

Monte Carlo

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Nobody can say how the news has spread, where it's coming from. It's no longer possible to pinpoint the source, irrelevant once the name has been spoken. Deedee. Everyone knows she's in Monaco. Everyone feels her presence. Deedee. People understand what they're a part of, the event, they prepare themselves for an afternoon in the self-evidence of the extraordinary. A young actress who's all the rage, of course she's here. Her name goes from mouth to mouth, linking everyone with everyone else, a second circuit.

Deedee.

Cool and flamed like the marble of the corridors she is led through on the way to her suite. The provocative curl of her lip, even when looking down in devotion. A deeply religious country girl who has gradually grown to the shape of her nickname. A duet with the brilliant chansonnier. Gracing the Croisette in Cannes. Her blonde hair, and the impossible way it flatters her face; every young woman wants the same hairstyle and makes a fool of herself with it. Deedee. In Paris the rebellious students detest and desire her.

[...]

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It happens by accident. The woman's been holding the camera for a while, looking through the viewfinder every now and then, taking the odd photo. But now she waits, the film's almost finished, she estimates she's only got one photo left. She's trying to wait for the right moment, but won't remember taking this photo later. The fuel is no longer a liquid, the change is taking place. She remembers the heat hitting her in the face, an invisible cloud, the fire not yet a fire. It's the kind of photo you can't possibly take consciously; the event has captured itself. Sitting in the stands next to the fat, Italian-looking man and holding her camera ready for one last photo, the woman presses the button without realising, unknowingly taking the only photo that exists of this moment, a

coincidence on top of a coincidence. She doesn't remember doing it. The heat on her face, that's what sticks in her mind.

He spent four years as head mechanic of a team that raced in the British Rally Championship, taking his responsibilities very seriously and secretly enjoying the respect he commanded from young and old, in racing circles and in his village. Three days after his thirty-third birthday, the postman delivered a letter that nailed him to the spot. It was there in black and white under the green-and-yellow Lotus logo. His wife tugged cautiously on his arm, asking him what the matter was. He saw her, he looked at her, he looked into her indeterminately-coloured eyes, garlanded with pale lashes, his wife, her narrow shoulders and wide hips, her hands red and chafed. Where to start? How far back did he have to go to make her grasp the full significance of this letter? To Queen Elizabeth, sixteen years earlier at Silverstone, when she attended the very first grand prix of the brand-new Formula One World Championship? To Fangio, Farina and Moss with the monstrous Ferrari and Maserati engines at the front of their cars? Or just to what the Italians called the "garagistas", who changed the face of Formula One completely ten years after its launch? Teams like Cooper and Lotus and Brabham, all based in the UK, each one in garages in hangars at old World War II airports with lots of tarmac for testing. Teams who deliberately stopped trying to compete with the big engine manufacturers and concentrated on the car instead, its design and weight, placing a small, efficient engine behind the driver, greatly improving the car's traction and handling and reducing tyre wear at the same time – a revolution: the start of modern Formula One! Yes, that's where he should start, because that was the kind of team he was going to work for, he, Jack Preston. It said so in black and white in the letter he was holding. It excited and terrified him. That evening he lit a candle in the church.

Even before he's bitten into the tape to tear off the first strip, he feels the audience's eyes on his back. The audience is always there and the mechanics, too, are on view during a grand prix weekend. Like the drivers and cars, they're worth watching, even if nobody comes especially for them: they're present, they stand out, they touch the cars, the enormously expensive racing cars. Coping with that extra pressure takes a certain kind of composure, even if nobody knows what exactly you do. Only the best mechanics get this opportunity and that's another thing the public doesn't stop to think about. Every mechanic on the grid has more than paid his dues and it's an embarrassment to be faffing about with insulation tape. They looked at each other when Chapman came over with the news and gave the order, but Alfie and Jim had been with the team longer and Jack Preston, at thirty-five the oldest of the trio, had picked up the roll without a word and made his way to the Lotus 49. Alfie followed along behind for moral support. After the first strip of tape something happens in the stands. A man laughs loudly, a deep emphatic roar, as if trying to draw attention to Jack and the tape. Laughing off a daring move, cheering the automobile federation's decision, after pressure from ITV and the BBC, to ban teams from using their cars as mobile hoardings, a step too far. It was a decision their team leader had successfully contested yesterday during qualification, but today Chapman was forced to concede. But there are other sounds coming from the stands too, rejecting the decision as disgusting, a conservative spasm. And Jack Preston sticks a second strip over the sailor's head and feels – with his nose up against the red, white and gold – the conflict in his own chest. And suddenly he's the focus of attention, soon the cameras will come rushing up to film him covering over the sailor, and again it occurs to him that it takes a special kind of attitude, and he is surprised by himself, surprised to discover that he too seems to have ice in his veins. When it comes down to it, this is where he belongs, in this team that keeps its sights fixed firmly ahead, that is secretly experimenting with wings, not to make the car take off like an aeroplane – inverted wings to push it down onto the track so it can corner faster than all the rest.

Jack Preston has covered the picture on both sides of the Lotus as requested. The noise on the stands has died down after the applause that sounded for the prince and his family. Alfie and Jim have started on the final checks. It's hot, mid-summer temperatures in May, the car radiating the heat it's absorbed and too hot to touch without gloves. Jim Clark runs his fingers through his thick, black hair, puts his helmet on and buckles it under his chin. A little bit further along MacLaren and Hull have put their heads together. Thompson is standing by a little helplessly in his civvies, still recovering from the accident he had six weeks ago in a Formula 2 race through nobody's fault but his own, which was plain for all to see. And Chapman brings his face up close to Clark's and says something that he apparently only wants to share with his driver, some last words of encouragement, a reminder about a particular corner perhaps, some way of creating an opportunity on this circuit where overtaking is extremely difficult. And the activity on the grid reaches its peak, people know that Deedee is on her way, the drivers stay standing, not yet climbing into their cockpits. Then there's one of those strange moments when everyone is waiting for something that's about to happen and everyone involved – on the grid and in the stands along the Boulevard Albert 1er, up to and including the Prince himself – suddenly falls silent one after the other. Falling silent because others have stopped talking and that silence, that sudden, improbable stillness, is spreading through the audience. Everyone swallows their words because they think something's going on, they can hear it, the silence that is building, faster than fire, so impressive that others fall silent in instinctive awe, immediately forgetting what they were talking about and only wanting to listen along with all the rest, until finally, during the few seconds when it really is silent and everyone is struck dumb and listening to the sounds in the distance, it turns out that it's just one of those things that sometimes happen in a large group of people and have nothing to signify and everyone can start talking again. Meanwhile Jack Preston is thinking about the heat and the wind resistance and how the combination could pick at the tape during the grand prix, an even greater affront than racing with tape on the car would be driving around in Monaco with strips of tape flapping away on the Lotus 49, and he sticks double strips vertically over the ends of the others, making an ugly black rectangle on the bodywork, as if there's a gaping hole under it the driver could stick his hand through. Then he does the same on the other side, the stand side, and that's where Jack Preston smells it first, in this perfume of spring and asphalt and people and machines and excitement and rubber and whatever else, in this atmosphere that is so typical of just before the start of a grand prix: he smells fuel. It's a fleeting semi-conscious thought, a hint of a realisation before it slips away again and he's making a black rectangle on the bodywork on the left while the tape he bites into leaves a nasty taste in his mouth and a new shiver runs through the crowd, not silencing it this time, not at all. It's as if a magnetic force field has slid over the boulevard, stands and balconies, no one can escape it, everyone turns toward the same dazzling point, even if Deedee is not yet visible to most of them. And they don't go quiet, they talk on, almost compulsively, without listening to each other or hearing what they themselves are saying; people are trying to compose themselves, to show themselves worthy of her now palpable presence. She and her retinue must have entered the circuit somewhere along the quayside. Photojournalists, press hounds and cameramen leap in front of her and are pushed aside by bodyguards. People call out to her from the stands. She greets a few drivers, shyly, the earnestness with which she listens to their car talk never lasting long, soon giving way to a charming smile, which is also the lead-in to her goodbye. She tosses her locks back or ruffles them up or waves in one direction with a slight head gesture that bares her long neck, and all of it as understated and modestly girlish as if she's just woken up in the morning. She advances slowly towards the starting line. Hull, who else, takes advantage of the opportunity to kiss her on the cheek, to the great merriment of all watching. Hull – who at a party last year danced on the tables in high heels and drag and fell onto the base and stem of a broken wineglass – kisses her on the cheek, but Deedee's eyes gleam as if she's been approached by a true gentleman. Jack Preston catches a glimpse of her between the backs and legs, and the woman in the stands is sitting ready with her face half-hidden

behind her camera with one photo left on the roll, and the smell of fuel grows stronger but doesn't get through to him, because Deedee now does something strange.

She looks at him.

He's sure of it.

From between all the heads and cameras, she keeps her eyes on him. He's standing completely alone at the side of the Lotus 49 and she's looking at him. She gestures impatiently, searching for an opening in the thick hedge of bodies, then spurts forward and slips through under people's arms to free herself from the hangers-on, laughing and walking to the side of the boulevard with long, quick steps as she comes towards him. The self-evidence of the extraordinary, this afternoon in the streets of Monte Carlo. She recognises him, she must have seen him in Spain or last year at Monza or Francorchamps, although he can't remember her being there. He would have known. Still, she must have seen him at work somewhere, because she recognises him and breaks free and comes towards him, all before the eyes of the audience, his heart leaps in his breast, and because he knows her face so well it really does feel like a reunion and he gets ready for a hand, a hug, maybe even a kiss, on the far side of the Lotus. This moment doesn't last longer than two steps from her swivelling hips. The realisation comes in a flash, in the corners of his eyes he sees that the press, surprised and amused by her sudden escape, are not paying him any attention but turning and starting to run. And it occurs to Jack Preston that Deedee is not looking at him but past him, with one goal in mind, and although he's not looking that way, he knows the prince has stood up and descended halfway down the steps from the seats of honour, everything points in that direction: the heads turning, Deedee's fixed gaze, the press ignoring him, and he realises that she has only chosen this route as a spontaneous and uncluttered approach to the prince, flouting the agreements, the protocol, taking the path of least resistance between the Lotus 49 and the main stand. That's the kind of woman she is and that's why she's loved by all. And the photographers opt for the path Deedee has abandoned, the shortest route to the seats of honour, while she reaches the Lotus's left rear wheel and the sound rings out, the sound of an enormous animal snapping at the oxygen, in the middle of one of her long, lithe steps, the fire not yet a fire, a cloud of heat, colourless, invisible still in the bright sunlight: it smashes into Jack Preston's back, surrounding him, and the woman in the stands doesn't know she's pressed the shutter. In the exact moment in which his overalls and the brilliantine in his hair are still barriers, distinct from but alongside the ghostly heat, he stretches out an arm and snatches Deedee away and covers her with his body. They are blown up against the advertising signs, his cheek presses against hers, he screams and his scream drowns out hers. And the men in white rolled-up shirtsleeves on the balustrades at St Dévote see the commotion arising in the distance, they hear the animal snap and see a plume of dark smoke forming some ten metres above Clarck's Lotus. They can only guess at the cause, but they see a thick column of black smoke rising over Boulevard Albert 1er with below it bursts of flame surging up from what can only be a hellish fire.