

# The Red-Headed Man

by Mary Clark

from *Fiction* and republished in the anthology *The Whole Story: Editors on Fiction*

Early in November, Julia began having dreams about the red-headed man. In the dream he was her boyfriend, and when she was with him she had the feeling of being so deeply loved that it didn't matter if he wasn't real. On the subway the day the dream started, a stranger with red hair had asked her if he was traveling in the right direction. Thinking back on the dream the next day, Julia could say that while she explained how the underground pathways corresponded to the streets above, a part of her collected his red hair is some thing to take from the waking to the sleeping world. Other than that, the man in the dreams did not remind her of any one she knew in real life.

She didn't remember the first dream until she was in her kitchen making her breakfast the next morning. She cut a cantaloupe and half and when it fell apart and she began to scoop the seeds out over the garbage can, she remembered driving in a very small car with her new boyfriend who had red hair. She was able to hold onto that memory enough to recall that she had told him his hair was the color of cantaloupe—as if she had also been thinking about her breakfast while dreaming—and was taken aback when she saw a pale peach-colored fruit rather than the brilliant orange she remembered from the night before. The only other memory she had of the first was that after telling him about the shade of his hair, he replied, “It is tremendously clever of you to say so.” Then the feeling of being loved port over her, making her clothes feel little damp for a while afterward.

His hair was the clearest memory she had of him. She had never been close to a redhead. If not for the unusual color of his hair, Julia was convinced that she would not have felt so enlivened while dreaming. It was thick and straighten cut short so that when she pushed it all one way it was bright orange, and when she pushed it another it was burnt rust, like the nap in a carpet. But his hair was not the texture of carpet; it was the texture of cut grass

“Your hair has a grass nap in it,” Julia told him the very next night in the second dream.

“Yes, I know.”

“Let me make a design.”

“If it suits you to do so.”

She made an S in his hair with her fingers using short brisk strokes at the rounded part of the letter. “There now you are a dreamboat.”

“Thank you. May I erase my hair now?”

“Yes you may. You are a dreamboat, but not a brown haired one.”

“Thank you, and you are a beautiful woman who is slightly nervous.” When he said this, his arms around her became a wool blanket she was wrapped in.

In the second dream she remembered that they drove down a narrow residential streets in an old city she couldn't identify. His car was the size of a book; that's how she thought of it, the size of a textbook, a textbook that held a catalog of animals. She didn't know, but perhaps she had such a particular sense of his car because they had a shrink to that size whenever they got in.

The dream reminded her of the Mystery Date Game, a board game she played as a girl wherein players advanced their markers by landing on squares that brought them closer to, or farther away from, being dressed in beautified for their dates. When each became ready, she open the plastic door in the center of the board, where underneath, a dial head spun and

positioned on an unknown picture of one of five possible dates: the Sporty Guy in shorts who leaned on the tennis racket; two others whom Julia couldn't remember; the dud the consolation prize of a dude of a date who slumped in the doorway, seedy and unkempt; and the Dreamboat in a white tuxedo, who held out flowers and stood up straight right in the center of the door way. Girls on the commercial for the game successively opened a real door to actors betraying each of these men. Then the camera held a few seconds on the real man in the real door way. Julia knew that if there was anyone who look like the red-headed man, it was the man who was the dreamboat in the Mystery Date Game, although that man had brown hair.

By the evening of the third dream she had forgotten about the pleasant dream she had the night before and went to sleep thinking about a meeting she had the next morning.

“My it’s a windy day,” the red-headed man said.

“Lovely.” As in the waking world the dream showed fall colors, though some trees took on blue leaves. Besides a streak of chill in the wind of a certain height, there was something else about it that she noticed. The wind was...the wind was *separated* into parts of wind... it was...

“Just don’t let it get inside of you.”

“What?”

“The wind.”

“Oh I won’t.”

“Once inside, you can only get it out in a way I don’t know of yet.”

“Oh, I won’t then, especially.”

“See the trees change color.”

“Exquisite.” The view was bright and clear and exaggerated from the angular late-afternoon light.

“The grass doesn’t turn like a maple does, except in one place I know.”

Then they were driving up the hill in his tiny car. “Only a small amount of mileage and I will show it to you,” he said. “There.” At the top they could see a whole field of red grass.

“If this grass were enough,” she said, “it would be red hair on the planet. Now it’s only a tiny, tiny tough.

“There he is now.” He pointed to a man in overalls, who appeared from behind some trees, mowed across the red field, and emptied bags of cut grass from the lawnmower attachment onto a pile in the center of the field.

They must have run down to that pile, because in the next moment Julia dove into it as if it was water. When the worker heaved another load on, she had to go deep under the same way she survived waves of the ocean, letting them pass before surfacing.

“Your hair is so cold it’s making me numb,” she said, confusing his hair for the grass that was like the ocean around her.

“The Red Sea,” he called it, which came off in the dream is an intellectual joke.

He swam over to her “I love you so that I’ve put you inside of my hair this way. I knew I could always do this for someone, and I’ve waited to do it for you.”

“I feel like Venus but with arms!” This image of her self accentuated the actual radiance she felt and continued to feel for a while when she woke.

Julia could never really see the face of the red-headed man; however, the dream led her to assume that he had a kind face. Likewise, his build was vague, his skin tone blurry, and she could not acquire a sense of his height since he grew in shrank to accommodate the events in the dream I do correspond with what he said. But her mind selected other features to push to exaggeration. She had an especially precise memory of his hands. The skin of his palms and

fingers was the smooth skin of a woman's back rather than the usual skin ridged by fingerprints. The balls of his fingers and palms padded with the consistency of foam, received the pressure of holding hands and reformed quickly when she moved her hand away. And just under that padding, she could tell the hard muscles there gave his grip restraint. Holding hands with him was like lying down at last after a day at work.

Julia could barely recognize a certain side of herself in the dreams, and would not have seen that woman as herself if not for dreaming's way of letting the dreamer know personal perspective. Her behavior and the corny things she said embarrassed her, even though the only witness was an invented man. She accused herself of girlishness when she strolled along the river with him and said that the stars reminded her of sequins on the evening dress of the night, and that the moon was the scoop of vanilla ice cream fallen on that dress when the woman of the night was not careful enough with her cone. And to think it was her creation to have herself strolling with him along the river looking at the moon as well!

But the red-headed man did nothing and said nothing for which he could be embarrassed. Roller skating on the river, close like a waltz, she fretted that they were going to fall through any minute, but he gently reminded her that he had turned on the very cold water faucet just before stepping on, and that the river should be freezing up in no time.

“You think of everything.”

“Oh do I? I thought I was thinking only of you.”

“Let me see your face.” She stared and stared, and described his features in words to herself to try to root the image of him in her memory. “Every time I try to remember some parts of you it won't go in.”

“That's a good thing.”

“I am also embarrassed about what I said about the moon.”

“You only said it because you’re homesick.” With that he twirled her until she lifted up to the bridge. The motion gave her the distant feeling that something was not right.

“Look how very cold my elbow is from skating.” He was on the bridge too then, pointing his elbow at her. She could see that the elbow of his coat was frost-covered.

“My poor darling, let me warm it for you.” She kept her hands around his elbow and breathed her warmest air—that’s how she thought of it, her warmest air, calling it up from the warmest part inside of her.

“It’s no use. My elbow won’t be warm until you’re no longer homesick.”

“But I don’t feel homesick at all; I really think of my parents. Anyway, I couldn’t be homesick, I have you.”

That dream ended with her breathing and breathing onto his elbow, but it still stayed cold. She woke from breathing so deliberately, and once awake, her breathing seemed more like panting. When she had located herself from the lost feeling of not knowing why she was breathing so, or where she was, she sat up in her bed and cried.

Going down the elevator to lunch with a coworker the next day, Julia asked her if she ever had a dream that wasn’t so much recurring as continuous, like a sequel each night.

The woman answered no, that she didn’t dream much, or rather, didn’t *remember* her dreams.

Julia decided it wasn’t fair to tell her dreams to someone who didn’t have so much pleasure herself. She worried that describing them would make them sound dull and haphazard.

She felt grateful for their return each night. To bring them on, she practiced the method of willing them by not trying too hard. Before sleep, she lay flat and still and tried to think of nothing. She waited like this until she saw splotches of light behind her lids shift slightly, and then

soon after, shake. That shaking had been her last memory of being awake, and a signal of the transition into sleep. So when it started, she thought only have a color: red-orange.

“Get into my Match Box. Get in quick.” He was holding open the car door, leaning across the passenger seat to do so. “You’d better hurry because the tornado will arrive in our presence.”

She shrank fast and got in.

Even though they were tiny, the approaching wind did not blow them off the road because they maintain their actual weight. He pulled right, got out, and opened her door. Taking her arm, he led her to the elevator that deliver them into the ditch-level of the field.

“Lay flat for now until it passes.”

The tornado blew over them resembling the black smoke off a train. It sounded like a train—something Julia remembered reading about tornadoes.

“Do you hear that?” he asked her. “It’s the eye.” It sounded like a sweet, spiritual cord held by many voices. “It’s nice now, but you know it comes again.”

When the winds returned, she knew they had returned, but did not feel them around her. She looked at the sky but could not locate them. She grew desperate, feeling that the wind was going to sneak up on her.

“The wind is blowing hard inside me now. Will you help me please?” He was shouting above the wind inside him.

She panicked. She grabbed him and held him, but his hair blew wild, as if from inside his head since there were still no wind in the air around them. She pushed him down and made him even smaller so she could put him in her sleeve, but even sill, his hair shifted, a tiny wheat field—the color of a wheat field at dusk—in a storm.

She put her hand on his head, but she could feel his hair trying to move underneath. When

she lifted her hand his hair switched faster like when a child releases hold of the legs of a wind-up doll scissoring faster until the backlog of the turning crank reaches its actual pace.

“It has wound down for now,” he said, small-human-size again, “But look!” He showed her his elbow, covered in ice.

“My stomach,” she said because the worry she had for him clawed at her inside until the pain was too much to sleep through, and she woke.

The sixth night, just after falling asleep, she was wakened by the telephone from what she could tell was the beginning of the next dream. The conversation that followed stirred her, and its lack of resolution made her too angry to sleep. She calmed herself by fixing on a certain shade of orange in a cloth on her dresser.

“You must pay just the right amount of attention to the wind, or it will get inside of you. It’s always been my mistake to do so.” They were flying above the city, supported on the stronger part of the wind. Julia could tell that they were able to fly because the winds had been inside him so long that he could use it to his advantage.

“Just be sure to stay on the level of the wind that can hold you. Don’t go to a weak level.”

“Oh I won’t.” She felt the thrilling mix of fear and liberation.

In the dream she saw a goose flying right beside her. She could see how hard it worked to fly, bobbing a little at each stroke. It was sweating and its mouth was open. It turned to look at her and then looked ahead again.

“The best thing is the rooftops. It’s how I got red hair by looking at rooftops from above.”

“I knew it was from some such thing.”

“Don’t you look too long, because your hair is the best color I can think of.”

For him to think of her hair color as better than his, when she so adored him being a redhead,



made her whole body warm from the inside out.

“Are you ready now? To go to bed with me?”

She couldn't answer, so aroused by his question; she could only exhale a long breath.

Next, they were in bed in the sky. She recognized the bed as her own because it had the same headboard.

“I have wanted to make love with you since on the subway I saw you, but I didn't want to be regarded as too attentive.” He kissed inside of her forearm. “Your skin tastes like sweet milk.”

With her lying there, exactly as she was actually lying, he went under the light down quilt to please her.

His tenderness startled her and kept her longing until she came in the dream, and as far as she could tell, in actual life, something she experienced only one other time, as a teenager. She lay awake and curled up, facing the space next to her where she had last seen him.

The next night, Julia wanted to call up the red-headed man for that evening's dreaming, but the dream that night was very slight and set between other dreams. She did remember being in a house behind a screen door, looking out. The red-headed man was walking down the sidewalk away from her.

“I'll miss you,” she called to him in slow-motion.

“I'll be all right.”

She knew when he got into the cab that it was really an ambulance because the light on top of it was yellow not blue.

She couldn't sleep that night and got up to watch late-night television. On the show, she noticed that one of the men in the talk-show's band had red hair. She got up close to the set to look at him in the background while the band's leader talked to the host. She waited through the

next guest for him to appear again, but the camera only flashed on the band for a second before cutting to the commercial.

She turned off the TV and made a sandwich. She sat by the window and ate, looking out at her sleeping residential street.

She felt a tired ache in her body the next day at work, and went to bed early that night.

“How’s the space in the broccoli?” the red-headed man asked her in the candle lit restaurant.

“It’s so good.” Julia had the pleasant sensation of eating something light and warm and a vanished green.

“I come here because the food has tremendous space in it.”

“Delicious.” She was inside the experience of tasting, which expanded to an enclosure bigger than herself making it much more interesting.

“To your liking?” He cranked the peppermill above her plate, and when he did so, nodding forward a little, she saw that her letter still sprawled across the crown of his head.

“I thought you erased your hair along time ago.”

“I did.”

“But the S is still in it.”

Of course, it came back.”

“I don’t want it in there that long.” Terrified, she switched her hands briskly in his hair so she was almost slapping his head.

“It will go away for good, when a dog walks by me,” he said.

“Hurry. Hurry, hurry, hurry.” They were running down the alley trying to find a dog. In the backyards, none were out. People’s gardens were dying from the approaching cold, just as they were dying from falling the waking world. Marigolds stood brightly above brown rubble, but the

sunflowers had turned to cast iron and could no longer be picked.

From far down the alley came a small black dog.

“There’s one!”

“Come here please,” said the red-headed man. The dog went to him and licked his hand, and as it did so, gradually the S left his hair and appeared in the nap of the animal’s fur.

“A little S dog,” Julia said as the dog trotted off.

“He’ll lose it one day in the stones that wash into the side of the alley after a storm.

Everything rubs off eventually.”

“You rubbed off on me.”

“Impossible.”

“Yes you did. Yes you did. You did rub off on me.”

“I’m afraid that’s outside of possibility, Julia.”

“Yes you did. Yes you did.”

He was fading. His car grew a normal size. He got in without her and drove away. In the distance, the shadows on his hair made it look brown. Still in the dream she stood in a place she thought of as the corner of the alley and repeated his last sentence to her, but it became more and more unfathomable, as the knowledge of something that happened to a person every day as a child—something that influenced all and everything that person was and is now—becomes as an adult, the one thing too hard to remember.