

Meeting Sandra

by Thomas Easterling

Anybody who lives in a college town will tell you that college towns are best when the students are not in it. Traffic is slow, and parking is not a competitive sport. Families with children picnic and play in the quad without worry, for there are no mountain bikers to run them over, no errant Frisbees or footballs to knock them on the head. In the summer, boutiques and mom and pop stores have their sidewalk sales at prices much lower than what they will charge when students descend again. And in the winter, the Christmas lights from those same establishments seem to glow more brightly on sidewalks that are not crowded with freshmen and sophomores straining to purchase one last knick-knack to take home as a present to parents who might be disappointed by grades. Indeed, a contented if tired calm consumes the town from the last day of finals to the night before the students return. Every day feels like a Sunday.

But the nights are still cold and long, and those who remain in the town scurry off to their best friends' houses and their favorite watering holes, lingering over second cups of coffee or an extra finger of bourbon, drinking to the merry wistfulness that surrounds them, and wondering if the next drink—the one that should probably not be had—is the one that will lead them in some better direction: a late night party with exciting people, a road trip to Memphis, a spontaneous jaunt to some isle in the Caribbean. By the time the restaurant's Christmas party had reached its second hour, Lu despaired of any of this happening. The exhilaration of winning big diminished a little each time one of the guys from the poker table paired up with a girl and danced to the slow, dirty blues groove of Lil Will and Big Love. Sam, of course, was dancing with Magda. Sam would turn her on the dance floor every once in a while so he could watch Lu watching them out of the corner of his eye.

Lu had had about enough of that, and turned his attention to the bottom of his glass. Nothing but ice and fumes. He took stock of his

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situation. He did not want to return to his house. It was empty, and he didn't want to give Sam the satisfaction of running him off. Lu could make himself another drink, but he was already looking over the precipice of buzz into the abyss of muzzy, and he didn't want to be hungover for the long drive to his mother's tomorrow. So he sighed, ducked beneath the bar, and started lining up shot glasses to get other people drunk instead.

"Hey! What are you making?" Catherine screamed over the roar of the Lil Will's guitar. She was a new waitress, a college student from the coast who didn't get a bid from the sorority she wanted—she let everyone know—because she had dated a Mexican boy in high school. So she joined the restaurant instead. She was pretty.

"Panty rippers," Lu screamed back. "You want one?"

"Hell yeah!" she cried.

Lu grabbed the Whalers and the pineapple juice and iced a few cocktail shakers. He poured quickly, the motions practiced and professional, and filled the shot glasses within a minute. Lil Will was in between songs, so he leaned into Catherine and said, "Lemon drops next, and maybe chocolate martinis. Anything I can make special for you?"

The girl's face brightened. "You're the best! Let me go ask Mike if there's anything he wants!"

Her ponytail swished smartly as she turned from him to consult Mike. Lu eyed her walking away and thought about how stupid she really was. Sweet perhaps, and hard-working, but she wouldn't be pleasant to look at after gravity took its toll. He made the lemon drops stronger than the panty rippers, and poured a row of Old Charter shots behind those, and then stood back to see who was thirsty.

"Hey! You're not supposed to be working!"

Lu looked up and saw Randy Adams, the chef and owner of the restaurant, grinning at him. "Merry Christmas, bossman," Lu said.

"It's been a great year," Randy yelled. "Grab yourself a bottle of whatever you want and start your ass to dancing. I'll take over the bar for a little while."

Lu picked up the Old Charter.

"That's what I like about you," Randy said when he got to the other side of the bar. "You're cheap. But take something nicer tonight. The bar's done well this year."

Lu thought about it and picked up a bottle of Blanton's and a lowball filled with ice and hollered thanks to Randy. To hell with it. He'd just have to get a little drunk. His mother would have to understand. Sam would too: he decided it was time to cut in and dance with Magda. Lil Will was playing his favorite song, "Twelve-Step Blues." Everyone else loved it too, and there was not enough room on the floor to contain the desperate gyrations of the restaurant staff and their friends. Before he got to Sam and Magda, someone bumped into him so hard that he shot headlong into the shoulder of a girl he had seen before but never spoken to—a heavy-set blonde with a mischievous smile. She was the daughter of one of Randy's early backers, the sort of girl who paid for lunch and had pretty friends. Not bad looking, Lu thought, but not Magda.

"Hey! Don't spill that," she yelled over the music. "That's good stuff! That's what my daddy drinks!"

Lu smiled and hunched his shoulders, and mouthed the word sorry. Then he tried to inch towards Magda so he could cut in, but the blonde girl bounced in front and yelled, "You're my favorite bartender! You're the best! Don't you love Lil Will?"

"I do!" Lu shouted back.

Lu looked over the blonde's shoulder and saw Sam dancing Magda towards the back door. Then he looked at the blonde. "I'm Lu," he shouted.

"I know!" she shouted back. "Everybody knows you! I'm Sandra!"

Lil Will got to the refrain, dropped the sound down and made everyone sing it with him. Sandra had a pretty voice, Lu thought, and when the song was over, he asked her if she wanted a drink.

"Hell yeah!" she said. "That stuff is really good. Let's go out to the balcony."

Lu stepped aside to let her go first, then looked one last time for Magda. It was no use. Lu was tall, but not tall enough to see over every person on the floor. He thought about how much fun it would be to teach her the electric slide, or any of the dances of his misspent youth, then turned to the balcony, where Sandra sat smiling. "I've only got one glass," he said. "Do you want me to go get another one?"

"The alcohol will kill the germs," she said. Lu put the glass in front of her and poured three fingers. Sandra sipped and closed her eyes. The cold air made her face flush. "Don't you just love Lil' Will?"

"What's not to love?" Lu said. "My ears will be ringing for the next week, but Will's worth it."

"Is it true that he was in prison?" she asked, pushing the glass his way.

"Doesn't everybody spend a night in jail at some point?" Lu deadpanned.

"Have you?" Sandra said, eyes wide and smiling.

"No," he laughed. "I serve too many cops and lawyers in here to have much to worry about. But yeah, Will's had his night in jail. Quite a few of them, actually. Somebody stole one of his guitars, when he found out who it was, he went and beat him almost to death. He loved that guitar. Albert King had played it once."

"I've never been to jail," Sandra said coyly. "I'm a good girl. Hand over that whiskey. It's chilly out here."

Lu poured four fingers more. The ice hadn't melted. It was cold and they were drinking quickly.

"You're not trying to get me drunk, are you?" she said.

"I'm good at getting people drunk," he laughed. "That's my job. What's yours?"

"Avoiding having a job. I'm in law school now. I'll go get an MBA too, if my daddy will let me get away with it," she said, pushing the glass his way. "Your turn."

Lu drank slowly, trying to savor the expensive bourbon—and trying to figure out what to say next to this girl who was funny and could drink like a man. Then the strains of another familiar song reached him. Lil' Will was playing “The Harlem Shuffle.” “Let's go dance,” he said, smiling, pulling her up by the hand.

“I love this song!” she exclaimed, rushing by him.

Lu quickly stowed the Blantons under the bar and followed Sandra. She had already begun to move it to the left, just like the lyrics told her to. Her pivot to moooooove it to the right mesmerized Lu. First her foot, then her hip, then the rest of her got there, and once it did, it didn't stop moving. He thought about how much he had to drink, then thought about whether or not the woman in front of him ought to be casting a spell on him: pretty face, a bright bedimpled smile with only one chin underneath it—and a matronly figure in a university town where true beauty was considered to be about ten pounds underweight, and perhaps surgically enhanced boobs. Sandra definitely had boobs. He had noticed that right off. But she had about thirty pounds extra, too.

“Are you gonna dance or stand there?” Sandra shouted. She pulled Lu into line and he proved her equal in movement, just as smooth and syncopated as the dark-skinned nanny who taught him the dance when he was a child. Lu had never before danced it without having to teach it, and it was so much better not having to—no awkward bumps, no ankle-popping missteps, just the absolute pleasure of letting the music move them. Lil' Will indulged them, running the guitar solo way longer than he usually did, and playing the chorus two extra times, but the song eventually wound down to its last cymbal crash, and then Lil' Will said, “Let's break it down low and slow now for all the lovers in the house.”

Lu drew Sandra in close—not too close, not the cheek-to-cheek familiarity of those long-married, or the belt-to-belt desperation of the sexually desperate—but close enough to smell her perfume. She reached behind and placed his hands on the small of her back, which brought them in tight enough for her chest to graze his, but showed him his limits, too. “Last dance,” she said. “I've got a ton of

things to do tomorrow. But I've never had more fun doing "The Harlem Shuffle."

"Are you okay to drive?" Lu asked.

"Don't have to," she said. "I only live a block away."

"Let me walk you home," he said. "I need to get out of here, too. I have to drive to my mother's tomorrow."

Lil' Dave finally brought the song—"Trouble Don't Last"—to a close, and Lu and Sandra grabbed their things and their coats, made their good-byes, and headed for the door. "It's cold out here," Sandra said, hooking her arm inside of his. "I'm glad chivalry isn't dead. My place is this way."

She led him south of the square to one of the tonier parts of town. They fell into step together, occasionally bumping hips, lurching tipsy, laughing. "How long have you been a bartender?" she asked.

"Since I was in college," he said. "I guess it's been about four years, maybe five."

"Think you'll do it forever?" she asked.

"I like it," he said. "But it's almost time to move on. It sounds crazy, but I've always wanted to own an antique store."

Sandra stopped and looked him straight in the eye. "You're kidding, right?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"So, you like antiques, and mixing drinks, and dancing. Are you sure you're not gay?"

"Hell no!" he laughed.

"You're not going to bust out into show tunes, or start singing old Blondie tunes?" she said. He shook his head. She thought for a moment, then continued walking again. "Okay," she said, "prove to me you're not gay."

Lascivious thoughts flew through Lu's mind. He hadn't planned on sleeping with this slightly overweight girl with the pretty smile, but he hadn't planned on dancing with her either, and that had turned out fine. He started to imagine her naked, began to wonder what it would be like to sleep with someone whose bony hips didn't bruise his own as they rollicked around the bedroom. His mouth went dry,

but he managed to say, coolly, "Just how would you like me to do that, Sandra?"

"Call me and ask me out when you get back from visiting your mother," she said. She stopped at a sidewalk in front of a white cottage with a lawn so manicured it must have taken legions of yard men to keep it up. "This is my place," she said, drawing him into a full embrace. "My last name is spelled S-A-M-P-I-T-E. I'm in the phone book."

Lu looked into her eyes. He wanted to kiss her, but saying goodnight on the sidewalk had taken the edge off his lust, and he realized that it wasn't the right thing to do. "I'll be back the day after Christmas," he whispered. "I'll give you a ring then and we'll plan something for later that week. I really enjoyed myself tonight."

They hugged once more, briefly, and said good night. Lu resisted the urge to turn around as he walked toward his rent house on the edge of the student ghetto. He heard Sandra going into her house and closing the door. He smiled. He would have something to wrap his mind around while he was visiting his mother. He loved his mother, but he couldn't visit her long before they drove each other crazy.

