

DOO-WOP DREAMS

ENJ CARTER

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Foreword

IN THIS PLACE and this time there was a lot of pressure to be nobody.

Men on their knees—you could see holes in the soles of their shoes—playing craps on the sidewalk. Neighbors asking you what number came in instead of saying good morning. A friend or two being sent to an upstate reformatory for stealing a pair of gloves or a coat for winter. Then again there was the street itself—a magical place that only demanded one thing—you had to use your imagination. You had to believe that a Spaldeen could turn a street with three sewers into a stadium. That four street corners were really designed for kick the can running bases. However, if you screwed up, like dropping a fly ball, when sides were picked for future games, you were always picked last and expected it.

Perhaps the anger of broken homes, and in many cases poverty, manifested itself in trying to be the best you could be. There were no agendas. Nobody worried about the future. It was all about giving one hundred percent, whether it was stick-ball, being a gang member, or singing doo-wop.

Chapter One

VINNY SULLIVAN DID not like standing in line for a blowjob, but he didn't have much to say about it. The full-blooded Italian teenage gang members in his Bronx neighborhood were pretty much the role models for behavior. Juanita, a fifteen-year-old daughter of a super, had come from Puerto Rico and was lonely. She was told all she had to do was blow the gang members on the block, and she would have plenty of friends.

Vinny was a reluctant gang member of The Supreme Hoods, but you did what you had to do for survival in this Bronx neighborhood, which was more like a small Italian village.

There were a dozen gang members lined up in the steamy basement at 178th Street and Arthur Avenue. In the clubhouse room, Vinny could hear the leader of The Supreme Hoods, Roscoe DeFeo, telling Juanita that if she didn't like the looks of a gang member, she didn't have to blow him. Everyone knew that Roscoe's one aim in life was to become a wiseguy—to work for The Laundryman, the local crime boss.

“Can you believe that pervert?” said Pedo Stavros, the only Greek in The Supreme Hoods. “He's staying in the room with her. You know, he expects a donation of five dollars for repairs on the club; he's taking I.O.U.s.”

Vinny barely heard his Greek gang member. He didn't like what was going on, and he was trying to figure out how to get out of the situation. Anyway, he was comfortable with getting his rocks off dry-humping Rosemary Abandonato in her dingy hallway which always smelled of bad cooking.

The Greek gang member continued, "He's planning to break in to Bronx Borough Hall tonight. Seems he got a tip where the probation officers keep their weapons locked up for the night. He mentioned it to me, I don't know what that means."

Okay, this is not good, thought Vinny. He's picking people for tonight. Another reason to get the fuck out of here.

"He's already gotten two of us sent upstate in the past six months," said Vinny.

"He thinks he's a big thinker."

"He's trying to impress the goombahs is what you mean?"

"That's what everyone thinks—look, the line just moved."

"I can't do this."

"She's supposed to be seventeen, age of consent. Anyway, you wanted to be a Supreme Hood, Vinny."

"And you fucking know why, Pede. What choice did we have?"

"She's crying, I hear her."

"Screw this, I'm gone."

The other gang members watched Vinny walk out of the basement, confused why anyone would not want to get a blow-job for an I.O.U.

* * *

2017 Fontaine Avenue was the only stoop building on the block. As a young boy of six new to the block, Vinny had hated the smell of the coarse cooking oil used by both Greek and Italian families in the tenement building, but it didn't bother him anymore as he climbed to his fifth-floor railroad apartment.

Francine, his mother, was sitting at the kitchen table, holding back tears. “Vinny, your father drank up the rent money again. What are we going to do?”

Vinny was not a big kid for seventeen, but said, “I told you Ma, we’ll kick him out; we can go back on welfare. Why the hell did he come back?”

“Oh Vinny, he was a good man once.”

Vinny looked at the patrolmen’s stick in the corner of the kitchen. He knew his mother would never use it. He walked over to it, picked it up, slapped it in his palm, and said, “Did he try and hit you?”

“No, Vinny, it wasn’t like that. This drink has poisoned his brain.”

“Did he sell his brushes?”

“No, he still has them, but he was fired.”

“I’ll borrow from the loan shark.”

“Are you sure?”

“What choice do we have?”

“Please be careful,” Francine added, suspecting her son might have to involve himself in an illegal activity to pay off the loan shark.

Later, in his tiny colorless room at the end of the railroad apartment, Vinny placed a stack of 45 RPMs on the turntable. He placed five discs on the player. In the back alleyway, outside his window, he could hear Perry Como singing “Don’t let the stars get in your eyes.” Como wasn’t the only favorite in the mostly Italian neighborhood, there were Jerry Vale, Louie Prima, and Al Martino, as well. *Good singers*, thought Vinny, *but not for me*.

The speaker in the 45 player wasn’t much, Vinny had to turn the volume up as far as he could. The sound of The Penquins harmonizing on “Hey Señorita” was a beautiful thing in Vinny’s mind. He jumped out of his steel cot and began filling in whatever space in the song that was left by the Penquins, snapping

his fingers to the beat. There wasn't much to fill in. They had it covered. Vinny considered their vocalizing to be first-class. When he sang in the hallways, or on the roof, or in the subways, he was only good enough to be a second tenor, but that was alright with him. There was a new name for what he was listening to. It began to be called doo-wop, but he still thought of it as rhythm and blues.

Anyway, he didn't care what they called it, it was a magical thing, and Perry Como and "Your Hit Parade" could go fuck themselves with their crooning bullshit.

A few hours later, he wasn't surprised when his mother came to his back room and said, "One of your friends is at the door Vinny, he has a message for you."

Vinny could smell the booze and the turpentine on his father as he walked past him, sprawled out on the bed as if he was floating on water face down.

As soon as he saw Louie the Lip in the kitchen, he knew Roscoe, leader of The Supreme Hoods, wanted to see him.

He kept walking past Louie and double-timed it down the marble stairs.

Roscoe, accompanied by two other Supreme Hood gang members—his 'war counselor' and 'treasurer'—were waiting for Vinny outside under the streetlamp. It was still afternoon.

"You don't like blowjobs, or what?" Roscoe said.

"I had other stuff to do."

"You're chickie tonight when we break into Borough Hall."

"Think that's wise?"

"We need some artillery. Those fucking spics are moving up Third Avenue like locusts, not to mention the Webster Warriors."

"How many are going in?"

"Three—you be there at ten, and you better not punk out."

"I'll do my best."

"You'll be there, Vinny, understand? I let you slide because I

know your heart's not in it, but you got to carry some weight. That singing shit is not going to get you anywhere. And that Damian guy is associated with those Fordham assholes, is that right?"

"We like singing together."

"It's not going to get you anywhere, Vinny."

Sure, taking hot cars to Vegas and running numbers is going to get me out of here.

"I'll be there," said Vinny, turning and walking back into his building, knowing this break-in was something he did not want to do. And anyway, Damian had said to keep the evening open. Whatever that was about.

Chapter Two

THE TWO SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLDS in The Crotonas were waiting for Vinny in the courtyard of J.H.S. 118. Junior was bass, Angel, falsetto.

Junior lived on Belmont Avenue, Angel on Crotona Avenue. They were also card-carrying members of The Supreme Hoods, but rarely attended meetings.

It was dusk, a cold February day, but the three broke into “Sunday Kind of Love,” then “Golden Teardrops,” followed by their version of “Gee” by The Crows.

“Is Damian coming, or what?” said Junior.

“He says he likes the way we sound together,” said Angel.

“He’s fucked around with other groups, can we trust him?” continued Junior.

“He *knows* The Crotonas are the best around here. The gig we did together at the St. Joseph’s bazaar turned out pretty good,” said Angel .

“He says he wants to be sure. He’s cooking up some type of test, I figure,” said Vinny.

Angel, the toughest of the three, and maybe the purest falsetto in the Bronx, said, “The fucking guy is great, he’s already made a

demo, he has connections. What do we have to lose? I love singing with this guy.”

“He’s coming now,” said Junior.

Damian Verserto had a swagger to his walk that immediately gained attention.

They watched him cross the schoolyard and instinctively had a feeling something was up.

“If you guys don’t mind, we’re going to take a subway trip.”

“Vinny didn’t want to hear that. Roscoe was no one to be messing with, yet Damian’s words were a welcome relief.

“It’s amateur night at the Apollo. I entered our names. We should be the only white group performing. Are you with me, or what? We’ll rehearse on the train down.”

“Just like that?” said Junior. “We’re dressed like bums.”

Damian raised his hands and opened his palms as if to say, ‘are you going to take this opportunity or not?’

“Fuck it, let’s do it,” said Angel.

Junior asked, “What’s the billing?”

“Damian and the Crotonas, I hope that’s okay?”

The three looked at each other and shrugged. Italian for yes. And so the four of them headed for the 183rdth Street train stop of the Third Avenue El. All the while Vinny kept thinking about the break-in and the consequences of defying Roscoe.

* * *

Backstage at the Apollo, they watched the groups performing before them. Most were chased off the stage by some maniac with a cap pistol when the audience showed their displeasure, but all had better moves than any white guys they had seen on street corners in the Bronx.

Damian seemed to not notice. *His confidence is amazing*, thought Vinny.

They had rehearsed “Hey Señorita” and “Sunday Kind of

Love” on the train. Damian felt they had to kill with songs no other group would dare touch. Vinny was not so sure.

When they were announced, and appeared on the stage, they could hear the snickers from the crowd as Damian handed the house band the two songs for the set.

The thing was, Damian had all his own moves, and an original voice unlike any other performer that Vinny, Angel, and Junior had ever heard.

The Crotonas fell right into the groove with him, each lifting their left leg in unison on the beat.

The audience, rumored to be the most difficult in show business, roared their approval.

When they got off the stage, somebody backstage said, “You ain’t getting first place, but you made your point. You’re the first white group that had the balls to come down here.”

Later, outside the Apollo, in the shadows of the marquee, four African-American teenagers were harmonizing. Damian and the Crotonas’ instinct was to show they were better. Just a few feet from the Apollo doorway, they went into “Little Girl of Mine” by the Cleftones. They were fully relaxed, confident, and almost explosive. Just as Damian started going into a few moves he had just witnessed earlier, a voice said, “Best you move on, Bronx boys.”

It was one of the stage hands from the Apollo. “Up where you’re from, you’re good, but I ain’t heard anything original yet.”

And that was it. The truth had come home. It dawned on them that they were carbon copies, not originals. Then they brushed it off. Just being able to sing rhythm and blues, or what was beginning to be known on the street as doo-wop, was all they cared about.

Chapter Three

WHEN VINNY APPROACHED his tenement building, it was nearly three in the morning. A police car with flashing lights was parked outside the stoop, which had four steps.

The Greek gang member's family lived on the second floor, but even from the vestibule of the building Vinny could hear Pede's mother sobbing hysterically. Vinny had to step back as two policemen led Pede down the marble steps in cuffs.

Pede looked at Vinny, and said, "I was last to get out, somebody saw me," and that was that. It didn't take long for Vinny to figure out what happened. Pede had stayed in line in the cellar and had been chosen for the break-in. For sure Pede would have to spend two years in an upstate reformatory, Vinny figured. He also suspected that Roscoe was probably looking for him.

"I'm sorry," Vinny said, as he passed Pede's mother.

"He's a gentle boy, why did this happen?"

Vinny ignored the question and took two steps at a time to reach the fifth floor.

He had almost made it to his room without stirring anyone, when his mother said, "Vinny, you had me worried."

“Nothing, Ma, a thing with the group. Make sure I get up for school in the morning.”

He couldn't sleep, though. *Roscoe is a psycho, anything could happen. What options do I have?* Kept repeating over and over in his head.

In the morning, like many in the neighborhood, he put on his black chinos, shirt, leather jacket, motorcycle boots with fake emeralds, and skipped breakfast.

Roosevelt High School on Fordham Road was a prison, as far as Vinny was concerned. No one was permitted outside the building during class hours. All The Crotonas were in their senior year. All would receive General Diplomas if they graduated, which they all knew wasn't worth much. Damian had already quit school and was working gigs as a solo; mostly saloons and weddings.

The Crotonas had been meeting in the upstairs stairwell at Roosevelt since their first day in the school, usually during lunch hour, although Vinny couldn't stand being locked up all day, and sometimes would eat outside and head to the local pool hall.

This morning, all three had cut gym class to discuss the night before and do some harmonizing. Angel broke into “Ruby Baby” by The Drifters, but Vinny was not into it.

“Okay, what's the problem?”

Vinny told them about the break-in at Bronx Borough Hall.

“So they went in without you. How many got caught?”

“Just one guy from my building. Decent guy, family has a flower store.”

Angel, the smallest of the group, said, “Roscoe doesn't want to mess with the Fordham Guineas—that's what I hear. The Guineas are just waiting for him to try and cross 183rd Street then all the shit is going to hit the fan.”

Junior said, “Half the fucking school is carrying Supreme Hood I.D. cards; what are the Fordham Guineas waiting for?”

“They’re not sure if Roscoe wants to expand turf or is just a criminal enterprise, which is none of their business if he stays below 183rd. They also heard he’s arming himself,” said Angel, as if he was talking about one country invading another.

“Damian can talk to him,” said Junior, “everyone knows he’s just a thug.”

“No, he’s fucked up. I’ll be the scapegoat,” said Vinny. “He’ll be looking for me.”

“You didn’t say a fucking word last night. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking ‘I’m not robbing anybody.’”

Junior, ever the catalyst, started clapping his hands in time and singing “OhhhOhhhhh . . . AhhhhAhhhhh,” and Vinny, as depressed he was, started singing lead on “Hey Señorita.”

* * *

A light blanket of snow began to fall as classes at Roosevelt let out. Vinny wasn’t sure what would happen with Roscoe, but knew there was no point in hiding. Roscoe and his Hoods usually spent this time of day shaking down “Jew Boys” in the 118 schoolyard for money. Roscoe wouldn’t be in the candy store, Vinny guessed, as he headed there.

The candy store at the corner of 178th and Fontaine Avenue was a refuge of sorts. It didn’t really have a name, for some reason, but it had the latest hits on the jukebox, girls from the neighborhood, and the owner lent out money as well. Vinny knew if he borrowed thirty-five dollars from the owner, a long-time-ago immigrant from Sicily with a horrible scar on his face—he had crossed the wrong people as a young man—the *vigorish* would be seven dollars a week until the loan was paid off. Mike liked Vinny, and called him ‘kid.’ “Hey kid, have any dreams last night, maybe a few numbers?” he would ask on some mornings. Mike was also the numbers collector on the block.

“Lily Maebelle,” by the Valentines, was playing on the jukebox. Rosemary, who lived in the building before Vinny’s, was moving up and down, making her tits hard not to notice. Her girlfriend Carol was sucking on a Popsicle. In public, Rosemary pretended not to be interested in Vinny, but they had dry humped in her hallway a lot lately. Vinny hated cumming in his pants, but Rosemary would not jerk him off. She smiled at Vinny from the telephone booth at the back of the store, as he asked Mike for the loan.

Mike still spoke in a heavy Sicilian accent, and said, “Kid, your old man is no good. I know why you’re doing this. But you miss a payment, Benny is going to visit you, I’m just the banker, you understand.”

Benny was the Jewish enforcer who worked for The Laundryman. In modern terms he would be described as a sociopath.

“I know, Mike.”

“What did you do? Roscoe is looking for you.”

“I don’t want to get into it.”

Mike handed Vinny the money. He needed something to cheer himself up, he decided. He walked over to the jukebox and played “Blue Moon,” by the Marcells.

Rosemary, speaking from her seat in the telephone booth, said, “You going to Carol’s birthday party on Saturday?”

“I’ll be there if I can make it.”

“Maybe The Crotonas could perform.”

“Maybe?”

“You never call, Vinny.”

“I thought you didn’t want a steady boyfriend.”

“You know I like you, Vinny.”

Vinny looked over at Carol, Rosemary’s girlfriend. He thought he saw her suggestively stick out her tongue for a split second.

“Everyone knows about the Puerto Rican girl,” said Rosemary. “How could you guys do that?”

“I wasn’t there.”

“You’re coming to the party, right?”

“Like I said, I’ll try and make it.”

A few of the guys from the block who were not members of The Supreme Hoods came into the store. They played the juke-box right away or Mike, in his heavy Italian accent, would have said, “Fresh Air.”

The blanket of snow outside was covering all the dirt and grime of Fontaine Avenue. “A Sunday Kind of Love” by the Harptones was playing, it was dusk, and almost magical, Vinny observed.