

The Girl in the Tangerine Dress

From the series, “Extraordinary Moments in an Ordinary Life”
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For the moment, he wasn't really paying attention to the numerous girls passing by. Sure, he *was* a 16 year old boy, and it *was* pretty much out of character for him. But right now he was concentrating on the game. He had played it many times, but had never won; and, it was the only game in the carnival he hadn't mastered, which made him even more determined. He was oblivious to the pretty girls, the flashing lights, the barking carnies, and the sweet distinctive smell of cotton candy that permeated the night air. His best friend had long since given up on trying to get him to move on to something else, and was following an attractive blonde that, while worthy of stalking, was way out of his league.

As the milk bottle rolled off its wooden platform for the umpteenth time, he reached into his pocket for another quarter and looked around for his friend. What he saw quickly took his attention away from the game. Long, lovely legs—walking toward him. His eyes lingered a few more seconds as the legs continued to approach, then he moved his gaze upward—past the very short orange mini-dress to a freckled face framed by a mane of long, straight, red hair. And she was looking directly at him. He glanced briefly at the other girl walking a few steps behind her. Dark, exotic, but not his type. The redhead recaptured his attention as she continued toward him with obvious purpose.

“Hey,” she said as she got close enough for him to hear. “How come you're not slingin' burgers?”

He could now see the bazillion freckles on her oval face. And her startlingly blue eyes were now reflecting the glittering lights of the quickly forgotten game behind him. Despite her very presumptuous greeting, he was sure that he had *not* met her before. He could count on one hand all of the redheads he had known in his life, and none of them were this cute or this memorable. The fact that that he worked at a hamburger joint across town wasn't something he bragged about, especially to girls he was trying to impress, yet she knew. Was she a customer? No way.

She was patiently waiting for an answer.

“I'm off tonight,” he replied. The response seemed trite and obvious and he wished he had come up with something more clever. “Do I know you?”

“You cost me a pizza the other night.” Now she definitely had his attention. How could he possibly have cost her a pizza? He'd never even seen her before.

“How did I cost you a pizza?” *Again with the obvious.*

“I was racing with a friend and the winner had to buy the loser a pizza. I was in the lead when we got to Cals, but as I turned the corner around the back of the building you were taking out the trash and you stepped right in front of me. I almost ran over you. I can't believe you don't remember that.”

He vaguely recalled the incident. But it *was* late at night, and it *was* at the end of a long shift. He just wanted to get things cleaned up and get out of there.

“Oh, that was you?” *Think clever. Come on. You can do it.* “You could'a killed me.”
Great job. That'll impress her. Geez.

“Na. The rocket has great brakes.”

Obviously “the rocket” was the bright red Comet convertible she had been driving. *That, I remember, but not the cute redhead? Geez.*

“Oh yeah. The red Comet. Nice ride.”

“It’s my baby. Anybody touches her but me, I break their fingers.” She smiled a wide toothy smile. He was smitten.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Her eyes had gotten bluer. He was sure of it.

She suddenly seemed to remember something. “Oh, I want you to meet....” She turned and looked around. There was no one nearby. “Now where’d she go?” The exotic one had wondered off while they were talking. “She was the one who wanted to meet you.”

His heart sank for a minute. *She? Not you?*

“Guess I’d better go find her.”

She’s about to walk away. You better do something quick. “Hey. You like car races?”
Duh. Red Comet. Pizza. C’mon guy. Move on quickly. “I was just getting ready to go over to the track. You wanna come along?” *Smooth. That should send her running.*

She looked around again for her friend and shrugged her shoulders. “Sure. I love car races.”

His heart began pounding. “Great. Let’s go.” *What a conversationalist.*

As they wound their way through the carnival grounds toward the race track, he began to worry about money. He had spent half his paycheck on the game. *Oh crap. The game.* He forgot that he had accumulated 50 points toward the prize he wanted—a giant stuffed blue poodle that he knew would appeal to the ladies. Too late now. He had walked away without getting a tally sheet. *Oh crap.* They were almost at the arena ticket booth. He gingerly reached in his pocket and pulled out his wallet. Then he glanced at the sign above the window.

Bleacher Seats: \$1.00

He looked back down at his wallet. Just two bills inside. That left nothing for Cokes. He stepped up to the window and handed the lady the two bills.

“Two for the bleachers,” he said.

“The other four bucks for me?” the lady barked back.

He looked down at the one dollar and five dollar bills he had handed her. *Another smooth move.* He hoped the redhead hadn’t noticed.

He retrieved the four singles the lady tossed out on the ledge. “Sorry. I’m gonna need that.”

As they moved through the gate, he gently took the redhead’s arm and moved her through the turnstile in front of him. Then he quickly pulled his hand away, wondering if he was being too forward. *How small she is. My fingers went all the way ‘round her arm and touched my thumb. Geez.*

As they stepped into the bright lights of the arena, he could see her clearly for the first time. Her hair was redder, her eyes were bluer, and the dress....that oh-so-short dress....it wasn’t really orange, was it? It reminded him of something. *Sherbet. Tangerine sherbet.*

The arena grandstand seats were really all the same, just long concrete benches, but the race promoters decided to call the upper rows “bleachers” to designate that they were the cheap seats—farthest back from the action.

“How ‘bout up there?” He pointed to an empty section just two rows from the top but straight out from the finish line.

“Sure, that’s great.”

She started up the stairs in front of him. The tangerine dress was even shorter now. *How could someone so tiny have such long legs?* Following her with his eyes, he felt a bit weak in the knees and tripped and stumbled forward on one of the stairs. *Geez, she must think I'm a klutz.*

They settled-in near the middle of an empty section, high above the track. The grandstand was nearly full except for the upper bleachers and other than a few scattered loners they had this section all to themselves.

"Can I get you a Coke?" *Geez. Now you think of it.* Like most of his friends, he always called soda "Coke," even though he seldom actually drank Coca-Cola.

"No, I'm fine. Thanks."

He breathed a sigh of relief. He really didn't want to leave her alone. *Wow. Possessive already? You just met.*

"You have a favorite driver?" He finally started to make real conversation.

"I like Larry Phillips. His car is cool. Not all beat up like everybody else's. And, he almost always wins."

"Yeah. I like him too. And I hate the guy in the Coke can." These were the only two local drivers with nationally known sponsors, and Dave Goldsberry's car was painted exactly like the familiar soda can.

"Ooooh. I hate him too. I think everybody does. He's so aggressive"

They talked about Phillips and Goldsberry and racing, and how her uncle was a race mechanic, and how he "tuned" her Comet without her dad knowing. They unconsciously moved closer until their bodies touched shoulder to ankle. It was cool at the top of the stands and he offered her his jacket. She said "I'm good" and snuggled closer. He put his arm around her and felt the cool flesh of her shoulder warm under his hand. She smelled like vanilla.

When the 50-lap main event started, Phillips and Goldsberry were in their usual positions at the head of the pack. She said she hoped Phillips put Goldsberry into the wall and he agreed. By lap five, he was counting freckles on her legs. By lap ten, her head was on his shoulder and her silky red hair was just inches from his lips. *She really does smell like vanilla.* At about lap 15, she looked up into his eyes and he brought his lips down to hers. The first kiss was just a test. Just a touch. A soft, full kiss followed. *You didn't bump her teeth. Good job.*

There was no longer a race. No longer a carnival. No longer the sound of car engines or the smell of racing fuel. No fans. No hard concrete bleachers. Just two young hearts and a thousand kisses—until long after the race ended.

"Hey. I've been looking everywhere for you." It was his long-lost buddy, back from chasing blondes, who broke the trance. "Who's your new friend?"

He moved his face back from hers for the first time in nearly an hour.

"Hey, that's a good question," he said softly. "What *is* your name?"

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