I followed her upstairs to a small, air-conditioned office. The man behind the desk stood when we came in. He was shaped like a hairy banana, and his forward slant made me worry that

he could see down my dress, boring though the view might be. He studied my working papers, then looked at me as though I were transparent. "Michelle," he said. I nodded. "Well, Michelle, work hard, listen to Alice, don't get in trouble, and it'll work out." I nodded again, and Alice escorted me from his office.

The Floor was exactly that. It ran the length of the building, with units separated by type of clothing. Just the sight and smell of dark, wintry wools was enough to start me itching. A few tall floor fans were scattered around, but the corridors between the rows were so narrow that the fanned breeze didn't stand a chance of penetrating them. It was like a giant closet, crammed full, with no room to breathe. I was given a fat chrome machine on wheels with which to staple the price on each item. The temperature on the Floor was a good fifteen degrees hotter than anywhere else in the building. Everyone sweated freely, dangerously. By the end of the first week, I was imitating my more experienced co-workers — all teenagers, it seemed — who spitefully wiped their necks and faces and arms on the clothing to be sold in air-conditioned stores to unsuspecting customers.

I was clumsy at first and more than once stapled my fingers. But Alice was patient, working with me until I got the hang of it. Before she walked off, she said quietly, "A dress like that, crinolines: not the best thing to wear here."

I nodded, having already figured that out. This wasn't business. It was something else entirely.

**T**he second day, despite the unflagging heat, I wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt to protect my skin from the irritating wool. When the day was over, the warehouse bathrooms filled with kids washing up with paper towels and changing into shorts and tank tops or halters.

All I remember of the other employees, besides the boss and Alice, is one woman and three boys. Mitch had slicked-back hair, tight jeans, a half-open shirt, and a confident smile: a stereotypical greaser. Halfway through the summer I went to a movie with Mitch. I was thrilled to be having my first date with such a looker. He necked with me as though it were a chore, but I was too inexperienced and flattered to refuse. He left me at my door with a cool goodbye kiss. After that he slipped between the suits and coats whenever he saw me, avoiding even a casual hello. The week before Labor Day, Mitch exhibited for the boys a list of the girls he'd made out with. It comprised all of us on the Floor and included some of the secretaries from the second and third floors. Because I was a loner, I experienced a strange pride at being included, finally one of the gang.

David and Mark lived near each other in the Bronx. They were both crowned with kinky Jewish hair like mine, and they dressed in colorful striped shirts and jeans that emphasized their stockiness. The three of us developed a summertime friendship, eating lunch and sometimes going to a movie together. One evening we all had dinner at Mark's place, a fussy, middle-class, five-room apartment with glass lamps, brocaded living-room set, and carefully arranged drapes. There were a number of fans, and I was as cool there as anywhere that

steamy summer. Mark's mother dismissed me as a possible girlfriend for her son when she learned I lived in Williamsburg, a low-income ghetto. After dinner she didn't want the boys to accompany me home on the one-hour train ride. I stood firm despite her pursed mouth and shrill "Why is it necessary?" Mark was thrilled to commit this small act of rebellion against her. He and David complained about their mothers all the way to Brooklyn.

And, as I said, I remember one woman from the Floor: Mary.

That first day, Alice led me down the rows, pushing the machine ahead of us, her deft fingers making fast work of sleeve after sleeve. "It's not hard. Just take your time at first," she said as we reached the end of the row and rounded a corner. A woman wearing a drooping skirt and sloppy blouse turned at the sound of Alice's voice. Her brown hair was wild, a field of reeds blown by an unrelenting wind. Her eyes, slanted in the manner of Down syndrome, were thickly circled with black eyeliner, her mascara smeared and beaded. Her mouth was a blinding scarlet, white teeth rippled with lipstick. She was in her late twenties or early thirties and, despite her slouching shoulders, had a full, fine body. She offered an enormous smile and a poorly articulated hello.

"Hi," I answered, and smiled back.

"Get to work, Mary," Alice said, pushing the machine to the next row.

As Mary turned away, I said, "My name is Michelle. Pleased to meet you, Mary."

Mary flashed another quick smile. Then, with a glance at Alice, she returned to stapling with a practiced, smooth precision.

"She's harmless," Alice said when we were once again buried in coats.

"I'm not afraid," I answered. There were two Down syndrome kids on my block: a boy with cowlicks and a lazy eye, and a fat girl who sat on her front steps and greeted everyone who passed. They tried to stay out of range of the neighborhood bullies, who punched or teased them.

Though Mary had worked there six years, I noticed that, aside from the usual good-mornings, people treated her like a part of the warehouse scenery.

I settled into a boring routine: my mother and I traveling together in the morning, usually reading; the shipments of clothes that awaited me each day; smoking breaks and half-hour lunches; then home. At least once a day the boss checked up on the Floor. His rapid footsteps stopped at the beginning of each row, then moved by so quickly it seemed impossible for him to have seen whether anyone was working. He always appeared before a break or lunch, thus preventing anyone from sneaking out early. The sight of his long body curving forward in its strange manner nudged me from my dreamy, heat-induced lethargy, and I stapled with the smooth, swift regularity of a clock ticking. I decided then that, when I was an adult, I would be my own boss, despite the heavy odds against it. I was determined to be the only one who could judge how hard

I was working.

Each morning I exchanged hellos with Mary, who was the only worker besides Alice that the boss knew by name. I was touched by her quiet shyness, an exaggerated version of my own lack of confidence. Sometimes I shared a cookie with her at break before joining Mark and David outside to smoke, although usually she went off by herself or never even appeared. Her rows were done before anybody else's, and she often told herself, "Good work, Mary," when a line was completed. She flashed her odd, full-mouthed smile to everyone who said hi to her. When the boss appeared, though, she shrank, her head vanishing into whatever she was stapling, her back curving forward and her knees moving tightly together.

One particular afternoon, Mary was in the next row over from me, both of us buried in thick black coats with enormous brass buttons shaped like anchors. The sleeves were heavy as five-pound weights. I was wiping my forehead and hands on the lining of one of the coats when I heard the boss growl, "What are you doing, Mary?" I jumped, wondering how I could have missed his arrival. I buttoned the coat and began to staple furiously. A moment later I heard, "You're a bad girl, Mary. No break today."

I stopped stapling. Mary a "bad girl"? She always worked steadily, lost in her thoughts, until Alice tapped her on the shoulder to remind her to take lunch or go home. The boss's footsteps thudded by. He paused for a moment at the head of my row. I stood motionless and waited to see if he'd call me a bad girl, too, but he went swiftly out the door. I heard Mary's machine drag down to the end of the row and saw her shuffle like a frightened mouse to some suits against the farthest wall. "I'm sorry, Mary," I said, but she kept walking.

Alice called for break, and the click of the machines halted like a field of crickets gone quiet. I stood and stretched, eager to leave the building, but when I passed Alice leaning against the wall and fingering her cigarette, I paused. She looked at me crossly, one eyebrow raised. I almost walked past, but the thought of Mary working without respite from the stifling heat stopped me, and I stuttered, "The boss told Mary she couldn't go out on break."

Alice remained silent.

"Isn't that illegal?" I asked, embarrassed at the nervous break in my voice.

Alice stared at me impassively and said, "He's the boss. He knows what's legal. Keep your nose out of it."

*(end of excerpt)*