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“Quick, Mary Jo,” I yelled to my girlfriend. “Get those beers out of your purse and toss ’em into the ditch. There’s another squad car pulling up behind us.”

Mary Jo was my honey back then in those late teenage years. Good God, how the two of us could kiss . . . literally hours at a time. Long, luscious kisses separated by eternal gazes into each other’s eyes—sweating up our clothes in the summer, and frosting the car windows over in the winter.

Our marathon love fests usually took place at any one of our favorite hideaways — the dark parking lot near the shore of Lake Harriet in South Minneapolis, the back roads of Obal Vault Company in Richfield whose inventory of cemetery block and head stones was perfect cover from the rest of the world. And then, of course, the driveway of Mary Jo’s modest suburban home in the quiet Richfield neighborhood where she lived with her parents, two younger sisters, and a younger brother. We could kiss there undetected for quite a while after a date, at least until the porch light flashed on and off.

Mary Jo was twenty-one months older than my seventeen years when she first caught my eye while I cruised through Porky’s on south Lyndale near where the road divides into 35W. Porky’s was the quintessential American Graffiti-style drive-in restaurant and hangout complete with speaker phones and carhops. The sign atop the central building featured a

smiling pig holding a black, silver-tipped cane and wearing a top hat, all on a maroon and pink checkerboard field surrounded by pink neon lights. I was driving my dark blue '56 two-door Ford. It had been an uneventful Friday night and I was thinking about making just one swing through Porky's looking for buddies before heading home. But then, there in the third row, I saw Mary Jo. She had taken her sixteen-year-old sister, Kathy, out for a treat in their mom's '65 tan Olds station wagon. They were snacking on fries and Cokes.

It was love at first sight. I stopped my car trying not to look too conspicuous, took hold of the floor shifter, slipped it into reverse, and slowly backed into the stall next to her. It was customary to back into a stall rather than go nose first because the whole point of being there was to face the lane to see and be seen. "Say, excuse me," I said in a serious tone while reaching over across the front seat. "Is that some kind of trick car you're driving?"

"Ahhh, no-o-o," Mary Jo answered guardedly through the open window of her driver's seat wondering whether or not to laugh. Meanwhile, Kathy had that what-the-hell-is-he-up-to look on her face.

"Well, from here," I said, "it looks like your wheels are crooked and about to come off. Step out and I'll show you what I'm talking about."

Now I had to think fast. "Well, what do you know about that," I said as we were standing near the front of her car. "It must've been the shadows. I could've sworn those wheels were turned in. Believe me, I was just looking out for your safety."

Mary Jo knew my line was a come-on but she played along and one thing led to another and she invited me into the car to join her and Kathy. We visited and had a few laughs, I got her phone number and set a date for the following night. I couldn't wait to

see her again, and when I finally did, she was better looking than my memory had served. In fact, she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen.

There had been several girlfriends in and out of my life before Mary Jo, but she's the one who stands out the most. Whenever I watch the movie Forrest Gump starring Tom Hanks I'm reminded of Mary Jo by Forrest's lifelong sweetheart, Jennie. Like Jennie, Mary Jo had a great deal of free spirit in her. My pal, Steve, used to call her Mary Go-Go. She had alluring green eyes, slightly on the slender side but fit and built just right. She was small-boned, nicely-rounded shoulders, about five-foot-seven, a bright, sexy, engaging smile, and she sometimes wore flowers in her hair which might be blond and lying in curls on her shoulders one day, black or red and tied up and splashed out in a wild rooster tail the next, depending on her mood. Later, she dabbled some in drugs (by many accounts, probably more) and protested the war in Vietnam.

Even while I, the more conservative, was in Vietnam fighting with the 4th Infantry Division, Mary Jo was in Chicago protesting at the 1968 Democratic Convention. During which time she was purportedly wearing the diamond engagement ring she gladly accepted from me before I was sent overseas. But her protests didn't bother me. That was a time long before politics interested me. Actually, it was a long time before I had much of a public opinion on anything other than fast cars, good-looking women, and great parties.

I had three or four different cars back then, but my favorite was the one after the '56 Ford. It's the one I had been saving to buy for a year after graduating from high school while living at home in Minneapolis with my parents and five brothers and selling shoes at Florsheim downtown. It was a sparkling, brand-new, 1966 Pontiac Tempest Custom. But this metallic-blue beauty with a three-tiered white stripe running from wheel well to wheel well

wasn't a typical Tempest Custom—it was a Sprint. It had a six-cylinder overhead cam engine which made it sound and wind out like a Jag. The four-barrel Quadrajet carb boosted the horses of that little 230 cubic-inch mill to 207, and then with the Hurst three-speed on the floor . . . well, hell, I used to drag 327 Chevies, and beat 'em!

New cars were a lot cheaper back then—even in relationship to the day's lower, average income. That's why it was common for many families to be able to enjoy a brand-new car with each model year. The total cost for my new Sprint was just over twenty-two hundred bucks.

I'll never forget the smile on Mary Jo's face that warm Friday afternoon when I rolled up in front of the office building where she worked as a secretary an hour after taking delivery of my new car. There I was with the bright sun glittering off my chrome Rally Wheels, grinning broadly, feeling proud and looking cool in my short-sleeved, madras button-down shirt, my floppy-haired Beatles do and a pair of shades, anxiously waiting for my princess to reach the bottom of the steps. Truly, she resembled young, excited royalty as her colorful summer dress bounced lightly with each step she took on her way down that wide, marble staircase. "Your carriage awaits you, Your Highness," I said while getting out to open the door for her.

"It's absolutely beautiful, Steve," she said with a kiss. She got in and off we sailed for a good, long celebration drive with the Turtles playing our song on the radio, So Happy Together.