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Johnny And Emmie-Lou Get Married

By

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First off we had to get to the church. Emmie-Lou in her Poodle skirt, tight sweater, bobby socks, and high tail. Me in thick-cuffed Levis, white vest, black hair – soaked and scooped in pomade – and a pair of devilish, twelve-inch creepers. Emmie-Lou’s white dress was in the boot. *Don’t get it creased, Johnny.* I wouldn’t get it creased. Couldn’t say the same for my shirt, crumpled up on the back seat of my Chevy Bel Air like a used pack of smokes. I never was one to waste energy on threads.

Billy revved his Daimler Dart, and, yeah, it had a dirty throat but that machine was wired. It might have been dark, but the gas lamps that lined the street lit up every inch. The engine had been cranked proud of the bonnet like a sprawling heart of chrome. Four silver pendulum arms rotated, appearing to drive a colossal tick tock movement connected to the drive shaft. Pipework wormed in amongst the gristle of the engine, or beanstalked over the roof. The boiler squatted up back in its studded metal jacket. Now and then, a rack of variegated piston valves let off bursts of steam.

I swallowed. Billy’s Dart was one fat cat and Emmie-Lou was the cream.

Hell wasn’t she! I eyeballed the dips, hips and lips of the Rocketeers’ top doll, a paper shaker at Franklin High who wore team ribbons in her hair and was all but wed to Billy. Problem was Emmie-Lou didn’t want what Billy was offering. She might’ve been born on the east side, which made her Rocketeer to the bone, but that didn’t stop her from being real gone on a Fly. Real gone on me.

Except, in Dragsville, a Fly and a Rocketeer didn't go together. Each gang had its own part of town, way to fight, favoured machines and gene pool. Muddle the DNA and both sides took exception, the Flies by repossessing my glider wings and suckers, the Rocketeers by riding my thieving ass out of town. Or at least trying to. Truth was, I'd turn Jock before I'd abandon the blue-eyed baby riding beside me.

I shot Emmie-Lou a look made up of all the good stuff I felt inside. We'd been jacketed ever since we first spied each other in the school yard, her with a mouthful of Popsicle, me with a match hanging off my lip and a switchblade in my pocket. She'd flickered into view like the gasses streaming out of the open blower of my Chevy. Emmie-Lou; blackest hair, true-blue peepers, and a cupid's bow you could hook your mouth around and never let go of. For me, the deal was sealed there and then. As for Emmie-Lou, she'd stared right on back. I guess she must've liked what she saw.

Widening my nostrils, I sucked in the scent of her. Emmie-Lou had claws, curves, and a smell on her like cream doughnuts and summertime sweat - which was how she was two months gone, and why we were church bound. All I had to do was get us there, and whip Billy's ass in a race to Sinners' Square in the process.

Rocketeers caged us in on three sides. Behind us, the gang's elite were holed up in their Daimlers, Ac Aces, bullet-nosed Studebakers, and Nash-Healey's - coupes that gleamed with aluminium trim, rear-mounted water tanks, and every sort of billet. The remainder loitered on the sidewalk, or, to be exact, hovered above the concrete, mist shooting down from the twin pipes of their body-moulded backpacks. My one-time gang, the Flies were nowhere to be seen. All that stood between me and oblivion was the girl riding shotgun at my side and the steel wings of my Chevy.

A doll in skin-tight pants and a cherry patterned halter sidled out to the middle of the strip. She peeled a red ribbon out of her high tail and raised her arm. The Dart worked up thick blowbacks of steam. I held the Chevy on a knife's edge.

The instant the doll let go of the ribbon, I mashed the loud pedal. Grit whipped off the Chevy's steelies despite its locker. Reflected in the rear view, flames splurged out of the exhaust. And then the torque had me, moulding my spine back into the seat. In those first few seconds, Billy was just a bad taste in an otherwise lip-smacking cocktail of speed and adrenalin. The strip ahead was deserted, could've stretched for miles for all I cared. Emmie-Lou was a sweet knot of breath at my side. The Chevy parted the air like silk.

Then Billy rumbled up to my left shoulder. Tucking in my chin, I glanced sideways to see Billy smiling back, his starched white collar angled like a fin.

My gaze flicked up to the rear view. Rocketeers buzzed at our back ends. That's when she spoke, my blue-eyed baby, my Emmie-Lou.

"Give 'em hell, Johnny." Leaning over, she touched her tongue's tip to my ear – just as Billy must've popped the seal on the steam feed to give his Dart a swollen belly. His vehicle shot ahead on a meaty belch of cooling air. Simultaneously, the Chevy lurched. Emmie-Lou's mouth ricocheted off my skull. She fell back into her seat as we were wrenched high at the bumper, the front two steelies screaming in futile rotation.

"Billy's got us on a leash." I bit down on the words as the chain connecting the two machines whipped taut. Billy snaked his Dart from one side of the strip to the other, and I'd a good idea why. Sooner or later, the momentum would build, allowing Billy to release the hook-up and send us slamming into any of the derelict warehouses

that walled us in on either side. It was a dirty game, would've worked too if it hadn't been for the fresh hydraulics I'd installed two weeks earlier.

Glancing at Emmie-Lou, I registered the smear of blood where she'd hit her bottom lip on my hard head. My heart strings cramped.

"Fasten yourself in."

She did just that. I swiped a hand across the bank of switches in the dash.

Time folded as the front of the Chevy jackknifed, a 72 volt system working off the twelve batteries underpinning the lowrider's underbelly. The four corners of the vehicle shot up then dipped. I snapped more switches. The Chevy's entire body leapt skyward, pitched front then back, and juddered down on dumping cylinders. We left the ground every few seconds, our crazed bunny hop transforming that colossal machine into a thing of flesh and metal.

Somewhere along the line, Billy lost his hold on us. I dragged the Chevy's arse off a curb, showering the streets in sparks off the scrape plate.

"Okay, baby?"

Emmie-Lou was hot in the eyes. "You always were a wild ride, Johnny."

I pinned up a corner of my mouth. "About to get wilder." A swirling fish bowl of a water tank reflected in the rear view; I'd plumbed it into the stretched bumper to even out the weight. Cranking a lever, I drew on that reservoir now to power the twin guns at the Chevy's backend, flipped a switch and uncapped the cut-outs. The black shark roared.

Billy dove left then right. I aimed dead ahead. Billy's Dart had the pretty face of a pro street dragster but my Chevy had lungs on it. The black shell hunkered down on an open-wheel chassis, 34-inch skins bolted on either side while the rear wheels tucked in at the tail where the fibreglass had been tubbed to accommodate them.

Downshifting, I yanked a steel handle in the roof, stoked the engine then floored it. We streaked past Billy's Daimler in an explosion of blue-black flames.

The street widened out into four lanes. No traffic, which was understandable; it was Rebel's Hour, those 60 minutes before dawn when the good folk snoozed like babies in their cradles and only cats and hobos inhabited the city. And the racers. I tucked in my shoulders as if streamline everything that could create resistance. In Dragsville there was always some punk wanted to race you.

Right that second, it was a blonde flattop called Billy, who just happened to be one of the founding members of the Rocketeers. We'd never see eye to eye, Billy and me, and not just because his crew terrorised the neighbourhood, flying in at unlatched windows to steal a honey or a wallet, or dumping fistfuls of nails onto the streets below, a helluva slice of rain. No, the truth of it was that Billy and I were the bover boys of our tribes, destined to clash skulls no matter the subject. But while we were extremists, I'd strayed that bit too far for the Flies. Now I was on my own.

Billy shifted in real close; if I hadn't got chrome nerf bars mounted wide either side of the Chevy's skirts, he'd have scuffed me up good. As it was, I kept my eyes on the cool grey slip of road and the clock tower of the church as it peeled into view.

"You ain't got Billy licked 'til we're wed, Johnny." Emmie-Lou stated, breathless and wide-eyed.

"I know, baby. He'll never stop hammering us 'til that band of gold's wrapped around your finger. But don't doubt me now, Emmie-Lou."

"Never could, never would," she smouldered, but I caught a glint of fear in her eyes.

She was right to be spooked. Billy had found his speed again, elbowing in as we turned off 99th Street and into Sinner's Square. The track narrowed, our machines

swerving in to buddy up on the Inner Circular. In that same instant, something slam-dunked the Chevy's roof, prompting my best girl to throw up her hands like a scream queen. I pinched up my eyes. A second clang reverberated, shaking my nerve; it sounded like the fist of an iron man. Then I heard the hiss of steam, not the piped flux that powered the stomach of my machine, but a rent in its mechanism...or, to be specific, a crack in the squat, rear-mounted boiler. I rapped the Speedo with my knuckles. Five miniature dials whirred and continued to loose momentum. One glance at the rear view confirmed the worst of it; the boiler was weeping hot green water onto the road, the misted tank starting to clear as it cooled to reveal one hell of a splinter.

It was the third strike which shook me back to my fighting best. I drew wide, sucking in the belly of the Chevy to ease up onto the sidewalk and narrowly avoid the stalks of the gas lights. Glancing over, I saw a hammer arm wielding a tremendous steel wrecking ball at the rear of the Dart. How the weight of the thing didn't roll that coupe was anyone's guess, but Billy had always been the physicist. Meanwhile, I was just a grease monkey...I was also the better driver. There was one chance and one chance only to end the thing well, at least for me and Emmie-Lou. I crushed the break. Cranking the suicide knob hard to the right, I swung the Chevy between two gas lights and back out onto the track immediately in the shadow of the Dart. I caught Billy's face ghosting his rear view. No two eyes had ever shone as cold.

"Gonna ride your back, Billy," I shot beneath my breath. My fingers swept the bank of switches at the dash, closed around and depressed a lever by my thigh. A final blast of steam punched in to fire up the hydraulics. The front two corners of the Chevy dipped way low. Then we kicked off a full two metres clear of the strip, stomachs tumbling, blood roaring in our skulls.

The landing was sweet and tough by equal measure; sweet to feel the reverb as the Chevy hit the Dart hard across the shoulders, steelies revving off the wide-bottomed boiler to send us flying out over Billy's head to crash down out in front; tough because I heard the stunt take its toll on the ride that had cost me three years working the pumps at Mickey's Garage. I flicked the steering, then hit it hard to the left, the Chevy clawing its way into a bootlegger and coming to rest alongside the church door. The Dart slammed in hard to the black shark's trunk. Steam filled the air like a pea souper.

I leant across and unbuckled Emmie-Lou's seat belt.

"Think you can run now, Emmie-Lou?"

"Sure thing, Johnny."

"Then grab that pretty frock of yours and let's get us to a preacher."

"Just one problem, Johnny." Emmie-Lou's face drained. "Billy's at the window and he's touting a blade."

Nothing to worry about, my blue-eyed baby. Let me deal with the bad dog at the door. Let me take the knife for you. Let me carry the weight. Out loud, I said, "So Billy's not gonna give it up 'til blood's spilt. Okay then."

Emmie-Lou's hand was a branding iron at my forearm. I smiled at her with my eyes, then cranked the door handle, slid out a boot, crunched down on a stone as I rose, and eased out. "Get dressed," I said last thing and shut Emmie-Lou in.

Billy was fired up. Spit escaped out a corner of his mouth as he breathed hard. His eyes stayed cold though. He rocked side to side on spread feet, one hand out for balance, the other clenching the blade. I kept my silverware hid in my palm; I trusted the catch to spring open inside a second. It'd been tripped enough times to keep it fit for purpose.

“Least you didn’t end up in the weeds, Billy.” I fixed on him grimly. “What’s more, I ain’t hunting pink slips. Dart’s yours, and to pay the necessary, it’s a helluva blower. But my Chevy won the race fair and square. Time for you and me to part ways.”

“And Emmie-Lou?” Billy tugged on his collar, its stiffness etched on his face.

“Knocked up. Part Fly, part Rocketeer, our rug rat’s gonna be a mutant by both gang’s standards, a kid who can’t fit, no way no how.” I eased back against the still-warm Chevy, cocked my head and squinted at Billy. I squeezed out a drop of true feeling. “I’d give up my pink slips for that runt, for its blue-eyed mamma too.”

In those last few moments between end of Rebel’s Hour and dawn, Billy squinted over, the smallest trace of understanding at his lips. The seed of a smile grew up at the edges, and I saw then that it was anything but friendly. I was suddenly aware of the dark shapes of a hundred or more Rocketeers’ machines at my back, their engines idling. The occasional spurt of steam was a bleak reminder of the gang members hovering nearby. I tensed my hand around the blade. Billy kept on smiling.

Emmie-Lou startled the pair of us. The door handle clunked and she started to emerge, white silk frothing at her ankles. I glanced at her with a blaze of yearning, just as Billy stepped forward and slid in the knife.

For an instant, she was soft, doused in scent and yielding. Then the blood began to seep through her dress. My flesh felt as if it were scorched off my bones. Devil’s mercy, the ache! So much gut wrenching pain as my girl stumbled backwards from both Billy and me, and up onto the church steps where a preacher stood, dressed head to toe in black and condemnation. He caught Emmie-Lou as she fell, manoeuvred the both of them down onto the steps and sat, cradling her head like a child’s.

I turned towards the Chevy. Staring at my reflection in the driver side window, I contemplated who was real that instant, the torn man on the sidewalk or the two-dimensional figure in the glass. A second later, I span around, blade unsheathed.

The slash to Billy's throat was deep and neat, designed to drain life quickly. He made a motion as if to come for me, but I was already striding away. Billy was done for. He just didn't realise it yet.

Dawn stripped the layers of night from the sky. I fell to my knees on the first step. It was more than I dared do to disturb Emmie-Lou, cradled safely as she was in the arms of a better man. Outta the corner of my eye, I registered Billy stagger in my direction before he fell face forward, his blood greasing the strip like a skid mark. The air was thick with noise as the Rocketeers flocked.

No matter. If there was no Emmie-Lou, I'd slip the blade between my own ribs.

"Johnny," she whispered.

I leant in, trembling.

"It's not over 'til we're wed."

Agony dug in at my forehead. "They're coming for me, Emmie-Lou. There ain't time."

"You promised, Johnny. You, me, and the babe. Said, together, we're gonna see this jacked up world reborn."

Her words were an adrenalin shot to the heart. I stood up. "Start reading, preacher."

The man glanced at me. My expression must've been crazed enough to convince him.

“Dearly beloved. We are gathered here today...” His voice was a dark scrape of sound.

I met Emmie-Lou’s gaze. She seemed less substantial then, like a figure cut from burnout and reminding me of how she’d looked on the day that we first met.

“Do you take this woman...”

“Hell, yeah!” *I’d try my best, Emmie-Lou.* But there’d be no reaching the end of this marriage service for me. Scaring my mind with her fading image, I turned back around to face the street.

In their slim-cut suits, white and goolish green starched shirts, Chelsea boots, and steam-powered backpacks, the Rocketeers edged in, the gleam of hatred in their eyeballs. Blades flicked out from palms and pockets. Time bled away. I was breathing stolen air.

It was a stiff metallic crunch followed by the hiss of ebbing pressure in miniaturised hydraulics that alerted me to the swarm overhead. They came now, a thousand Flies, tumbling down from the bell tower in zigzagging, jagged motion. I watched them punch the long iron candy canes of their suckers hard against the brick, depress levers in each palm to release the gas, then freefall. I remembered that great rush of air and disconnection from the earth, and it flooded me with awe and sorrow.

Having pleated their suckers into half-a-metre long cylinders stored at their backs, other hundreds of Flies blackened the skies. Landing on the sidewalk in-between me and the hordes of Rocketeers, the gang members lowered their arms, concertinaed their canvas glider wings into the back pouch in their leather, and drew out their suckers from the sheaths at their spines. They whipped the skull-crushing iron canes out to their full extension; steam oozed from the tips.

I sat down as Emmie-Lou said, "I do." Retrieving the band of gold from a jeans' pocket, I slipped it onto her finger. Then I scooped her out of the preacher's arms and pressed her body hard to mine to stem her wound.

Flames of hazy sunlight filled the streets. All around us, two gangs slugged it out for control of the strips in Dragsville. Inside my best girl, a babe kept on growing in the muddied image of a Rocketeer and a Fly.

The End