

This was hard. Chanterelle had never thought something like this would be so difficult. Usually a sentiment like this would be reserved for things like an application for college, or getting psyched up for a job interview. Things like that were hard, but that didn't make them the only difficult thing that Chanty ever had to deal with. No no, what Chanterelle was finding hard at the moment... was figuring out what to wear to her first date.

She'd been asked rather out of the blue by a friend of hers, and looking back, it was the most adorable thing he could've done. He'd stumbled over his words so much, using slang to mean something before saying it again in a way he thought she'd better understand, all while nervously holding the small cluster of flowers he was able to get on such short notice. Chicks digged flowers, after all! It'd be a crime if he tried to ask her out without them. In truth, he could've asked her out while holding a ratty stray cat, or one of those fish wrapped in newspaper you get from the market, and she *still* would've said yes.

Now then... dresses? Or skirts? Chanterelle was trying to figure out which to go with. She had that gingham print dress she'd gotten for her birthday, all red and white in the most adorable way. But she also had her blouse with the pussycat bow. The bow tied with the thick shiny ribbon around the neck of the shirt. It had a cute little skirt to go with it, too. She started by putting them out on her bed, one next to the other. She stood there for what felt like forever before figuring a better way to decide was to pick them up by the hangers and hold them out in front of her in the mirror to see which looked better with her overall appearance.

She'd already done up her hair for that night. Most girls her age kept it short, but she liked the look of it all tied up in fluffy little pigtails. And with her little bow on the one pigtail... actually, maybe she should go with the gingham print dress after all. The blouse on top of her pigtails might make for too many bows in the outfit. Besides, she wore that blouse all the time. It might be nice to spice things up this time. It only took a minute or two after she'd come to her decision. A minute or two to finally get to twirl around in front of the mirror and watch the skirt of her dress twirl with her. It was nice. Now all she had to do was figure out earrings.

She hadn't even gotten a chance to sit down when she heard someone remark from the hallway.

"Why're you dressed like that? Friend of yours forget a picnic blanket?"

Chanterelle looked up and over at her bedroom door. Her brother was leaning against the door frame, looking at her with a stupid little smile on his face, proud of his little joke. Chanty's brother was built like a star football player, and she wouldn't have been surprised if the side of the door frame buckled and broke underneath his hand.

"Ha ha, very funny, Lysander," she replied dryly, trying not to let him feel satisfied with the joke. "I'm getting ready for a date!"

"Date?" Lysander's eyebrow was raised.

"Yeah, a date- You know what those are, don't you?" Chanty giggled at her own little quip, while her brother just rolled his eyes. "Marty's taking me to see a movie!"

"Marty? That's your Italian friend, yeah?"

“Uh-huh!” She turned back to her vanity as she fished a little box off of the table. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to decide between the heart studs mom got me for my birthday, or the sterling silver clip-ons with the pearls from grandma.”

“Alright, good luck with that,” Lysander went to leave her to it, but he didn’t get very far before the two of them turned toward Chanty’s bedroom window. She walked over and leaned out, her hands underneath her on the windowsill as she stood on her tiptoes to get a good look outside. Her bedroom window overlooked the street right outside the house, and now happened to look over the Lassiter V-16 parked along the sidewalk. The same car that had honked to get her attention.

“Ey, Chanty! Are you ready up there?” Marty called out from the driver’s seat of the car. That was what surprised Chanterelle the most. Marty... had a car!!

“I’ll be right down, Marty, gimme 5 minutes!” She ducked back into the bedroom, going back to the vanity before deciding to grab the heart studs from her birthday.

Lysander peaked back inside the bedroom. “You remember, if he pulls anything-”

“You’ll knock the stuffing out of him, I remember,” Chanty replied as she grabbed a pair of nice little heeled shoes from under her bed. They made the most adorable little click-clack when she walked in these ones. “Marty won’t do that, though, he’s a sweetie pie.”

“Well if he turns out to not be a sweetie pie, don’t be afraid to tell me.”

“Alright, I know, thank you, LyLy.” Chanty went to put on her shoes, and Lysander left before he had the urge to say something mean to his sister for daring to call him “LyLy” unironically.

Marty felt so proud of himself. He was seated in the driver’s seat of a god damn lassiter V-16 for pete’s sake. All part of his little plan to impress his crush. After all, he told her they were going to the movies. He didn’t want to say too much to her and spoil the surprise, the surprise being that he was actually taking her to a *drive-in* movie. He’d just gotten his license, after all. Plus, drive-ins had less rules. It was a perfect place for them to just have fun and watch movies. And again, the car! He had a nice car! Chicks LOVE guys with cars!!

So there he was, rhythmically tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as he hummed and smiled to himself. Tonight was gonna be great. It was gonna be fun.

“See you tonight, Lysander!”

And Marty was gonna be spending it with a wonderful gal.

He looked up and over at the front door of the house he was parked outside of, watching as Chanty came happily jogging down the path. She was going about as fast as a girl could in heels, and her little pigtails bounced up and down like clouds in the wind.

“Marty, how’d you get a car this nice?” She asked as she pulled the passenger side door open. “You musta bought it brand new!”

“Well, you know how it is,” he replied as she took a seat and shut the door behind her. “Lotsa people giving you money for odd jobs and shit.”

“But ain’t the new ones almost 4 grand?” Chanty asked as she put on the seatbelt.

“What, you think I’m not good at saving money?” Marty replied.

The two of them looked at each other, eyes squinted in suspicion and other such emotions kids would feel when their skills are called into question, before their cheeks puffed up and the two of them couldn’t help but break out into childish giggles and fits of laughter. There wasn’t much more talking before Marty started up the car and drove off. Marty didn’t have the money for one of them fancy convertible cars with the foldable roof, so he just had to roll down his window and pretend he could feel the wind in his hair like James Dean.

Chanty shifted around in her seat so she could look at Marty. He was dressed in the fanciest thing he owned, which was simultaneously the cheesiest thing she’d ever seen a guy wear. It was one of those blue tuxedos, with the ruffles in the front. And here Chanterelle was worried she might’ve been overdressed for this whole thing, yet here was Marty, wearing something a boy his age would wear to prom to a drive-in movie.

“So, am I allowed to ask what we’re seeing or is that a surprise, too?” Chanty asked.

Marty, he knew movies. His dad owns a theater in downtown Empire Bay, after all. He used to spend most of his free time as a kid watching gangster films in that very theater. But they couldn’t go watch a gangster movie. What kinda guy brings a chick to a gangster movie for their first date? He sure as hell couldn’t. He knows girls like funny movies, so he decided to bring her to see the funniest movie of the previous year:

“Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein.”

Chanty blinked a couple of times like a confused little deer, thinking for a moment.

“Ain’t those the guys that did *Who’s On First*?” She inferred. “Every time they play that on the radio, my dad always sounds like he’s gonna laugh himself to death.”

“Yeah, that’s them!” Marty confirmed excitedly. He chuckled to himself as he kept driving. “Funny sons a bitches.”

Suddenly, the car came to a hard stop. Marty held out an arm to keep Chanty from launching forward in her seat, and he used the other to lay on his horn as someone cut across the lane in front of him with no indicator whatsoever.

He shouted angrily, “WATCH IT! STUNATO!” Chanty had heard him say that word before. Mostly when talking about

“I didn’t know they made movies,” Chanterelle said, trying to move on like they didn’t almost get hit by another car. “Thought it was just radio stuff.”

“Well they do!” Marty confirmed happily. “They’re pretty good at it, too, I’d say.”

“Well of course you’d know that, Mr Movie Man, you’ve probably already seen it.”

“Well hey, that don’t mean I can’t enjoy it again. And it’s a funny movie! I thought you’d like to-”

“Marty, red light RED LIGHT!”

The car came to an abrupt stop again, this time at an intersection. It stopped a little over the line, but still a safe enough distance from the cross traffic.

“Jesus, Marty, you gotta pay better attention to the road!” Chanty said, playfully smacking him on the shoulder. “You’re gonna wreck your car before you’ve had it for a week!”

"I'll be fine, trust me." He looked over with a smile before patting Chanterelle on the head. "I've got another pair of eyes in the car, after all."

Empire Bay Drive-In theater. It was right outside the main city, in a big empty lot over by the edge of whatever wilderness was left around Empire Bay, like a junkyard on the fringes of a city where it wouldn't be in danger of being labeled an eyesore. But it was just like any other Drive-in Theater of the time: row after row of parking spots, a gigantic screen in the front for the projector to project the movie onto, and the big horseshoe-shaped concession stand off somewhere where its bright lights and colors wouldn't ruin the movie-watching experience.

By the time Marty and Chanterelle had arrived, there were still enough open spaces for them to choose between. But Marty had been to theaters before, and if this were anything like a regular movie theater, a spot in the middle of all the cars was the best place to sit. Not too far in front that you hurt your neck trying to watch the movie, but not so far back that you can't make out anything. Even more lucky, they had arrived before any of the previews had started.

"Alright, I'm gonna get a bite to eat," said Marty as he got out the driver's side door. "You want anything, baby doll?"

"Don't be like that, Marty, I'll just go with you." Chanterelle got out the passenger side of the car, shutting the door behind her.

"I don't have a problem with that! Safer that way, too," he said, locking the car. "Don't know what would happen if I left you alone in the car."

"Oh shut up, Marty!" Chanty giggled as she elbowed her date in the arm. "I'm not a baby, I woulda been fine!"

"Alright, alright, don't chew me out about it, babe." Marty laughed back, looping an arm around hers as they walked along. The parking lot wasn't pitch black dark yet, but they were in just the right place for the sunset to not be enough to illuminate the place. The brightly colored concession stand was like a lighthouse overlooking a raging sea of car engines that hadn't been shut off yet. But lighthouses, as far as Marty knew at least, didn't sell killer pretzels. That and buttered popcorn. That was one of his favorites to get at the movies. And he ended up getting it again.

Chanty noticed it there. Marty splurged on the popcorn, getting a bag big enough for them to share. The popcorn wasn't what made the gears start turning. Of course he would get popcorn at the movies. And they were on a date, so he'd get enough for them to share all romantic-like. But then he kept going. He asked her if she wanted something to drink. More specifically, what kind of shakes did she like? Chanty answered honestly, although it wasn't like Marty *didn't* already know that. Hanging around Chanterelle around the malt shop and all that, it was hard to not figure out what flavor milkshake she liked. Marty got himself a malt on top of it, as well as one of the killer pretzels. Chanterelle couldn't believe the size of the thing. She wouldn't have been surprised if whoever was making the food back there just took two regular pretzels and slapped them together before selling it. It wasn't the popcorn that made her suspicious. It was the drinks and the pretzel on top of it. Just all of this extra stuff that must've

cost a lot of money, surely. But Chanty was smart, and she also wasn't a fan of souring the fun. She didn't want to bring it up to Marty. Not yet, anyways.

"Don't eat all the popcorn before the movie starts, okay, Marty?" She giggled as they walked back. Marty looked at her with squinted eyes as she took a long sip of her milkshake, pretending she hadn't said anything wrong.

"C'mon, babe, what do you take me for?" He popped one of the kernels in his mouth. "I'm gonna try and make it last at LEAST through the cartoon at the start."

The two of them slipped back into the car not long after, doing their best to get comfortable. Chanterelle wished she could lean back in the car seat like a recliner. That's all that could make the movie night even better. Marty set the bucket of popcorn between them on the center console, and Chanty couldn't help but take a handful. That's all! She was no hypocrite, after all. She'd wait until the movie started up to eat more than a handful or two or five.

"You should hang something from your mirrors, Marty," she said, covering her mouth with her hands since she hadn't swallowed the popcorn. "Spruce up your car a bit. You know, one of my neighbors got a pair of those fuzzy dice that are getting popular-"

"I wouldn't be caught dead with that kinda silly shit in my car, Chanty," he replied rather quickly, sipping down his malt. "If I'm hanging something from the rear-view mirror, I want it to mean something."

Chanty had to stop herself from chuckling so she wouldn't choke on her popcorn. She took a moment before quipping back at him.

"What, are you gonna hang a picture of the boys from Key Largo from the mirror?" She asked with a playful smirk.

"Maybe I will, Chanty, who knows?" Marty quipped right back, leaning back in his seat with a hand on the steering wheel. He looked over at the rear-view mirror, scrutinizing it. He looked like an old guy trying to figure out what the best paint color would be to slap on the wall of their living room. "If I can find someone with a photo of them, I'll punch a little hole through it and tie it to the mirror with string. Because why not, right?"

That just made Chanterelle giggle again. He liked her laugh. It sounded like a little kid blowing bubbles through their straw into their chocolate milk, all sweet and childlike. It was one of Marty's favorite sounds. He'd listen to nothing but her adorable laugh forever if he could. Then again, he probably wouldn't be able to hear any of his favorite gangster movies over it. Alright... maybe she could be quiet for the movies. Every other time, he'd love to hear her laugh. The sentiment would come to bite him in the ass as the two of them quieted down as the projector started rolling.

All these movies, even the drive-in ones, started the same: with a little cartoon short before the movie. Marty almost forgot about this, since they didn't usually play that kind of stuff before the violent gangster movies he so often watched. But this was Abbott and Costello. If there was any kind of movie that warranted a funny 6 minutes stretch of slapstick, it was a film with those two jokesters. Marty hadn't been ready for the short that played. Not when it started making Chanty laugh like a lunatic.

“Wha- the slapstick can’t be that funny,” Marty wondered aloud.

“No, no, it- heehee- It’s the-” Chanty was cut off by more giggles bubbling up in her throat like the foam in a rootbeer float, until she finally got it out. “It’s Woody Woodpecker. He kinda sounds like you.”

Chanty kept giggling, though now was trying to calm herself back down. Marty was just stunned, looking up at the screen and listening. He didn’t wanna say it. He just sat and grumbled, but in a playful way, like a dog who’d just been cornered with their favorite toy but secretly wanted to play fetch with it again.

“God damn it, first Joe, then you, huh?” He said with a chuckle. That was what caught Chanty a bit off guard. Joe was a common name. He could’ve been talking about anyone when he said Joe said he sounded like Woody Woodpecker. But that would be too convenient. Too nice. Chanty took a pause and looked up at the projection. The short was still going. They still had time before the movie. She reached a hand over and started cranking up her window. It was when she leaned over the center console to crank up the driver’s side window that Marty took notice.

“Hey, babe, you alright?” he asked, confused. Once both windows were up, she leaned back into her seat.

“Be honest with me, Marty,” she started. “The money for the car and all the snacks and the movie. Did you get it from a job... or from running errands for Joe Barbaro?”

Marty’s confused smile dropped in an instant, his face going a bit pale. He knew who that was. Chanty did, too. After all, Empire City wasn’t a perfect city. It had its fair share of criminal underbelly people. Joe Barbaro was one of the more well known Italian-american Mafiosos around there. She knew Marty. She knew he liked gangsters. And she knew he liked to hang around the same little coffee place that Joe Barbaro was rumored to hang around. There was no way he was pulling the wool over her eyes this time around, and Marty knew that.

“It’s just a few errands, Chanty,” He said, trying to play off her concerns. “It’s nothing dangerous.”

“Errands, huh? Like helping him dump bodies or or or...” she trailed off as she tried to think of something else. “... Well I dunno what else the mob does, but are you doing any of that, too?”

“None of that shit, babe!” Marty assured her, sitting up a bit so he could get a bit closer to her. “I just pick up his winning money from the horse races sometimes. Other times he pays me to wax his car, but it’s fine!”

“Well, if...” Chanty couldn’t even finish it. Marty watched with saddened eyes as Chanterelle’s started to get glossy with water. “Marty, can you promise me something? Don’t get roped up in that mobster garbage. Please? I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you-”

“Hey hey hey, baby, don’t cry.” Marty leaned forward so he could put his arms around Chanterelle. “Don’t cry. If you cry, I’m gonna start crying.” He just took a moment to hold her in his arms, his face against her forehead as he tried to comfort her the only way he knew how. She

was taking sharp breaths and such, trying to keep herself together while tears started welling up in her eyes. He couldn't take it! He put his hands on the sides of her face and tilted her head up so he could meet her gaze.

"Don't worry about it," he said calmly, flashing her a smile. "All it is is betting money and car wax. Ain't gonna be nothing more than that. I promise."

It took her a moment. Chanty was still trying to recover from her sudden fit of tears and sobs, but she was finally able to calm herself down enough to take a big breath in and rub the water from her face.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Promise." He patted her shoulder before sitting back up. "Now enough of that emotional shit. Let's laugh for a while, why don't we?" Chanty couldn't help but giggle. "See, you've already got the laughing part down, good on ya!" And that just made her giggle even more. She calmed herself down again, leaning back in her seat on the passenger side as the two of them looked up ahead through the windshield and over at the projection.

Chanterelle leaned to one side, resting her head on Marty's shoulders as the Woody Woodpecker short came to a close. If Marty noticed her there, he didn't seem to mind. He was content to just sit there, sharing popcorn with the girl he loves, watching as the opening titles came up on screen for the best comedy of last year.