

## THE RED DODGE



*Heather De Bel*

Tye wanted to tell Justin. It had bothered her all day.

She told him about how, pulling into the gym entrance that morning, she accidentally cut off a red Dodge sedan. It was an old car, rusted, dent on the side door. He was about to turn into the same parking lot and though he had the right of way, Tye pulled in first. Her windows had been down, music up high. She wasn't paying attention. After a moment of slight embarrassment, Tye circled the lot looking for a place to park. A car was backing out near the gym entrance. She stopped and waited with her blinker on. After the car left, she began to pull in when that red Dodge cut in front of her and took the spot. She had to slam on her brakes to keep from hitting him. She shut her eyes, waiting to hear crunching metal. When she opened them, the guy was closing his car door and swirling his keys at her. He mouthed "nice try, bitch" before walking toward the gym entrance.

Justin licked the foam around the edge of his beer. His eyes narrowed.

"Did he say 'nice try, bitch' or 'nice try, *bitch*'?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, "I couldn't really hear him."

"But you're sure he called you a bitch?"

"I'm sure."

Justin shuffled around the kitchen like he was looking for something, slamming cabinet doors, mumbling curses to this unknown man. His posture made Tye uneasy—back stiffened, arms flexed. It was something she was accustomed to. Justin had a tendency to overreact, a tendency that often got him in trouble.

"It's not that big of a deal," Tye said, letting her posture slump. She often shrunk to boost his confidence. Justin was on the short side, 'stocky' as he put it, with a jaw and build like a pit bull. His height wasn't something they talked about. She knew not to wear heels, not to wear a bump or a high ponytail in her hair, and certainly not to stand on her toes when they kissed. But it was only sometimes that she avoided giving herself an extra inch.

"What did he look like?"

"I can't remember."

Justin put his fists on the table and looked down at her as she sat, "Of course you can't."

She paused.

"Actually, he was tall... white middle aged man, average looking."

"Tall?"

"Yes, tall."

"How tall?"

"I don't know. That's just how he stood out. He was tall."

She would never say so but his anger excited her, the restlessness, all that testosterone. It was, to Tye, his most attractive trait. He was quick to protect her, that dog in him always ready to snap. In a way, she thought, his temper was a display of passion and this passion was a display of love. She let him pace the room a few more times.

"It's no big deal," she said again.

He chugged his beer down in one long sip, squeezing his eyes shut as he swallowed. When he opened them he looked at Tye. Justin sighed and his face calmed. He sat on the stool and put one leg up on a rung. Back slouching, he stared at the floor. Tye, feeling a little guilty, sat at his feet and leaned her head on his knees. Justin ran his fingers through her hair. They sat there like that, in a calm silence.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're right, it is no big deal."

She rubbed her cheek against his leg.

"Besides," he added, "You probably heard him wrong."

She looked up at Justin and gave him a hard look.

"Actually," Tye said, "It was 'nice *try*, bitch.'"

Justin avoided the gym. He told her he didn't want to risk seeing the man in the red Dodge. He might lose his temper and there was no telling what would happen. Tye was bored of his empty threats and went without him. She didn't mind. She enjoyed working out alone.

Eventually Justin, swearing he was over it, went one Monday morning with Tye to the gym. And as they were driving around the parking lot, a red Dodge passed. Justin stiffened, gripping the wheel tighter with one hand. "Is that him?"

Tye noticed the crumpled door. "Yep," she said leaning forward, lifting her head, "that's him."

Justin, in his oversized truck, followed the man until he parked. The man hopped out of the car. Justin sat up taller and pretended to look for a spot. The man didn't pay much attention to them, just walked to the gym entrance, swirling his keys.

"I thought you were over it?"

"You were wrong Tye, he's not that tall."

She reached over and wrapped her hand around his, pulling it to her chest. Perhaps if he felt her, knew that she was beside him, he would forget about it. She didn't want Justin following the man. She imagined a confrontation, some pushing, the cops called, the end of her gym membership.

"Justin, what are you thinking?"

He didn't notice, so she shook his hand.

“Justin?”

“I’m thinking he has nice rims.”

Justin pulled his truck in front of the cars next to the Dodge. He took his hand from her grip and jumped out, leaving her in the truck. She looked around and saw that no one was in the parking lot. She felt nervous and unsure of what to do. The truck bounced. She turned around and watched Justin in the bed of the truck, rummaging through his tool box. He took out his tie down strap and wrapped it around his forearm. Then, he jumped over the side and walked behind the truck. Tye opened the back window and leaned out for a better look. She watched as Justin hooked the tie down strap to his tow hitch. Then, he hooked the other side of the strap to the Dodge’s rim and loosened the bolts. With the ratchet, he cranked until the strap was taut. Despite her uneasiness, she felt a sudden thrilling flutter. She suppressed a smile.

After some time, he came back into the truck, on edge. Justin gripped one fist with the other, like he was trying to crack his knuckles. Her heart pounded. When Tye looked at Justin she noticed he looked older, stronger, and though she was scared, she realized she loved him. She loved this. She would never tell anyone; she would protect him the way he protected her. He was about to put the truck in drive.

She stared at him. The car was still in park.

She waited.

“Should I do it?” he asked.

“What?”

“Aren’t you going to tell me not to do this?”

“What? You’re not going to do it?”

He paused and looked away, shaking his head, “Fuck it. I’m not doing it. I don’t want to go to jail for some tall circus freak asshole.”

“He called me a bitch.”

“Maybe you’re thinking of something else. Probably mixing up memories. Maybe just hearing things?”

Tye took a breath, loosened her grip.

Still waiting, she glared at him. He was no longer a man who would protect her or a man who loved her. She realized he was a cornered dog baring his teeth, afraid to bite.

“I’ll go put your shit back in the bed of your truck.”

She jumped out before he responded and walked over to the tie down strap. It was taut, bright yellow, pulling on the man’s rim. She looked over at Justin through the window; he was crouched in the driver’s seat, hiding.

She leaned down and loosened the strap, but she didn’t remove it. She left it lying on the cement, one hook still on the tow hitch and one still on the Dodge’s rim. She hopped back into the truck.

“I put the strap in the bed. Just get out of here,” she said.

“Let’s hope no one saw this, we can get back at him another day.”

“Whatever. Hurry up.”

Justin peeled away, burning rubber as he usually did. It was only a moment before the strap lifted and tightened. Justin flinched when the truck felt a hard jolt.

“What the hell—”

Tye didn’t respond. She was watching the rearview mirror, smiling at the rim and tire spinning wildly off the cement.