

THE BLACK TIGER

By
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Dedicated
to Bill and Steve Dredge and the
happy fraternity of sports-car racing
drivers in the United States of America.
Also to their hero mechanics.

Also by Patrick O'Connor
THE SOCIETY OF FOXES
FLIGHT OF THE PEACOCK
THE WATERMELON MYSTERY

THE BLACK TIGER

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Woody Hartford, seated upon a four-legged stool of uncertain design, examined the pieces of a carburetor that lay on a bench before him, and contemplated a problem of the nicest delicacy.

The problem had nothing to do with the carburetor. Woody at seventeen could put that back together without even thinking of what he was doing. He'd cleaned and adjusted a score of them since he first started working at McNess Union Service Station, Hermosa Beach, California, two years ago. The problem concerned the matter of whether to spend ten dollars on Cindy Lou or on Mary Jane. It was not one that could be lightly decided.

There were, Woody was dimly aware, certain ethical factors involved. Cindy Lou needed the money spent on her in the worst way. On the other hand, if Mary Jane ever found out about it, she would, in a ladylike manner, raise a great deal of trouble.

Again, if, to avoid strained relations with Mary Jane, Woody spent the money on her, it would be a long time before he would have a ten spot to spend on Cindy Lou.

"A guy with a hot rod and thirty bucks a week," Woody said to the float chamber of the carburetor, "has no right having a girl friend, too. On the other hand," he added, "a guy with a hot rod is going to wind up with a girl friend whether he wants one or not. There's no arguing about that."

He sighed, reached for one of a number of remarkably dirty rags on the workbench, and thrust it into the float chamber of the carburetor. He'd have used a clean rag if one was available. Clean rags were delivered every Monday to the McNess Union Service Station, but Mondays were Woody's days off. When he arrived for work on Tuesday the rags were all uniformly dirty. This was one of the minor oddities about the service station that Woody had long ago ceased to trouble himself over.

Cindy Lou was Woody's hot rod. Or to be more precise, she was Woody's 1940 Ford coupé, which he was converting into a hot rod with the hope one day of competing in drag races. He'd already milled her head, worked over the chassis, changed the gear ratio, and moved the engine so that it was no longer in front of the driver's seat. Instead it was alongside the driver, and separated from the driver by a makeshift firewall. All that was needed now was to buy a four-carburetor manifold and Woody figured that Cindy Lou would hit a hundred miles an hour in a quarter mile from a standing start. A hundred miles an hour wasn't championship speed or anything like it. Some of the boys were getting a hundred and thirty out of their mills. But it would be good for Cindy Lou, and with more expansive engine modifications, it could be improved even further.

But the final payment on the carburetor rig, secondhand, would cost ten bucks. And Mary Jane was expecting to be taken out that night with the same ten bucks.

"Maybe," said Woody hopefully, still cleaning the float chamber, "I could give the guy five on the manifold and squeak by with Mary Jane on the other five." But he knew even as he said it that the compromise wouldn't work. Bob Peters, who had the

manifold, wanted cash and spoke darkly of several other offers. And Mary Jane wasn't the kind of girl you could take to the corner drugstore for a lemon coke, then to the movies, and call it an evening.

Every now and then Mary Jane got it into her head that she wanted to go out in style. And Woody knew he'd better take her. She went through phases of being very sophisticated and looked upon drugstore entertainment as kid stuff. During her sophisticated intervals, she read books by Aldous Huxley and talked about the social obligations of the upper strata.

At such times, and this was one of them, Mary Jane didn't want to hear a word about Cindy Lou, in which she was normally interested. And the mention of carburetors and manifolds left her slightly hostile.

The telephone rang, interrupting Woody's reflections. He wiped his hands briefly on his khaki pants, got down off the stool, and went over to the phone, which was fastened to a wall of the garage.

"McNess Union Service Station," he said into the mouthpiece.

"Hi," said a cheerful voice at the other end. "That you, Woody?"

"Yep."

"How are things?"

Things, Woody replied, rubbing the end of his nose with an oil-blackened hand, were pretty good. He knew what was coming. Bob was on the line and after a little more palaver would want to know whether he was going to hand over the final payment

on the manifold. Bob was never one to get right to the point. He was studying salesmanship and had read somewhere that most big sales were made in the course of friendly discussions with clients about their own problems and affairs. So Bob asked Woody whether he felt good and whether his dad was in good health and had he gone to the dry lakes racecourse last weekend and what he thought of the weather. Woody replied noncommittally to all these inquiries while he weighed Cindy Lou in the balance against Mary Jane. Finally Bob decided that he'd done enough of the friendly discussion part of salesmanship and should get down to the point.

"Say, Woody," he said, "I don't want you to get the idea that I'm rushing you. But I've had a couple of offers for that manifold, and I was wondering whether you could give me the last payment and pick it up today. I'd like to have you have it rather than these other guys, but I need the dough today."

"Wouldn't settle for five now and five next payday, would you?" asked Woody.

"No," said Bob. "I'd like to oblige a pal. But I've got a real hot deal on myself, and I've got to have the skins."

"O.K.," said Woody. "I'll pay it off."

"Swell," said Bob. "You going to be there this evening?"

"Until seven," Woody replied.

"I'll buzz by with the plumbing and pick up the dough about six-thirty. S'long."

"S'long," said Woody and put down the receiver.

Only when he had hung up did he realize the enormity of his offense. Without consulting her, he had in one second rejected Mary Jane for Cindy Lou. And Mary Jane was definitely expecting to be taken out that night. When he'd paid for the manifold, he would have exactly one dollar and fifteen cents left. That was not sufficient for even a lemon-coke-and-movie evening.

Furthermore there wasn't any hope of raising a loan this late in the day. Woody's father, who would be good for a loan after a slight lecture, was out of town. His mother, he knew, had only three or four dollars of housekeeping money around and probably needed that. And Worm McNess, proprietor of the McNess Union Service Station and Woody's boss, was as tight as a tappet. His idea of a loan was fifty cents, and Woody needed at least seven or eight dollars.

Worm McNess came by his nickname fairly enough. His full name was William Orville Randolph McNess, the initials spelling "Worm." But beyond that he was long and thin, rather as if a piece of spaghetti had been brought to man size and given human features and limbs. And over and above all, this Worm could wiggle and twist around a car in positions next to impossible for mechanics built on more normal lines.

Woody liked Worm. He was a good boss with a quiet sense of humor and an inexhaustible knowledge of the insides of automobiles. Woody could never make up his mind whether Worm really liked cars or not. He seemed to view them all with a certain contempt. "Bucket" was his terse term for any automobile brought into the service station for repair—though it was a term he did not use in the presence of the owner.

Cadillacs, Thunderbirds, or Chevvy—all were buckets to Worm. Yet he worked on them with the greatest care, and when he was through, had always done an expert job. It was hard for Woody to understand why he viewed all automobiles with such contempt and yet worked on them with such care.

Worm was putting the pan back on a Chevvy now—the same car whose carburetor Woody was busy cleaning. He rolled out from underneath, got to his feet somewhat unsteadily, and hunched his thin shoulders forward. This done, he reached gingerly with two long greasy fingers into the breast pocket of his shirt and took out a cigarette.

"Hurry oop wi' yon carburetor and let's get this bucket o' bolts oot of here," he said. His accent, after fifteen years in America, was still straight from Aberdeen, Scotland.

Woody by now had the carburetor back together again and got busy installing it. All the time he kept wondering whether he ought to call Bob Peters and tell him he found he hadn't the dough and the manifold deal was off. Or whether he ought to call Mary Jane and tell her something had come up and he couldn't take her out that night. Or whether, just on the chance that this was a day for miracles, he ought to ask Worm for a loan of six or seven bucks.

He decided, since Worm was close at hand and relaxing with his cigarette, that he'd try him first.

"Say, Worm," he said in as offhand a manner as he could manage, "how about letting me have a couple of bucks until payday?"

"Bucket o' bolts," he said ignoring the question completely and shaking his head more in sorrow than in anger over the Chevy. "Mon, they ought to take the poor beastie and gie her a decent Christian burial. She's eighty thousand miles on her if she's been driven a yard."

Woody was used to these tactics and knew what to do about them. He said nothing for a minute or two while he connected the gas line to the carburetor. Then he said, "How about letting me have a couple of bucks until payday, Worm?"

"It's a wonder her wheels aren't square," said Worm, concentrating with great determination on the car. "I tell you, laddie, there's no one but McNess could have got her running again."

"You could take it all out of the first pay check," Woody persisted.

"Her cylinders have been bored so many times, her pistons will be slapping around in water before long."

"Worm, I just got to have the dough."

"Hoot, laddie. What's all your concern about money? Ye'll only be spending it. When I served my apprenticeship in Aberdeen, I worked five years without getting a nickel."

Woody sighed. "O.K.," he said. "Forget it."

So easy a victory disturbed Worm. He felt that he had been perhaps something less than generous. He was sensitive about being considered tight with money (undoubtedly because this was the truth) and would tell anyone who was prepared to

listen that the Highland Scots are the most generous people in the world. He was a Highland Scot.

"Ah weel," he said, "I recall as a laddie that it was hard to be walking around without a groat to comfort me fist with. How much do ye want?"

"Six or seven bucks," said Woody. He hoped for ten, but it was a desperate hope.

"Whist, mon," said Worm, a look between astonishment and outrage showing in his pale blue eyes. "Do ye think I'm the Bank of England? I'll let ye have two dollars to payday and not a penny more."

He went over to the cash box, opened it as if it were the main vault of Morgan's bank on Wall Street, and came back with a dollar bill and some silver in his hand. He gave Woody the dollar, solemnly pronouncing the word "One" and then counted out three quarters, two dimes, and a nickel.

"Ye'll be takin out yere lassie, nae doot," he said when this was done.

"Not on this," said Woody. He didn't want to sound ungrateful, but the money was just not enough.

"Laddie," said Worm, "I'm a man that knows a great deal aboot womenfolk. And there's naething truer aboot them than that if they really love ye, they'll be wanting ye to save yere money and not go splashing it around on them."

Woody wondered what kind of girl friends they had in Scotland when Worm was a boy. Mary Jane wasn't a gold digger. But she

liked to be taken out now and again, and he didn't blame her for it. He looked at the long, pale length of Worm standing before him as solemn as a preacher and decided that he probably hadn't had any girl friends when he was serving his apprenticeship in Scotland. From what he could gather, his closest friends seemed to have been a kit of mechanic's tools and a book called *Davie's Problems and Principles of Internal Combustion Engines*.

There was just about time, now that Worm had failed to come through with a loan, to call up Mary Jane and see whether he could postpone their date. He hated to do it, because he suspected that Mary Jane had had her hair done or received some other kind of unnecessary and expensive beauty treatment in preparation for the evening.

He dialed her number, not knowing quite how he would put it, and was further distressed when she answered the phone right away. Almost her first statement was, "Oh, Woody, there's a movie based on one of Somerset Maugham's books at the Criton, and I'm just dying to see it. You ought to see it too. It got raves from the really good critics. It would do you a lot of good."

Woody groaned. Somerset Maugham. That meant that his instincts were correct and Mary Jane was intent upon an adult-type evening out.

"Gee," he said. "I don't think I can make it tonight, Mary Jane. I've, er ... well, something's happened."

It seemed to Woody that the temperature around him fell about ten degrees when he said that, and the slight silence that followed seemed to last about five years.

"What's happened?" asked Mary Jane, and Woody could have sworn that there was cold water trickling from the receiver which he held to his ear.

"Well ... I just haven't got the dough right now," he said lamely.

"Woody Hartford," said Mary Jane. "You knew ten days ago about this date. You asked for it then. You had plenty of time to call me before—"

"But, honey—" said Woody.

"Never mind," snapped Mary Jane. "I'm going to the movie, and it won't be with you. I just hope I never see you again—you and that silly old car of yours." Woody thought he heard a sob before the receiver clicked in his ear.

At ten minutes to seven, Bob Peters came round with the manifold. He swept into the service station in a yellow Buick convertible that Woody knew he'd bought out of spare-time earnings. Woody took one look at him, and his heart sank. Mary Jane, dressed up as lovely as a princess, was seated beside Bob, and she looked right through him.

"The manifold's in the back," said Bob cheerfully. "Do you mind getting it out? I don't want to soil my duds."

Woody opened up the back of the convertible and took out the manifold. When he had put it on the ground carefully, Bob said, "That'll be ten bucks—cash."

Woody gave the money, a five and five singles, to Bob, and Mary Jane said, "Oh," putting more scorn and contempt into the word than Woody would have thought possible. Then the two drove off, Mary Jane with her nose very high in the air and her brown eyes surprisingly stony.

"What have ye got there, laddie?" Worm asked when they had gone.

Woody looked at the manifold and after the departing car. He thought of Worm's book, Davie's *Problems and Principles of Internal Combustion Engines*.

"I think I've got the same sort of girl friend that you had in Scotland," he said.

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In the week that followed, Woody caught only a few glimpses of Mary Jane. She cut him dead each time. They'd had their quarrels before, but Woody realized that this time it was pretty serious, and there was little he could do to alter the situation.

"When a dame spends five bucks fixing up her hair to be taken out and you spend ten bucks fixing up a hot rod and don't take her out, you're back in the stag line again," his friend Steve Phillips told him philosophically. "Why don't you forget about that pile of junk and spend your time straightening things out with Mary Jane? She's a nice kid. You ought to take more care of her."

"Wouldn't do any good," said Woody. "Besides, if she's going to be my steady, she's got to take the hot rod as well. I'm not interested in dames that want me to spend the rest of my life catching up on Aldous Huxley and Somerset Maugham. Betcha neither of them can drive a car."

Woody spent the week fixing up Cindy Lou in the intervals between working in Worm's garage. He wanted to get her ready for a trial run at the salt lakes out in the Mojave Desert by the following Saturday. The salt lakes were where the drag races were held. But there could be none that weekend. However, the quarter-mile, half-mile, and mile markers would be there, and he would be able to test Cindy Lou's speed.

In the drag races, hot rods do not compete directly with each other. They go singly over the measured straightaway. Their speeds are electrically timed and the winner picked on a fastest-time basis. Steve had agreed to come out to the salt lakes to help with the timing. And even Worm began to show an interest in Cindy Lou now that she was nearing her test run.

He came over one evening while Woody was adjusting the tappets and looked at Cindy Lou with enormous disfavor.

"Mon," he said, "ye're not intending ta drive that contraption, are ye?"

"Sure," said Woody. "Ought to go like a bomb. Figure I can get her up past the hundred mark."

Worm made no reply to this other than to give a disapproving cluck of his tongue. He was fascinated by the weird engine position and got down on the ground on his back to examine it and the differential hook-up.

"It's all contrary to Davie's *Problems and Principles of Internal Combustion Engines*," he said when he emerged from beneath the hot rod. "That Davie was a sound mon, now. Ye'd do better ta spend more time studying his book, of which I have a copy in the office. How many gears do ye have on this beastie?"

"Two," said Woody highly flattered, despite Worm's disapproval, that he was taking any interest in Cindy Lou at all. "Low will take her up to about sixty-five from a standing start. I have to hit sixty before I can shift up. Then she'll really take off."

"Hae ye figured out yere flywheel revolutions?" asked Worm.

"About six thousand revolutions per minute at maximum torque," said Woody.

"Mon, mon," said Worm. "Davie would na' like it at all."

Nonetheless, Worm was obviously fascinated by the hot rod and gave a grunt of approval at the way in which the various engineering problems of its unorthodox design had been solved. Indeed, he became so interested that after inquiring cautiously whether it would be very expensive, he agreed to come out to the salt lakes and help with the speed trials.

"Ye'll be needing some cold plugs, I'm thinking," he said. "The ones ye have there'll never do the trick. I've eight I can lend ye. But ye must gie them back when ye're through wi' them." He went into his office while Woody looked in wonder at Steve. He'd never known Worm to show so much interest in a car before.

"Wonder what's come over him," he said.

"Maybe he's trying to make up for not lending you that dough the other night," Steve suggested.

Woody shook his head. "He thinks he did me a favor," he said. "His idea of dames is that the more money they let you spend on them, the less they are worth."

"Maybe he's got something there," said Steve.

Worm now returned with the eight plugs. They were of an Italian make, each wrapped in a piece of greased paper on

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