

The Guerilla Drive-In

by Thomas Easterling

Lu called Sandra the minute he got back from Louisiana. Before he unloaded his Christmas gifts, checked the mail, called his mom to let her know he'd gotten back safely, or reset the thermostat to a warmer temperature, he yanked out the phone book, looked up her number, and punched it in. It was almost odd looking up a number for a date. Usually there were hastily exchanged cell digits exchanged at the bar—when there were numbers exchanged at all.

She didn't answer, and he hung up when the answering machine clicked on. He hated leaving messages, especially when a date was hanging in the balance. Messages were too impersonal, and she probably had caller ID anyway. She would know he called. So he unloaded his car—Donna had been exceptionally kind this year with the gifts—and tidied the kitchen and looked at the clock. An hour had passed. He swept and mopped and dusted for another hour. Still no call from Sandra, so he rang her number one more time, hung up when he got the machine, and decided to walk over to work. The dinner rush would be over, and he wasn't on the schedule until the weekend, but he could get ahead on his bookkeeping, and maybe help out if needed. He would do anything to pass the time while waiting for the call.

The restaurant was actually quite busy. Most of the other places in town were still closed, and they had little competition for the hungry stragglers still in Oxford over Christmas break. Next month's inventory and orders would have to wait. Things were still so busy when the kitchen closed that Lu went to help Huey tend the upstairs bar. Some of the servers were already up there, slurping on their shift beers, thinking about the tips they made that night. Christmas credit cards would be paid off quickly at this rate, Lu thought. Owning a good restaurant in a college town amounted to having a license to print money.

At ten to midnight, Lu looked at Huey and hollered last call. He killed the volume on the jukebox and turned on the house lights, and

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/thomas-easterling/the-guerilla-drive-in>»

Copyright © 2009 Thomas Easterling. All rights reserved.

people rushed to settle their bills. As the din finally died down, Lu heard someone ask in a stage whisper, "Isn't that the boy?"

"Ssh!"

Giggles followed.

Lu looked up from the credit card machine and saw Sandra standing—and blushing—with two drop-dead gorgeous girls flanking her. "Hey, Sandra," he said.

"Hey Lu!" she said. "I've been out with the girls tonight. We came and ate early, and forgot to pay our tab up here."

"I'll get it for you," he said. He watched the girls watching him in the mirror behind the bar when her turned to get Sandra's tab. The two on either side of Sandra allowed their eyes to drop lasciviously, but Sandra's did not. One of them elbowed her, and she rolled her eyes and elbowed back and the other girls went to the other end of the bar. As he returned with the chit, she said, "You'll have to excuse these two. They've had a bit more to drink than I have. I thought you were going to call when you got back to town."

"I did," he said. "I just got back this evening. I called, but I didn't leave a message."

"Oh," she said, looking at him closely to see if he was telling the truth. "I must have been out already." She sighed, and signed her receipt, and glanced at her friends at the end of the bar. "Look," she continued, "let's try to get together before the semester starts. I've only got one more semester of law school, and I'm almost in the top ten percent, and I want to make sure I get there, so I'll be hitting the books pretty hard once things kick up again. I'm sorry we couldn't make it work tonight."

"Me too," said Lu. "I'll call tomorrow."

"Lu," she said coyly, almost blushing, a smirk turning up the corners of her lips. "Leave a message next time."

Lu watched as she gathered her friends and walked down the steps. That smirk burned itself into his mind. It was all he saw while he and Huey closed the bar. They worked quickly, cleaning tables and barware, mopping out the bathrooms—no puke tonight, thank God for small blessings—checking receipts against tabs, divvying up

the tips. "There's a latenight tonight at Magda's," Huey said when they were done. "Want to go?"

"Not this time," Lu said. "I just got back from Louisiana and I'm too tired to think."

"Hey, nobody's paying you to think," Huey laughed. "Seriously, come on over if you change your mind. Everybody'll be there. Thanks for helping out tonight. I was really in the weeds."

"Happy to do it," Lu said. "Do you think you might be interested in covering for me one night this week? I might be going out on a date."

"No problem," Huey said. "Just give me a ring."

-:- -:- -:-

The phone shook him out of sleep. He looked at his alarm clock—eight forty-five—and groaned, and then checked the caller ID on the handset. SAMPITE SANDRA. He cleared his throat—he didn't want to sound like he'd just woken up—and said hello.

"Hey, this is Sandra," she said. "I hope I'm not calling too early."

"Not at all," he said, wondering if he'd managed to scrape the gravel from his voice.

"I looked at my called ID when I got home last night and saw that you called," she continued, "and I wanted to apologize for the way my friends were acting last night. I don't know what got into them, unless it was Grey Goose, but anyhow, I'm sorry about all that and that I missed your call, and—"

"Don't worry about it," Lu said. "I didn't even notice your friends. Are you busy Thursday night?"

"Yes!" she said exuberantly. "I mean, no, I'm not busy."

"I mean, if you are, then—"

"No, really, I'm not," she said.

"Then would you like to—"

"Yes. What time?"

"Is seven too early?"

"I'll see you then," she said. "Thursday night at seven. Bye."

"Bye."

Sandra's voice lingered an extra southern second over that last syllable, tony and sweet and comfortable all at once. Lu would have had sweet dreams if he could have gone back to sleep.

-- -- --

Lu parked in front of Sandra's house at precisely seven o'clock. He had worried himself silly over where to take her on their first date. He knew she liked to dance, but no good bands were playing in town, and he didn't want to take her to some MarshallCounty juke. Not on the first date anyhow. A decent dj was spinning at the Midnight Sun, but the place had all the ambience of a meat market. Dinner and a movie seemed bland—until he heard that Don Diego was throwing a guerilla drive-in double feature at an abandoned warehouse a few miles out of town. Lu didn't know much about the movies—*Swing Time* and *Hannah and Her Sisters*—but Don promised they were top drawer, and the weather was unseasonably warm for late December, and it would be a fairly interesting first date. He arranged to pick up a picnic basket of appetizers and baguettes from the restaurant, and made a thermos of hot chocolate in case Sandra was cold natured, or didn't want to drink the wine he picked out.

Lu looked his face over in the rearview mirror one more time, smiled, and went to the door. Sandra opened it as soon as he knocked. "Hey there, how are you?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Lu said. "You look great." And she did: a sweater that emphasized the right curves and hid the wrong ones, a suede skirt that stopped just above her knees, tights, and the same smile that he had been seeing in his dreams for the last ten days. "You might want a jacket, though."

Sandra looked at him quizzically, then reached inside to the coat rack and picked up a black leather jacket. "Perfect," he said. "Did you like *Grease* when you were a kid?"

"Who didn't like *Grease*?" she said innocently enough, but her expression suggested that she feared this date was beginning to deteriorate.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to start singing the soundtrack," he said. "It's just that the song 'Stranded at the Drive-In' has been stuck in my head all day."

She laughed, but gave him a strange look. He opened the car door for her, and after they were both in the car she said, "It smells great in here."

"I picked up a few things from the restaurant on the way," he said. "They're in the picnic basket in the back seat."

"Isn't it a little cold and dark for a picnic?" she asked. "Where are we going?"

"You don't like surprises, do you?" he said.

"Not especially," she said. "Usually not on the first date, anyway."

"Don Diego is hosting a guerilla drive-in at the old Emerson plant," he said. "A double-feature with a couple of wintertime classics. Dinner and a couple of movies, with a slight twist. We can come back to town for drinks if it isn't fun."

"That sounds cool," she laughed. "It's the kind of surprise I can handle, anyway."

"What kind gives you trouble?"

They talked and laughed all the way to the abandoned plant. The east side of the building was perfect as a drive-in movie screen: whitewashed, flat, no texture. Don Diego was about ready to start when Lu and Sandra rolled in. He hollered out a number on the FM dial they could use to hear the movie, and cranked up his digital projector. He wore a tie-dye beret and sunglasses. He was the heir to a St. Louis dry cleaning business, but fell in love with Oxford when he came for a visit in his twenties, and decided to sell his interest to his sister and live in the beautiful south. Over the last thirty-five years, he had run his own independent cinema & café—it failed—had become a Rastafarian—he was good at smoking weed—and had collected every Sunday edition of *The New York*

Times published since 1982—they were stacked in the hallways and bedrooms of his rent house in the heart of the student ghetto.

Lu corked the first bottle of wine as the opening credits for *Swing Time* rolled. He put the picnic basket between them and they laughed when Lucky got conned into getting his tuxedo pants cuffed, and when the portraits in his fiancée's house scowled at him. The food was gone by the time Lucky and Penny, who was not his fiancée, sang "A Fine Romance with No Kisses," but there was another bottle of wine. Lu corked it and poured.

"Do you think there can be romance without kisses?" Sandra whispered. Lucky had just gotten pelted with a snowball as he was about to kiss Penny.

Lu thought for a second. This was clearly some sort of a test, and he didn't want to fail it. "There should be romance before there's a kiss," he said.

"I think you're right," she said. She smirked and leaned slightly away from him. "I like romance."

"I like kisses, too," he said.

"But only when there's romance," she said, turning towards the screen.

"Of course," he said.

When the movie faded out, Sandra asked, "Don't you wish it always ended that way? The right people fall in love? Romance leads to marriage? God, that was a great movie."

"Except marriage shouldn't end the romance," he said.

"I think you're right," she said. Her eyes warmed up and softened, and she leaned in towards him, and when she closed her eyes and they kissed, they lived absolutely through that kiss. By the time they opened their eyes and saw that the world was still turning, Michael Cain was on the screen looking longingly at his sister-in-law during a holiday gathering. One of the older characters played a show tune on the piano, and his wife sang along. Everything looked picture perfect. "Is that what it's like at your house for Christmas?" Sandra asked.

"No, it's just mom and me," Lu said.

"My house is a little like that," she said. "Isn't this a Woody Allen film? Isn't he like a child molester or something?"

"Naw, I think that's just what his ex-wife said."

They settled in and watched the rest of the movie, which was good. They talked about it on the way back to Sandra's. It made Lu long for home even though it showed how flawed every home was. And he wasn't sure about how a Marx Brothers movie could resolve existential anxiety so fully, but seemed too captious to mention. Lu also realized that it wasn't the movies that made for the good time. It was because he was with Sandra. When they got to her house, he got out of the car to let her out and walk her to her door. It was the first time they had been quiet since the closing credits of the second movie rolled. He wanted badly to be asked in, to pull her in close and not let go.

"I'm not used to doing anything halfway," she said, looking up at him from the threshold, flustered and anxious and happy all at once. "So it's killing me to kiss you goodnight out here. But you're different, Lu. You're a good guy, and I want this to last, so I'm not going to invite you in for another drink because I'd be tempted not to let you leave because once the semester starts I'm really going to be no fun because it's so much work, but I don't want you to think that—"

"Shh," Lu said, pulling her into him to kiss her once more. He knew she was right even though he didn't want to hear it. They kissed, and then he said, "It's okay. Can we do something Sunday? I've got shifts Friday and Saturday."

"Yes," she said.

