

Goodbye, Debbie Sue

I started collecting secrets when I was just six years old. That was the first time I saw Debbie Sue naked. I thought about sharing the occurrence with my dad, but decided he already knew about the differences in boys and girls. Nine years would pass before I again beheld a sight such as that time on the riverbank.

I'm sixteen now and I work in a place called Mel's Diner in a dusty little town off Highway 90 about halfway between San Antonio and El Paso. A baptism at the church had just ended with a good dunking and I wanted to get over to Mel's before the fun started. When I arrived, Lionel Scoggins was already on his favorite stool at the counter. He was a hulking bear of a man with short, white whiskers that made him look like a Santa Claus down on his luck. Mel stood behind the counter pouring Lionel a cup of coffee. Mel, short for Melanie, must have been a good looking woman once upon a time, before life had beaten down on her. That's what my friend, Debbie Sue, had told me lots of times—that life could beat you down, and it could be darned hard to beat back.

Debbie Sue is three years older than me, but we were friends just the same. I didn't even mind that some kids made fun of me for having a girl for a friend. We had lots of secrets between us. One of my favorites was the time she put a rubber finger sticking out of a drain in the girl's restroom at her school. She told me how a couple of girls ran out screaming to high heaven. We laughed a lot about that.

Not only was Debbie Sue nice to me, but she was also easy on the eyes. She had *budded* a few years earlier, and she always smelled like powder. We were able to talk to each other about life, which I couldn't do with the knuckleheaded boys my age.

Conversations with them were pretty much limited to fishing, or how to ditch school or church.

Debbie Sue seemed downright philosophical at times, like when I said we just had to get through the crummy stuff in life. “Life ain’t about just getting through. That’s losing,” she’d said. “Stay in a place like this your whole life and you wind up like Lily Hawkins who said a voice was telling her to jump off a bridge, so she goes off and does it. No sir, not me.” Debbie Sue wasn’t about to grow up and old in this backwater burg. She was an unsettled searcher, like a squirming cat trying to escape its master’s arms. When the time was right, she planned to light out. And furthermore, all the foot-washing yokels who’d ever teased or made fun of her could kiss her ass as she headed down the road. Debbie Sue talked tough, and I would have bet she’d get life by the tail before it had too much time to beat on her like it had on Mel.

I watched Mel pour Lionel a refill. Her thin-hipped figure had withstood a passel of kids and husbands, and around fifty years of gravity. Although she wore her hair ratted up and brushed back like a fading country-western singer, her fallen arches and her face reflected some hard times and harsh disappointments, a life of hard knocks, most notably highlighted by a crescent scar on her forehead—the result of getting kicked by a horse or running into one of her ex-husband’s fists, way back when. I wondered why she still wore her faded and frayed mustard-colored uniform, but figured it was because it gave her a modicum of professionalism, or purpose. Even this far from anything important, a person needed to feel they had a niche in life.

Mel gave me a tired look, but managed to make her mouth turn up in some semblance of a smile. “You don’t need a get-go from me, Bobby. Put on your apron and tend to whatever needs tending.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said and disappeared into the small kitchen that was barely big enough to throw a cat in. I’d cleaned all the dirty dishes before I left the night before, so I found the fly swatter and quickly ended the day for the kitchen’s first two visitors.

Soon Corky Trumball came trundling through the front door. I knew it was Corky even before he said, “Howdy” to Lionel and Mel. Most of the customers were so familiar that I could identify them just by the way they shuffled their feet. Both Corky and Lionel claimed to be men who’d seen and done everything, even though I was pretty sure they’d never been farther than the state line.

All of the diner’s customers had their own niches. Corky was the town sot. Even his moniker came from his love affair with the fruit from the vine. Not that what he drank had ever seen a cork. But he was fine in the mornings, opting for strong coffee, and that was a blessing because he wouldn’t want to be three sheets on this Sunday morn, considering what was going to happen once the place got busier.

Mendoza came in through the back. He ruffled my hair and wrapped his none-too-clean apron around his waist. “You’re here early today, amigo,” he said while he busied himself with a skillet of bacon fat.

“Yeah. They dunked ole Harlan Johnson in the baptismal over at the church.”

“And you slip out before they caught you, eh?”

“Looked like the preacher was about to drown ole Harlan the way he held him under. I think it was long enough to put the fear of God in him for sure.”

Mendoza laughed, revealing his gold tooth. I liked the way Mendoza laughed. It was a pleasanter sound than bible-beating voices any day.

“Since you’re here, give me a hand with the eggs and biscuits.”

Within a few minutes, the rest of the crowd sauntered into Mel’s. They found their usual chairs and stools while Mel made the rounds with her coffee pot. She didn’t need to ask them what they wanted. She just started shoving orders through a cubbyhole between the counter and the kitchen. I wouldn’t be real busy until there were breakfast scraps to be bussed, but the entertainment would come sooner than that, or so I’d been promised. I peeked out the door again and counted twelve men who ranged from age fifty to seventy. I’d seen their faces my entire life, all of them covered with layers of lost opportunities for different outcomes to their lives. Josh Potts and George Fraily were already shoving dominoes around a checkered, plastic tablecloth while they sipped coffee and waited for their orders of ham and eggs.

Suddenly, the event I’d been waiting for was about to commence. I saw Debbie Sue’s shapely silhouette approach the diner’s front door and step in. Her sweet perfume cut through the diner’s caffeine and greasy odors. She wore a cotton print dress with lavender flowers and red leather dress-up shoes with heels. The dress looked like mail-order Sears, but everything looked cute on Debbie Sue. She also carried a beat-up suitcase. Lionel noticed her first. His jaw stopped in mid-chew on a slice of toast. Soon everyone, including Mel, stopped what they were doing to wonder what could bring Debbie Sue into the old man’s club at this hour.

She stood just inside the door and said a little unsteadily, “I need about fifty bucks. I’ve got bus money, but I need a little more to buy some stuff.”

This wasn't what I had expected. Debbie Sue told me she was going to make a grand entrance and give a few old codgers who'd given her grief over the years an ear full. Then she was going to flash them and hit the road, leaving this grimy town behind once and for all. Begging for money was the last thing I ever thought she'd do.

No one responded to Debbie Sue's rather strange request. Instead, they appeared dumbfounded to hear she had a notion to shake off the town's dust and go somewhere. She looked at the assemblage and sighed. Then she sat her suitcase next to the door. She stepped on a chair and climbed on top of an unoccupied table in the middle of the room. It wobbled a might until she was carefully centered, but there was no uncertainty in her act.

Two furrows of concern appeared on Mel's brow. She broke the crowd's silence by saying, "Debbie Sue. Get down off of there. You might break a leg."

"Please, Mel. I have to do this." She had everyone's undivided attention. "I'm hitching my wagon to a star, and I'm leaving to make a career for myself in California. I'm going to be in the movies," she announced, her voice steadier now.

The word "career" had never been associated with anyone from around these parts. Debbie Sue unbuttoned the top of her dress.

"Tarnation, girl. What 'er you up to?" Josh Potts said, an unplayed domino frozen in his hand.

Debbie Sue didn't answer. Careful to maintain her balance on the tenuous stage, she slapped at a lock of dark hair that often dipped down over one eye. She pulled the dress off of her shoulders, and let it fall to her ankles. She wore no undergarments. A

communal gasp rose from the crusty old men and Mel alike. I nearly stopped breathing altogether.

She stepped out of the dress and stood before the gathering as naked as the day she'd come into the world, save for her red shoes. I almost expected her to click the heels and wish to be sent directly to California, but this wasn't a movie. This was real.

Debbie Sue's body had changed a might since that day I'd seen her coming out of the river. Perched atop the table, she reminded me of an old statue I'd seen in a picture book, but that statue didn't have arms. Debbie Sue's hands rested on her hips resulting in a posture that said, "Here I am for the world to see." It was much more provocative than that old statue.

There were no whoops or shouts for her to cover herself or to climb down. Everyone seemed to be in a state of awe. Never in the Lord's universe had anyone there expected a sight such as this. She could have been Miss America awaiting her scepter and crown if she'd had a bathing suit to go with them. Her arms, legs, face, and neck were browned from the sun. Her torso, from below her shoulders to mid-thigh, could have been fashioned from porcelain.

Mendoza and me, our heads sticking through the swinging door, one atop the other like two of the Three Stooges, were as spellbound as the rest of the onlookers. Debbie Sue had told me she was leaving town today and she was going to give the regulars something to remember before she left. I thought that meant a piece of her mind. I had no idea she intended to show off all her attributes, if that's what it took to raise a few bucks. She could keep a secret of her own, it seemed.

I once saw some black and white pictures in a magazine article about a nudist camp. That indiscretion had resulted in an ass-whuppin' for me and two other boys by our fathers. The beatings were followed by speeches on the wages of sin as our dads hungrily eye-balled the pictures themselves. This time, I wasn't worried about punishment for myself. I was concerned about the position Debbie Sue was placing herself, looking candy-sweet like she did.

She began to pivot clockwise like a figurine on a music box giving everyone a good look from all sides. "Gee whilakers," I murmured unconsciously as Debbie Sue's pert fanny rotated into view, a delicate derriere complete with dimples. I knew then if anyone ever asked me what the most beautiful thing I'd seen in my lifetime, I'd answer right up—one Debbie Sue Dinglehooper standing on top of that table.

She examined her audience as she turned, studying each man as each one of them studied her. None of the men had ever been into a big city peepshow or strip-joint, so they had nothing to compare the sight of the naked Debbie Sue to, other than the flickering memories of their youth. To say they gawked would be an understatement. George Fraily's mouth was open wide enough to cause his upper dentures to drop onto his lower lip.

Mel broke the silence. "Oh, Honey. Come down from there."

"I just need a little cash for California so I can go on interviews." The intimacy of her confession was as startling as her nakedness. "I've seen the way many of you look at me. I knew what you were thinking. I'm not holding it against you, understand. I just thought that seeing what you've been thinking about would encourage you to help me out. Corky there could help buy me a new dress if he just gave up his Tokay wine for one

night,” Debbie Sue stated without a hint of sarcasm, simply stating a fact. “Those of you that get paid not to grow crops could help a local girl make good. And some of you who have time to hang around Mel’s all day drinking coffee...”

Some of the men lowered their eyes as they met Debbie Sue’s but none made for the door.

“And just think. When I’m famous, you all can remember me like this. While your wives are cooking, or cleaning, or churchifyin’, you can think about little ole me, Debbie Sue, and what I was willing to do to get out of here.”

It suddenly occurred to me why Debbie Sue was doing this. It was for a reason even stronger than her professed desire to seek fame and fortune. She was thirsty for more meaning in her life than to be a local pretty girl who ended up nursing and diapering a string of babies, or working in a café like Melanie. I understood she felt as parched as a dried up riverbed with any recognition of what she might aspire to drying up her spirit a little more each day. Whether it was California or some other destination, she had to test the waters of life beyond Cabbage Patch, USA, the sooner, the better.

The cash register rung. Mel pulled several bills from their trays and held them out to Debbie Sue. “Take this,” she said. “It’ll give you a start.”

“No, Mel. I don’t want your money. You work hard to earn what little you get and to keep this place open so these boys can chew the fat. Thank you just the same.”

Mel shrugged and fed the bills back into the register. “Well, at least get your clothes on before Tom shows up and hauls you in,” Mel pleaded. Tom was the Highway Patrolman that stopped in for eggs and coffee every Sunday morning like clockwork.

“I’ll get dressed once these fellas pay for what they’re looking at.” Then she added, “I’m going with or without your help, even if Tom hauls me off to the pokey first.”

It was so quiet everyone could have heard the proverbial pin drop—those whose hearing was still functional, that is. Lionel lifted one cheek an inch off his stool like he was about to fart. Instead, he pulled a wallet from his hip pocket and fumbled with a ten dollar bill. He walked over to Debbie Sue’s table and laid it at her feet. He looked up at her and winked, making him look even more like an off-season St. Nick.

A soft rumble passed through the room. The married men left it to their wives to drop something into the church plate on Sundays, so this was their opportunity to figuratively pass the plate for one of God’s nicer specimens—Debbie Sue. One after the other dug into his overalls or his *Dickies* work pants for a few dollars. They lay the money at the makeshift altar in Mel’s Diner, paying homage to a fantasy, visible for one show only.

Right on schedule, Tom’s patrol car pulled in front of the diner. That seemed to break the spell inside. Some of the men acted like they might be arrested if Tom walked in and found them gawking at a pretty, naked woman. They started to drink their cold coffee as if Debbie Sue was no longer there, but she had matters under control. She quickly stepped back into her dress, the buttons left undone, picked up the booty, and climbed down. Tom was still in his car as she picked up her suitcase and hit the door. “I’ll send a postcard after I’m discovered and you mugs can talk about how you knew me when.” She turned on her heel and walked into the bright light of morning.

When Debbie Sue stepped off the porch and leaned into Tom’s patrol car, Mel’s patrons nearly knocked each other over racing to the front windows. It was the fastest that

some of them had moved in twenty years. After a brief chat, Debbie Sue strutted around to the car's passenger side and climbed in next to Tom. It appeared she'd scored a ride to the bus depot.

I'd liked to have asked Debbie Sue how she felt about leaving this way, but knew I'd never have the chance. She'd got what she needed from a bunch of old guys that were normally tighter than a lug-nut on a rusty bolt.

"Tom's leaving without breakfast," one of the men noted as he saw Debbie Sue smile at Tom, brush aside a lock of her hair, the buttons on her frock still undone. "She might be a right *good* actress."

I was equally sure that Debbie Sue's dreams would come true because the movie stars I'd seen over at the Rialto couldn't possibly have any better body than what I'd seen twirling around on Mel's table top.

Three months later, two postcards arrived at Mel's Diner. One was addressed to Mel and the other addressed to me. Mel's crescent scar got whiter when she flushed, and I saw a tear in the corner of her eye as she handed me my card. I didn't know whether it was a tear of joy or sorrow.

I took the card out to the diner's back steps where I could read it in private. Debbie Sue's leaving had created a rip in the town's scenery she had managed to slip through, but the memory of her performance was crystal clear. Deep down I knew she would change from the person who had been my accomplice, if she hadn't already, so I began to read with apprehension.

Dear Bobby, I've got a dancing job in L.A. They call it the city of angels, in case you didn't know. I'm saving up for acting lessons. Hang on to your dreams and think about me once in a while. Oh, I've changed my name to Blaze Heaton. Heat-on. Get it?

Your friend, DS/BH.

“She’s doin’ fine out there,” I heard myself say.

I suspect we all play different parts for different reasons. Maybe the only time we can be ourselves is when we’re alone with no one to disappoint. I’d been hanging onto something all right, thanks to Debbie Sue: the chance to have something besides those lost opportunities. If she could have dreams, so could I. When I get a little older, I just might light out. Debbie Sue...er...Blaze, would be a big star by then. Maybe I could find a girl just as nice, and one with a body as nicely assembled as my good friend’s. I planned to hang on to *that* secret until I could hold a dream-girl of my own.