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MISS SUE'S NUMBER BOOK

BY JULIA MARIE MALLORY

Miss Sue had been dead 13 years when she dropped 333 down the dimension into Kat's mouth yesterday. The last *three* bounced a bit and settled after Kat coughed and woke up with the sudden urge to play that number. The number followed her from the time she rose from the bed until she lowered her timecard in the machine. The bus was three minutes late, 3:33. Kat dozed off during her twilight break and when her head bounced after nodding, her eyes settled on the round black and white wall clock, 3:33. *I have got to play that number*, Kat thought.

She stepped off the bus and moved at the pace of someone who worked a double shift last night. At the corner store she managed to secure her ticket despite getting trapped behind Mr. Pete's \$83 number order. Johnny was expressing his displeasure from two people behind Kat, still in his bus driver uniform, so heavily starched it could stand up without him.

"PETE, THEY FINNA RUN OUT OF PAPER AND INK FOOLING WITCHU. I'M TELLING YOU, YOU SHUT THIS MACHINE DOWN AND I'M COMING FOR WHAT'S UNDER THAT MATTRESS."

"You make it to my mattress, you betta be worried bout a different type of machine," Pete returned without missing a beat between them as he thumbed through his stack of tickets.

The whole store turned audience and oooooohed and laughed while wondering if it was possible to break the machine. Couldn't be, especially not on their lucky day. Between her double shift and standing in line, Kat's feet started to form a small fire in her work lace-ups. The heat, now in her hand as the lotto ticket floated on her lifeline before she slipped it into the square pocket of her hotel uniform.

It was an unseasonably warm April day, and the outside air held the neighborhood's affairs and traveled with tenderness into Kat's apartment. Out of bed from her post-work nap, she looked down on the street. She loved to hear kids with joy in their voices. Even the stoop mothers giggled between gossip. Wrapped up in the warmth of the spring air, a good mood washed over her and soaked plain through after the needle landed on Aretha's latest single. Kat's background singing filled the small living room as she slowly spun in circles in the middle of the floor. "Sproutin'... blooming..."

Little kids chased each other across the sidewalk as their mothers yelled threats that they weren't going to be sitting up in nobody's emergency room should they suffer a nasty fall. "Your insurance is paid up!" She heard Viola scream at her son David. That child was hard headed but he sure was sweet. He didn't mind going to the store for Kat or carrying her groceries up three flights of stairs. She was already planning to slip him something extra when her number hit.

Kat's right hand itched all the way to the mini market. She tried to scratch it against the ridge of the pocket of the indigo jeans she had to jump into and hit a squat while putting on. The jeans that hugged her legs and made the menfolk playing dominoes pause when she walked by. Respectfully.

By now, she was up to swimming in the good mood. A perfect strut in her platform boots. Waving and smiling at folks that weren't paying her no mind. Then Jesse's voice tapped her on the shoulder. Oh, Jesse. Face full of sunshine, smile full of you-can-have-whatever-you-want.

"Say, Kat! Whatchu know good?"

"Everything, when my number hit," she tossed over her shoulder without breaking her stride.

Oh, Jesse.

Moments ago, Kat's scream lit up the neighborhood when 333s turned eyes on the white lottery pop-up balls. She was poppin' her fingers to the bounce of the balls that were trying to get chose from their see-through bubble. She paused when the announcer called out the first three.



"HOTDAMN! C'MON NOW!"

She even gave Margaret a shoutout as she placed the 3 placard on the wall in its designated spot.

"Okay, sista! I see you. Can't nobody wear a turtleneck like you girl!" Margaret's gold hoops were throwing stars across her deep brown face. She may have been assisting the announcer but she was nobody's sidekick.

Kat had the ticket tucked in her front right jean pocket. Her right hand patting it, cheesing like Cheshi'e cat, as her mom would say.

"Hey, Miss Kat! Miss Kat!" Little David was cutting through her daydream.

"Hey, yourself. Whatchu doing over this way?"

Kat moved her eyes from the red light at the intersection to the top of David's head.

"Just going to the store for my mama. She said she can't watch her evening program without her corn chips."

Kat laughed, "Vi keep her a bag of something salty." David smiled. Kat continued, "I want you to wait for me before you head back home. I got a lil sumtin for you."

"Okay, Miss Kat. I sure will!" She snapped back into her daydream. David and her outstretched right leg left the curb in unison.

"GIRL, LOOKUP!" shouted inside her body but from beyond her body.

A rusty gold hatchback was headed straight toward them with no sign of stopping. It wasn't Kat's life that flashed before her eyes but a red rage rainbow.

She didn't know that so many scarlet shades existed in the universe. Before David's foot could lay flat in the street, Kat managed to snatch the neck of his polo shirt with such force that it separated from its seam, as her back crashed against the screen door of the beauty parlor. The car's shiny silver bumper and two front tires were now parked where she and David stood just seconds ago.

She was shaking all over, rage lifting her right platform boot-ed foot and banging it on the bumper.

"DAMMIT, MAN! YOU COULD HAVE KILLED THIS CHILD. YOU AIN'T GOT THE SENSE GOD GAVE A GRAPE!"

But the man was actually a tall, lanky teen, whose shampoo commercial brown hair swooped over his sleepy eyes.

"Mmmmm-Ma'am. I'm sss-sorry." He was forcing the words out of his throat.

"I was driving. And, I-I-I-I just wanted to put this 8-track in the player." He dropped his hand as he held the black cartridge in the middle of his stomach as proof. Hall & Oates. It didn't take long for a small crowd to form around them.

"Whatchudoinroundhere-anyyyyyyway?" someone hurled from the crowd.

"Careful now, Kat. You hitting that bumper like that, the whole damn car liable to catch fire." Man-Man teased.

The crowd's laughter lulled Kat from the layer of shock trying to attach itself to her. "Boy! You could have killed us, all because you wanna listen to some gahtdamn Hall & Oates! Go on. Whatchu waiting for? Get out of here!" Her whole body shook in agreement.

"Sh-shouldn't we call the police?" the lanky teen asked.

Man-Man was on a roll. "The police? That's just more trouble for us. We'd be the ones paying for your mistake. Go 'head. GET!"

Shampoo commercial hair folded his body into the too-small car. He backed off the sidewalk, then the curb until he was moving through the green light and to whatever ease awaited him.

Kat pulled David in close to her body, inspecting his limbs by squeezing them. "Are you okay? David, are you okay?"

"Are you okay? I gotta get my mama's snacks before her show starts."



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Since David didn't see the car until Kat moved him out of its destructive path, the horror didn't register like it haunted every one of Kat's nerve endings. But, in 10 years, David will tell the story, and not only will he lose his shirt collar, Kat will lift him over her head and completely out of his shirt. And, in 20 years, when he tells it Kat will be pinned between the beauty parlor screen door and the bumper and he will push the car back and free her from its grip.

"Oh, boy! Don't you know better than to answer a question with a question?!" Relieved, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight.

They headed towards the store and Kat suddenly remembered why she had left the house in the first place. She managed a smile as she patted the winning ticket in her pocket.

On the walk to their block, she rehearsed in her head how to tell Viola what had happened, if word hadn't reached her by now. When she and David turned the corner, Viola was sitting on the stoop. He handed his mother the bag of snacks as she asked for her change.

"David, why don't you go inside and let me talk to your mom. Oh, and before I forget," Kat reached her hand towards David, who grabbed it like a handshake, the crisp bill hidden between them.

In her other hand, she held his shirt collar, which she extended to Viola. She could hear David quickly clearing the steps to their second floor apartment. Viola was holding in her hand what looked like a funeral program, which she placed in her lap to accept David's detached collar from Kat.

"Say, whatchu got there girl?" Kat was trying to see through Viola's folded hands.

"Oh, just my mama's funeral program. Katrina, I miss her so much."

"Me, too. Couldn't nobody fry no corn like your mama."

"Girllllllllll."

"And the one thing Miss Sue was gonna do come hell or high water, was play her numbers."

Viola waited for an opening in their laughter to get to the heart of why she assumed Kat had stopped by. "You ain't neva lied! But tell me why part of my son's shirt is in your hand and not on his body."

"Now, Vi before you get upset..."

Kat sat down, grabbed Viola's hand, and spared no details as the sun began to tuck itself in for the night.

